

Prologue

An older gentleman looked down upon a world with his hands clasped behind his back as lightning arced through the clouds in the planet's northern hemisphere. Pushing back his shabby fedora, he studied other parts of the world. He was average size for a human, and his mostly white hair had reddish streaks. He wore old, battered tan slacks and a faded, baggy yellow dress shirt. With a careworn face and green eyes, he seemed otherwise unremarkable.

This scene would not have been all that strange if it had been an older man looking out from the observation area of a ship, peering at the world he had once lived on. This older gentleman stood in the blackness of space without a vacuum suit and with no ship in sight, nor would there be for over three billion years. Standing in the nothingness of space, he watched this barren world with its small oceans. The world, in its early stages of development, was just how he'd hoped it would be—except for one thing. *More damn water*, he thought.

He scratched at the white stubble on his chin and then shoved his hands in his pockets and studied the world with great interest.

This world, and two others, occupied the Goldilocks zone of this system. One world was closer to the sun than where he now stood. The other was at the outer edge of the Goldilocks zone. The world he stood above was the one he had been waiting for. It seemed no different than others in this neck of the galaxy, but with his help, life would evolve on its surface one day.

If only it had more damn water. The planet only contains about half the water it needs to form sentient life one day. But I'll be damned if that will stop me.

Not willing to wait to see if more comets would bring enough water, he made a plan. He wanted to move forward with things as soon as possible. Besides, he had been away from his family for far too long.

Looking in the sun's direction, he sensed the world at the inner edge of the Goldilocks zone. It was now on the other side of the sun, but he did not care. Sending his thoughts in the opposite direction, he sensed the world on the outer edge of the zone.

Smiling, he held his arms out to his sides and drew on the energy of the universe. With this energy, he pulled the water from the two worlds, keeping it warm enough that it did not freeze.

After a few minutes, two large balls of water, one from the inner planet and the other from the outer, appeared in orbit over the third planet from the sun. The misshapen balls waxed and waned as they hovered in space. He brought his hands together with a slap, and the balls of water elongated to encircle the world. The water cut through the atmosphere and spread out to rain down and fill the lowest parts of the planet.

Once the rain stopped and the skies cleared, nearly seventy percent of the planet's surface was covered with water.

Satisfied with what he had accomplished, he allowed his thoughts to drift back to the previous universe, where his family waited for him. The process would continue now without his help. It had started with the birth of a long-forgotten universe and continued through many others before reaching his own. Now, with this young universe, the cycle would continue—as long as he could find the one being who would do as he had done. Be they male, female, an it, or something new, he would be happy to hand over the task to the next in line.

Four billion years later.

Krel, the home of the human race, was also the heart and soul of a kingdom that spanned the Milky Way. The blue-green planet had a silver ring that ran around its equator. From the ring, four tethers, equally spaced, anchored the massive structure to the planet's surface. From the silver ring, beings from all the known worlds arrived and left daily.

King Dolloff was none too pleased with his brother, Julian, as the royal family settled into their private spacecraft. Queen Radella was settling in with their four children. She was tall and slim, with black hair and a long face. The six-year-old twin boys ran around their compartment, chasing their ten-year-old sister. Their sixteen-year-old sister was talking to a boy her age on a holo-screen. The ship hovered above the ground, preparing to leave Krel. The royal family was expected to attend the coronation of the new sector leader of the third most populated nonhuman sector in the realm.

The king was upset with his son Rainier, the next in line to the throne. He was supposed to be with them on this trip but was nowhere to be found.

Julian stood at a portal, looking out. He was tall and thin, and his hair was cut short. The hat he wore seemed to be part of his skull. He wore a red robe that went down to the deck. The brothers, though twins, were nothing alike.

This was only the second time King Dolloff had permitted his family to travel together to another sector's coronation. Of course, the family would move to the Milky Way's opposite side every tenth standard year. The citizens there felt they deserved to have the king and his family close to them at least some of the time.

"You know, brother," King Dolloff grumbled, "it was your idea for the family to travel to this coronation. The new sector ruler did not expect all of us to attend. You or I could have attended, and they would have been content. But you committed all of us, so now we have no choice."

"Well, yes, I did," Julian replied. "I felt it would be better for our relations with the third-largest nonhuman sector if we all came. They are unpredictable creatures. One wrong word or the absence of one member of a delegation could start a war with that sector. What does not offend once may offend the next time. I have never understood how they came to power in the first place."

In the portal's reflection, the king saw a section of the rear wall vanish behind him. Through it walked the captain. He strode to the front of the room and bowed to Julian. Then he went over to where the king and queen sat and dropped to one knee in front of them.

"Rise," said the king. "Is our flight ready to begin?"

The captain was dressed in the standard all-white uniform with gold trim running around the collar and the single chest pocket. He had a black beard, and he appeared haggard. The hat he wore was white with a gold braid running along the front of the bill.

“There will be a brief delay, your majesty. An anomaly in one of the inducer coils is causing the delay. Engineer Aiken is working on it now, sire.”

King Dolloff glanced over at his brother, who seemed not to have heard. “Where is my head engineer? She should look into this matter,” he grumbled.

“Yes, your majesty, but she has not reported for duty, and the backup engineer, Aiken, has taken her place.” Seeing the displeasure in the king’s eyes, the captain added, “I have the utmost confidence in his abilities, your majesty.”

Before the king could challenge the captain, Radella placed her hand on his. As he look over at her, his chiseled features softened. Then he waved the captain away.

Radella stroked the back of his hand. She wore a scarlet gown that flowed over her long, sleek body. Gold trim ran along all the openings.

Ten minutes later, Julian stood and made his way to the back of the compartment. He touched a section in the middle of the wall, and it vanished. “I am going to see what is happening in engineering,” he called back to the king. “If we need to transfer to one of our other vessels, I will send word.”

After he left, the wall became solid once more.



Another five minutes passed, and the king was becoming impatient. A quiver ran through the ship, which caused the frown to lessen on his face. Slowly the ship rose. The portal in front of the king and queen contracted until it was an oval six feet long and three feet high at its tallest point.

Dolloff looked around and, not seeing his brother, touched a small blue square on the arm of his chair. In the center of the portal, an image of the bridge came into view.

His eyes went wide. “What is going on here?”

The crew members were either slumped over their consoles or lying on the floor. Behind him, the king heard his younger sons hammering on the wall, but the door would not open.

Julian’s holo-image appeared in front of the portal.

“Brother, where are you, and what is happening to the ship?” the king asked as fear stabbed at his heart. “The bridge crew appears dead, and we cannot leave our compartment.”

His fingers flew over the touch controls as he tried to engage the ejection system that would release the family compartment from the rest of the ship. By now, he knew, they must be at least a mile above the planet’s surface.

When he touched the last control, the ship should have jettisoned the compartment, but nothing happened. He gripped the armrest hard, causing his knuckles to go white.

“Brother,” Julian said in his high, nasally voice. “I am happy to see you and the rest of the family. The fact is, I am back in the palace. I know the bridge crew is dead. As a matter of fact, the ship is being flown by her captain, who is in the control room at our spaceport. He has been very useful to me and will soon command the royal fleet.”

The king sat up straighter, looking every bit the king his brother was not. “Brother, do not do this. Killing us will only bring ruin to the kingdom and you.”

“This, brother,” Julian said with a sneer, “is the start of a new era for the kingdom. I have lived in your shadow for far too many years. The only reason you are king”—Julian glared at his brother— “is that you were pulled out of our mother first.”

“You know as well as I do it is not because I was born first,” King Dolloff said.

“Enough! The time has come for the kingdom to meet their new king.”

Before Julian’s image faded, Radella said to him, “One day, our family will rise from your treachery and rule again, for you will have no heirs. Your only future is a cold grave.”

A small smile played on her lips as her long-fingered hand gently caressed her husband’s cheek. “The one from the forbidden world will guide our great kingdom once again, our grandson.” She slumped into her husband’s arms.



Seated on the throne in the palace, Julian went rigid, and all the color drained from his face. “*No!* That cannot be. I will not believe it. I am king, and I shall have many children.” But in his heart, he knew Radella was never wrong in her predictions.

If she is right and I father no children, there will be no one to stand against the great nemesis. The thought filled him with horror. *Wait. The self-destruct. I must deactivate it and bring them back.*

He fumbled with the controls on the right armrest of the throne.

“Captain, bring them back. Do you hear me? Bring them back now,” he pleaded.



The ship slowed and then stopped. As it hovered in place, King Dolloff held his wife and stared out the portal at the spaceport and Center City miles below them. A moment later, the ship started to descend, giving him hope.

He turned to his wife, who looked up at him with a small smile and said, “The kingdom will endure, my love, and one day, our descendants will rule once again. After Julian’s death, our grandson will become king, and he shall unite the kingdom in ways we have not been able to do. He will do this through the wife he will choose. But this will be far in the future.”

“My wife, we are approaching the ground. My brother must have changed his mind on hearing your words.”

She leaned against his muscled shoulder. “We will not land, my love.”

As he gazed into her light green eyes, the ship exploded.



Prince Rainier, piloting a small scout ship, chased five sleek black spacecraft. Someone had abducted his fiancé, and she was on one of the other ships. They stayed just out of his ship's reach as they raced to the jump point, where they would leave the Krel system.

Prince Rainier was a young man with blond hair, blue eyes, and a determined expression on his face. He looked like a younger version of his father, King Dolloff. But now worry made him appear much older. His hands played over the controls as he tried to squeeze the last ounce of speed from his ship's engines.

"Stop!" he shouted over the communicator. "I command you to stop! I am Rainier, prince of the realm! Halt!"

He glanced up at the screen, wondering why the ships were not obeying his commands and staying just out of reach of his own. He knew they could outrun him if they chose to.

He magnified the image of the closest ship and studied it. His blood ran cold when he realized what they were. The royal family's robotic ships! But how? We only use them to transport prisoners. What if they do not recognize me as a prince of the realm? They are programmed to destroy any ships that follow them.

Fear gripped his heart. *Guinevere, my love, how did you get on one of those ships?*

All at once, the five ships opened a jump point and vanished. Unable to establish a command override, the prince followed them through.



Three days later, the five robot ships returned to normal space and flew close to an oversized moon orbiting a blue-green world. Sitting on a craggy rock the size of a house sat an older man with his shabby fedora pushed back on his head. His legs were crossed, and he was playing a flute. The eerie notes filled the surrounding area, which was strange because there was no air.

If the ships had scanned the area, they showed no sign that they had seen him. As the vessels flew by him on their way down to the planet, he lowered his flute and smiled.

A moment later, he turned back to see a flash of light: the sixth ship had just entered the system. He felt confident that this phase of his plan was nearing the end. The sixth ship did not pause as it raced after the others.

Suddenly he was standing on a much smaller rock, one the atmosphere would deflect, and he watched as the five ships entered orbit. One ship broke away and headed towards the planet's surface while the other four turned and arrayed themselves in a defensive formation.

Down below, the lone ship approaching the surface left a fiery streak across its sky.



The prince's ship approached the other ships slowly. He knew that the fifth ship would deposit its prisoner and then return, but he did not know what the other ships would do to his. *There is no need to hurry. I will see if I can get control over the ships now*, he thought.

"Attention, ships. This is Prince Rainier. I am now your commander. I order you to drop all defensive action and protect this ship."

The ships broke formation as they flew towards him, as he'd hoped they would. *Good*, he thought. He wondered why they had not responded to his commands earlier.

When they reached his ship, to his great relief, they took up defensive positions around it.

"All ships, follow me down to the world's surface," he commanded. Then, angling his ship towards the planet, he gave it enough power to skim through the atmosphere without damage. The other ship could make it to the planet's surface within a minute or two and then dump the prisoner and return to space just as fast.

As he approached the planet's atmosphere, he saw the fifth ship making its way back to space. Receiving an alert, he saw that all five robot ships were encircling him.

What is going on? he wondered.

Before he could do anything else, a holo-image of his uncle Julian appeared beside his command chair.

"Nephew, I have grave news," Julian said.

"Uncle, my betrothed has been kidnapped and was taken to the family's prison world. How could this happen?" the prince demanded.

"That is unfortunate, but you must hear my news first. There has been an accident. The ship with the family was destroyed as it rose from Krel. There are no survivors."

With a stunned look, Prince Rainier stared up at his uncle. "What...? That cannot be. My father, dead?"

"All the family, except you and me."

"But how did you survive, Uncle? All were to attend the celebration."

Julian turned away and shook his head. Then, looking back at his nephew, he said somberly, "Nephew, you must return now."

"But Guinevere... I will not—"

"Forget the wench. You have a kingdom to think about now, nephew! Besides, once someone has been taken to our prison world, we consider them dead. Now, return."

Prince Rainier's eyes narrowed as he stared at his uncle. "Uncle, you are the only one who commands these ships, and how did you survive the accident?"

He continued his descent to the planet's surface.

"No, nephew, listen to me. You must not approach the prison world."

Prince Rainier ignored him.

"No, nephew, you must not approach—" Julian said again.

The prince watched the screen as all five ships exploded. His last thoughts were of his family, but he said, "I love you, Guinevere."

Then his ship vaporized around him. Julian had programmed the family's ships to do just that if Prince Rainier followed them.



On the prison world, as night fell, Guinevere placed a hand over her abdomen and felt the first sensations of their baby in her womb. She was a year or two younger than her prince, with strawberry-blond hair, a petite face, and amber eyes. The dress she wore was pink with blue sparkles scattered around. The right sleeve of her dress was torn at the shoulder, the back was riddled with holes, and the left sleeve was missing. Her arm was bruised from when the floor of the ship had opened and she'd fallen out. She wondered when her prince would rescue her from this backwater world.

She kept her eyes glued to the night sky; she just knew her prince's ship would come swooping down at any minute to rescue her. From the corner of her eye, she saw a flash. Turning, she saw five brilliant points of light. Then a sixth joined the others. With a hand to her mouth, she watched as they faded from sight.

"*No!*" she cried. "My prince, my love, cannot be gone."

But in her heart, she knew his life had ended. She buried her face in her hands, fell to her knees, and wept.



After what seemed like hours, Guinevere wiped her tears away, collected herself, and took in her surroundings. Behind her stood a village of wood and brick houses with light streaming from their windows.

Then she realized that two men from the village were walking up the hill towards her with torches in hand. Like her, they were human. They wore baggy bib overalls and long-sleeve flannel shirts that had seen many days of hard work.

She jumped to her feet. A moment later, the rugged-looking men stopped in front of her, grinning as they looked her over.

One of the men said something to the other in an older form of English, the kingdom's official language. Then he stepped forward and smiled down at her. She was only five foot eight, and they were well over six feet tall. He reached out and felt her torn dress.

Before she could say anything, the other man walked up to her other side. Before she could react, they jumped forward and grabbed her by the wrists.

Guinevere screamed and tried to pull free, but they held tight. One man pulled a rough-hewn knife and pressed it to her throat. "Now, now, my pretty little lass, we do not want our wives to see what we are about to do to you. So, keep that pretty little mouth of yours closed."

Guinevere's eyes went wide as she felt the knife's edge. He bent close as if to kiss her, but then he stopped. Someone had tapped him on his shoulder. Both men looked back to see an older man dressed in a faded yellow dress shirt and baggy tan slacks. He held a shabby fedora in one hand.

Guinevere's attackers released her and turned with their knives raised. "What is it, old man?" the younger of the two said.

"I would be much obliged if you would release her. She does not mean you two, ah, gentlemen any harm."

Guinevere ran past the two men and stood behind the older gentleman.

The men stepped forward and held out their knives until they were within an inch of the older gentleman's chest. He merely looked down at the tips and shook his head. All at once, they thrust their knives at his chest.

The moment the blades touched him, they were violently thrown back, and they landed a good ten feet down the hill with the torches on the ground beside them.

The older gentleman calmly strolled over, knelt beside them, and touched their faces. Then he straightened and walked back to Guinevere.

She put both hands over her abdomen and backed away from him.

"I will not harm you, my dear," he said as he stopped and examined her.

"Can you help me, sir?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear. May I ask your name?"

She nodded eagerly. "Guinevere. Can you take me home, please?"

He shook his head. "No, my dear."

"But you said you could help me." Guinevere's bottom lip quivered.

"And I will, but not in the way you may wish."

She gave him a puzzled look.

"I cannot return you to your home, but I will not leave you with these barbarians without some help."

The older gentleman and Guinevere watched as the two men climbed back to their feet and looked around. On seeing her, the men fell to their knees and buried their faces in the grass.

"They will now respect and honor you," the older gentleman said with a smile.

When Guinevere turned to question him, he was nowhere to be found.

Two years later.

Guinevere walked from the tiny village, leading her son by the hand as the sun slowly disappeared behind the hills. They walked up the small hill the robotic ship had deposited her on and stopped at its crest. She gazed at the rolling hills lining the valley and smiled. Mighty oaks and maple trees grew halfway up their slopes.

It soon became dark. Guinevere picked up her son and placed him on her hip, but as she headed back down the hill, she saw a group of villagers coming up.

When the villagers reached Guinevere and her son, they fell to their knees. A white glow surrounded the woman and child. Shafts of golden light rose from their heads. The villagers pressed their hands together in thanksgiving as they gazed up at them.



The older gentleman watched as the villagers bowed before Guinevere and her son. He smiled, content that the next part of his plan had been completed.



Julian walked around the long-abandoned crash site for what seemed the hundredth time. He stopped where the remnants of the royal family's compartment lay, now a tangled mess. He had ordered the site to be walled off after the crash, as he did not want his brother's supporters to make a shrine out of it and he could not bring himself to remove the wreckage. The rescuers had found little of the family's remains. One thing they had found was his brother's right hand, and on one finger was the dragon ring every king had worn since his family had first ruled the kingdom.

He had ordered the head servant, Warwick, to have the ring destroyed. Warwick had seemed horrified at the thought, and Julian understood his reluctance. The ring had been a symbol to the kingdom for millennia, and each king would wear it from the day he was crowned till the day he died. Clutching the ring to his breast, Warwick had run off with it. Julian made a mental note to check with Warwick later to make sure he'd done as he'd been ordered.

Julian looked back and saw a group of his friends walking his way, led by Prescott Spartacus. They had wanted to meet with him for weeks, but they had not been clear on what they needed. He had put it off to deal with pressing business.

This morning, though, he had heard from Prescott Spartacus, and he'd decided to meet with him and the others before traveling to the Aries sector, and he had asked the group to join him here instead of the palace. The group approached, and Julian was surprised that the knights let them pass without searching them. He stared at them disapprovingly. He'd have to talk with their captain and let him know that such lapses in security would not be tolerated in the future.

Prescott turned to the others, and everyone stopped. He said something to the others, but they were still out of earshot, so Julian could not make out what it was. They nodded to him, and then he turned and approached the king.

When he reached Julian, he bowed and then knelt. Julian told him to rise, and then they strolled past the crash site, conversing as they walked.

"Sire," said Prescott, "we, your loyal supporters of the Senate, wish to bring to your attention a plot to take your life."

Julian stopped and stared at his friend. "Go on. There have been many plots. Is this attempt by one of the nonhuman races?"

"Yes, sire."

“Which one?”

“The fox kingdom, from Beowulf.”

Julian’s face darkened. “That is good to know. I shall order the fleet to their homeworld. Their bombardment will make the planet uninhabitable.”

Prescott’s face paled at this, but he soon regained his composure. He dropped to one knee, took the king’s hand, and kissed it. Rising, he exchanged smiles with the king, and then he turned and walked off.

The king was pleased as he watched his friend go. For the next several minutes, he stared at the remains of the ship as a gentle breeze brushed his face. Finally, he turned from the ship and took a transport back to the palace.

As he walked up the palace stairs, his eyes suddenly went wide. He fell to his knees, his body went rigid, and then he pitched backward and rolled down the hard stone steps. At the bottom, beaten and bloody, he came to a stop and lay face up on the cold surface.



The knights strolled over to Julian and looked down upon him with calm eyes. Prescott and his close allies joined them a moment later. No one lifted a finger to help the dying king.

As King Julian stared up at them, his eyes fogged over. Without another glance in his direction, the knights turned, walked up the stairs, and disappeared into the palace.

Prescott reached down and picked up the crown from where it lay next to Julian’s now-lifeless body. Warwick came over, and Prescott handed the crown to him. “Warwick, take me to the royal family’s privy chambers.”

“Yes, Senator. Now that the last member of the royal family is dead, the doors should open for anyone. Is it my understanding that you will approach the Senate and put forth your right to be king?”

Warwick, a little over three feet tall and gnomish in appearance, waddled up the front steps to the palace, and Prescott followed.

“It has always been my family’s right to rule the kingdom,” the young Senator said as they walked. “If not for the cursed flaw on their DNA, we would have ruled the kingdom in their place.”

When they reached the double doors to the royal family’s privy chambers, Prescott smiled and walked up to them. He waited patiently as the room scanned, but then nothing happened.

He looked down at Warwick with a puzzled expression on his bearded face. “Why do the doors not open, Warwick?”

Calmly looked up, Warwick replied, “The king must not have been the last of the royal family like we thought he was.”