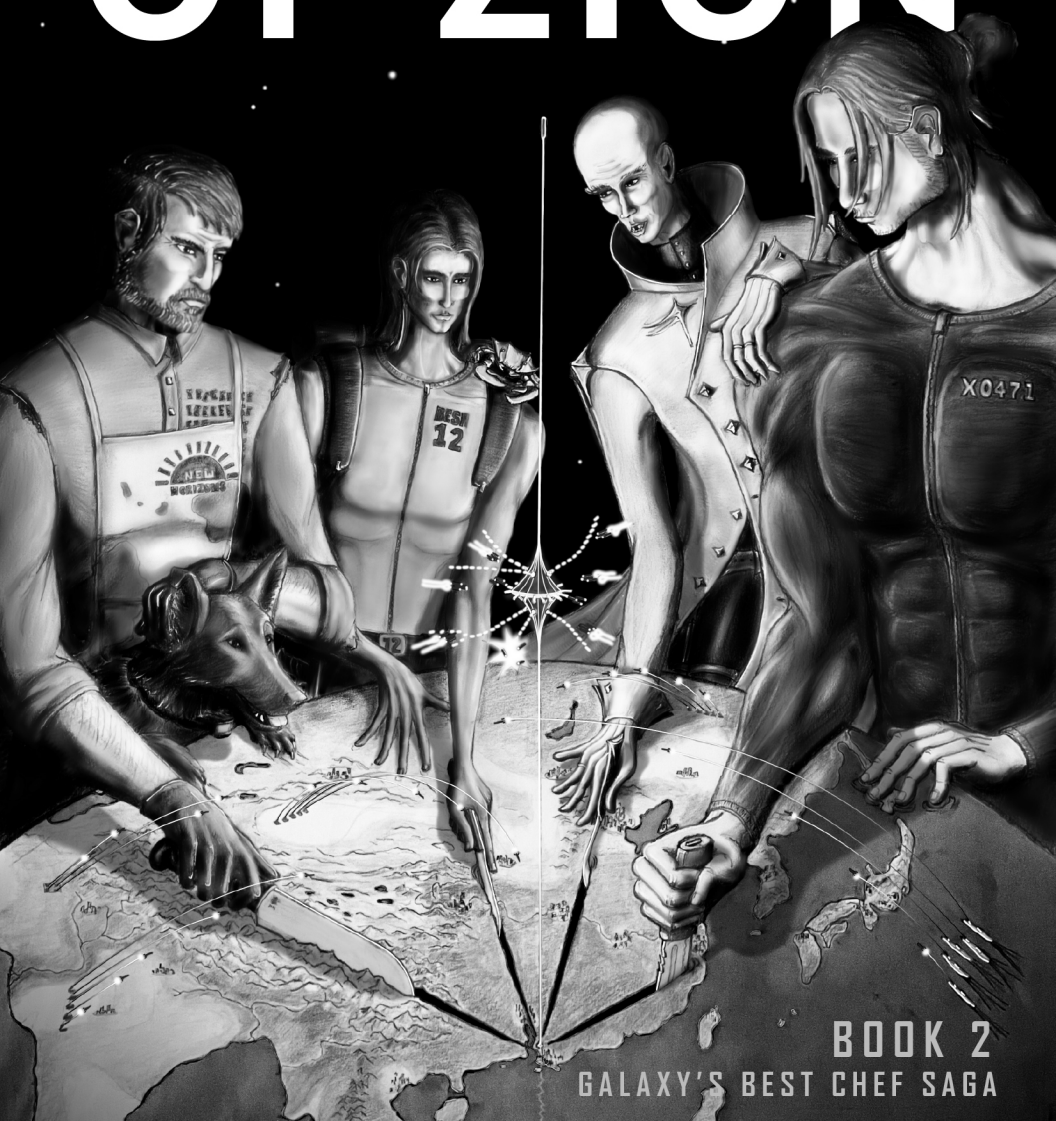


RYAN DUVAL

GHOSTS OF ZION



BOOK 2
GALAXY'S BEST CHEF SAGA

CHAPTER ZERO

“Listen up, you little shits! We’re hitting a seed bank today!” the old woman barks from the cockpit of their stolen refuse barge slowly nearing a gray speck in the vastness of space. “So, say your prayers! Send those messages to your mommies! For only half of you might return!”

Thirty young men and women, recruited from the streets of Hardsill, nervously glance at one another.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” a boy of seventeen years whispers in the deathly silent cargo bay directly behind the cockpit.

“So, that’s what all the secrecy was about,” says another.

“But a seed bank... That’s a death sent—”

“Shut your traps!” cries the old woman. “You signed up for this! You knew a seed bank was possible! My Sol, you’re a bunch of wimps! And you call yourselves soldiers!?”

No, we don’t, the boy thinks, his stomach twisting until pain and nausea is nearly overwhelming. He imagines they all feel this way. They all were tricked. *More like we had no choice*. The boy’s mother comes to mind, the hoarseness of her cough worsening with each passing day, and the medicine draining their life savings. *But everyone from Hardsill has a story like this*. *So, a seed bank makes sense*, the boy admits, knowing the value of the ancient kernels, pits, grains, and nuts, ones untainted by centuries of genetic modification, locked behind several meters of sicklecell titanium.

“The moment that cargo bay hatch opens, we storm!” the old woman continues, her voice hardening. “Don’t give them a second to think! A second to respond! Be fast! Be efficient! Be just as ruthless as they’ve been to you!”

“But they’ll have an entire regiment guar—” a recruit begins.

“How do you know that!?” spits the old woman. “Are you a mole or something!?”

“E-everyone knows this,” the recruit dares respond.

The old woman whirls from her cockpit chair, raises her rail-pistol, and clicks. A projectile silently passes into the recruit’s head, melting through skin and bone before splintering within their brain. By the time the rest understand what happened, the old woman is back in her seat, staring at the gray speck in space growing larger by the second.

None of them say a word or move a muscle.

“Helmets on!” barks the old woman, sealing her own. “Rail-guns coiled!” she calls through com.

They don helmets and retract coils without question.

A light blinks on the cockpit dash.

“Vessel three-six-foxtrot-whiskey,” comes through the com. “This is Eden Bank. Please, state your business.”

The old woman clears her throat and dashes an icon. “This is Refuse Barge three-six-foxtrot-whiskey, requesting routine docking with Eden Bank’s refuse bay. Sending encryption code now. We apologize for arriving out of sequence, we had to navigate a patch of micro-meteorites.”

The com is silent. The recruits glance at one another.

“Clearance granted,” finally comes. “Transferring you to dock master.”

The gray speck grows larger, appearing like a perfect circle.

The seed bank’s cylindrical end, the refuse bay, the boy recognizes.

“Bring it in nice and easy,” says the dock master. “Now, match gravitational rotation.”

The old woman rotates the barge and weight appears in the boy’s gut.

“That’s it. Docking in three, two, one...”

A clunk resonates through the refuse barge’s cargo bay where the recruits wait facing the hatch in formation, rail-guns raised and ready.

“Docking complete. Equalization commencing,” the dock master says. “Any crew transports today?”

“Negative on crew, sir,” the old woman casually responds. “We’re just here for pickup.”

“Roger that. Equalization will complete in approximately five minutes.”

“Thank you, sir.” The old woman closes the feed and turns to the recruits. “I know that you’re scared... I know that a seed bank has never been hit before... But I’ve been raiding for over two-hundred years and can tell you they have no idea what’s coming.”

The boy’s arms and legs begin to shake, his rail-gun rattles. He believes it is only him until he sees the shoulders of recruits in formation ahead shifting nervously, too. He peers to his right to see the person next to him is crying behind their visor. *Trained to use envisuits, trained to use rail-guns, trained to follow orders and read schematics, but never trained to handle fear...* the boy realizes. He feels strangely comforted in knowing he is not as terrified as those around him. He breathes deeply. His shaking subsides.

The cargo bay hatch whines with the increased pressure of the airlock beyond. An indicator light shifts from red to yellow, then green. The whining stops and the heavy knocking of deadbolts releasing is felt through the boy’s feet. His breathing increases. His hands shake again.

“Steady...” whispers the old woman through com.

Seconds feel like an eternity, until, with a sudden jerk, the cargo bay’s hatch opens to reveal a young janitor, no older than the recruits, guiding a cart overflowing with trash.

“Welcome to Eden Ba—” the janitor trails off.

The recruits stare confused.

They’re supposed to be soldiers! the boy thinks.

“Fucking go!” shouts the old woman. “Shoot him!”

The recruits do not budge.

The old woman pushes through them, her rail-pistol drawn, and clicks at the young janitor. He winces with each projectile silently penetrating his skin and crumbles to the floor. His mouth opens to scream but only blood comes gargling forth. The old woman kneels to the convulsing janitor, pries a holotile from his pocket, rushes to the refuse bay’s back door, and swipes it across the lock.

The door goes green and slides open.

She turns back to the recruits. “Come now or we’re all dead!” She bolts down the hallway, clicking her rail-pistol at more workers in maintenance uniforms.

Shit! the boy thinks.

The recruits in front of him snap into action, shifting formation, becoming a two-by-two line and funneling into the hallway after the old woman. The boy moves as if on autopilot, what little training received actually coming

back to him. They flood from one room to the next, filled with workers ducking below desks, and send projectiles.

But none of them are military! the boy knows, unable to pull his trigger, his finger frozen.

Just then, they round a bend to meet a shower of bullets from a regiment guarding the entry to Eden Bank's control room. Holes appear in the recruits in front of the boy. Light shines through them like swiss cheese. The rail-pistol in the old woman's hand shatters and spurts of blood erupt from her arm. She lurches back, stumbling over fallen recruits, pushing against those still standing.

They retreat around the corner to the screams of those left behind. A second volley silences them.

Blood gushes from the old woman's arm. *She's done for*, the boy is certain until she presses a button at her shoulder. Her face contorts as smoke seeps from her en-suite's shoulder joint. Then, her arm drops to the floor and the seam seals tight. The old woman does not give a second thought to the arm, kneeling to pull a rail-gun from a dead recruit's grasp. She flicks out the old magazine, leans the gun against her chest, pulls a fresh mag from the dead recruit's belt, and shoves it into place. Then, she rests the butt of the rifle on her thigh, its tip to the ceiling, and pulls its coil into ready position. She stands, faces the remaining recruits, makes eye contact with the young boy, and winks.

Her attention snaps to the ceiling hosting several pipes, fixating on one painted red, and follows it to the bend where the regiment waits. "Those of you who can move, get in line!"

They fall in behind her.

"Ready in three... two... one... go!" she cries and bolts around the corner, the rest following in haphazard formation. She raises her rail-gun to the ceiling, as the regiment opens fire, and snipes out the red pipe. A spray of gas washes over the regiment and ignites.

The recruits shoot through the flame-screen hoping to hit something as the old woman continues forth. Her rail-gun runs out of ammo. She discards it to the floor and jumps through the wall of flame.

The recruits come to a screeching halt and stare bewildered at the blaze.

The regiment is no longer shooting back, the boy realizes.

A flailing arm comes through the wall of fire, then a soldier's helmet is pushed into the spray. The gas dissipates and the fire clears. The boy makes out the old woman among the soldiers, parrying their moves with her single

arm and striking back with precision. Their bodies pile around her.

A god among mortals, the boy thinks.

The sight of the old woman boosts the recruits' morale. They rush forth, clicking at the soldiers on the floor, putting them out of their misery.

But the boy hangs back, his gun pointed to the floor, staring at soldiers being overwhelmed by their rush. *No... overwhelmed by the old woman*, he corrects himself.

Wild cries come through com as the last soldier falls, a mixture of cheers and screams. The boy cannot tell which is which.

The old woman grabs a soldier's heavy blaster, looking massive in her grasp, but she handles it with ease, and they funnel into Eden Bank's command room.

"Lock down the barracks before the rest of their regiment comes!" she orders, pointing at a central hologram. "The rest of you, follow me! The seed banks are just beyond this door!"

We actually did it... the boy thinks, astounded.

They fall in behind the old woman as she inputs a code. Hissing and a series of mechanical thumps and clicks, like an ancient clock, comes. Then, the door, nearly a meter thick, slides to the side. Dim lighting marks hundreds of smaller vaults down a long corridor.

Each contains a different variety of seed, the boy knows.

"Let's go!" the old woman cries, hustling down the corridor.

They pass wheat, barley, teff, sorghum, corn, soy, and more but do not stop. The recruits look side to side confused.

This is what we came for... the boy thinks. He builds his courage and says, "Shouldn't we open the vaults?"

The old woman whirls about. "Did I give you permission to speak!?"

The boy timidly shakes his head.

"Then, don't!" The old woman continues onward until the end of the long corridor appears with a vault several times larger than the others. It takes them nearly ten minutes to reach. She gently places her hand on its metal surface. "Behind this door is salvation... You should consider yourselves lucky to be in the presence of such greatness."

"Greatness?" a recruit responds. "I thought this was a raid... Aren't we here for the goods?"

The old woman grins. "You might be." She inputs a code. "I, on the other hand, have loftier aspirations." The old woman kneels, raising her heavy blaster as the vault shudders. "Against the walls!"

The remaining recruits press to the sides of the corridor, and kneel, their rail-guns fixed on the massive vault door groaning open. The room beyond is pitch black, appearing endless, save for a pulsing orange light on the back wall. The old woman does not move a muscle until a metallic tumbling breaks the silence and a fruit-sized orb bounces out from the darkness.

“Grenade!” the old woman cries and opens fire.

The grenade tumbles towards the boy. He has no time to think, but the muscle memory from eight years of competitive Ganyball kicks in. He whips the butt of his rail-gun, cracking the metallic orb, sending it hurtling back through the open vault door.

“Hell yeah!” cries the old woman.

The boy curls on the floor just as the grenade erupts. Even through the helmet his ears ring and his retinas burn, but for a moment he sees several soldiers within the darkness dropping. The old woman shouts orders, but the boy cannot hear a thing. She rushes into the vault.

Move your legs! the boy commands himself. With all his willpower, he stumbles into the vault after the others to meet a line of muzzle flashes. The recruits ahead flutter into the air like a gust of wind catching leaves. Then, a mighty punch slams the boy’s thigh, sweeping his feet out from beneath him.

Floor, ceiling, floor, ceiling, floor...

The wind knocks out of him upon landing. His leg is completely numb. *What in Sol was that!?* After several agonizing seconds, he regains his breath and grasps his thigh, but his hand falls into a gaping hole, instead. He stares, then removes his hand to see the floor on the other side. Blood gushes. *No, no, no!* The boy desperately pinches the hole, trying to stop the blood. *I’m dead!* But then, he remembers the old woman’s arm dropping to the floor and her suit sealing tight. *The leg must do it, too!* He searches around the suit’s hip, but his blood obscures all color and fills all creases. His gloved hands shake, his metal fingertips slip about. *Calm down! Think...* He breathes deeply, removes his gloves, and slips his fingers into the pouring blood. He discerns a little circle on the hip.

The moment he presses, a message appears on his visor reading, “*Do you wish to sacrifice?*”

“Y-yes,” the boy whispers.

The suit cinches tightly around his hip and needles prick his thigh. The smell of barbecue hits his nose. He desperately tries pinching his nostrils, but his helmet is in the way. He fumbles to unlatch and tears it off. After several seconds, the searing stops and his leg loosens free. There is no pain. *This*

can't be real. He looks at the other recruits for confirmation but finds their bodies strewn motionless about the vault. *I'm the last one,* the boy realizes. *Well, almost.*

The old woman still fights in close quarters with the soldiers, a heat blade in her hand, slicing at joints, spines, and necks. She is shot point blank in the chest and drops to a knee. Somehow, she stands back up.

Soldiers continue to fall.

Four left, three left, two left, now one, the boy counts.

The last is out of ammo and cautiously circles the old woman, staring at her heat blade, seemingly at a loss as to how she still breathes let alone fights. As he lunges for the blade, the old woman lets it go and shoves her palm under his helmet's chin, snapping his head up and knocking him back. Just before the blade hits the floor she kicks the handle, sending its heat edge through the soldier's ankle. He steps back to regain balance, but there is no foot to step upon. Instead, he slides on his stump and crashes to the floor. The old woman is quick and jabs her metal fingertips into his neck. He squirms, trying to release his helmet, then convulses. His arms drift to the floor.

The old woman drops to her hand and knees, coughing up blood and splattering her visor. "Not yet!" she gurgles and unlatches her helmet, letting it tumble to the floor. She crawls to the pulsing, orange light on the back wall, reaches up, pushes, then crumbles.

The back wall shudders and cracks. Snow spits as the wall parts. Beyond appears like a blizzard, until the rush of decompression subsides.

The chill air prickles the boy's cheeks and when he peers into the opening, he gasps. The silhouette of a man, well over two meters tall, with bulging, inhuman muscles, becomes visible. Soon, the boy discerns long, red hair. *Locked in ice, in hibernation,* he understands.

An orange glow surrounds the massive man. Water pours across the vault floor. The ice groans and cracks. Chunks fall. The man's gargantuan arm moves ever so slightly.

The boy tries to climb to his feet, momentarily confused when he cannot, and shuffles to the vault's side wall, instead.

"Ah!" comes from the massive man, echoing down the long corridor. A low growling follows.

The boy freezes.

The old woman straightens her back and presses her fist to her missing shoulder. Ice crashes to the floor before her, but she does not move. Tears run down her cheeks, yet she smiles.

A massive leg moves from the wall. A foot thumps to the floor. Once free from the ice, the man slumps down and retches a mouthful of strange liquid. He begins breathing deeply and powerfully, like a horse. Red hair masks his face, but the boy can sense the strength of his jaw.

The old woman looks upon the monster of a man with such love, such admiration. “Fores le Derecoture,” she whispers in a strange language. “Condra feen array tole sun.”

The massive man slowly looks at the old woman, his hair parting to show pale eyes. He slides a knee beneath himself, matching her position, and gently places a paw-like fist to his opposing shoulder.

“Condra feen array tole sun,” he responds.

The old woman cries out and falls forward. The giant man catches and helps her back into position. He stares into her eyes and smiles sweetly. They whisper back and forth, laughing, crying, and touching each other’s face as if they cannot believe the other exists.

The boy does not comprehend a word they speak, but understands their closeness. *Is he her great grandson?*

The old woman reaches into a compartment on her utility belt, retrieves what looks like a syringe, and presents it to the massive man. He stares at it in disbelief. He does not take it. She sets the syringe on the floor, instead, and leans forward, almost bowing. Turmoil crosses the man’s face. He sighs deeply and slowly cups his paws around the old woman’s jaw. With a quick jerk, and a crisp snap, her body goes limp. He gently lays her to the floor, covers his face with his paw, and sobs.

Such ferocity, such fragility, the boy thinks.

After several minutes, the man delicately grasps the syringe and brings its point to the old woman’s temple. “Zun dah!” he shouts and pushes the needle deep into her brain.

The syringe beeps and blinks red.

The massive man rips fabric from his faded uniform, pulls his long, red hair back, and ties it into a bun.

The syringe again beeps. Its light becomes solid green.

He pulls the syringe from the old woman’s head and brings it to his own temple. He breathes in once, out once, and in again. “Zun dah!” He plunges it into his brain. He moans. He twitches. He shouts. He wails. He goes to pull the syringe out, but fights himself at the last second. “No! No!” he cries and falls to the floor, writhing like he is on fire. And then, he is still.

The syringe beeps a final time.

Is he dead? the boy wonders, not sure of what he should be thinking anymore. *Am I dead?*

As if to answer, the man's paw twitches. He calmly pushes himself to his knees and removes the syringe. He looks upon the old woman.

"Sister," he whispers in Interspeak. "Your sacrifice will not be in vain."

"Sister?" the boy inadvertently says.

The massive man snaps his head towards the boy and closes the gap between them in a flash. A fist, larger than the boy's head, hurtles towards his face, but at the last moment it shifts to crash into the wall behind him, instead. The impact chatters his teeth and blurs his vision.

"Are you scared, boy?" says the massive man, with his face just centimeters away, pale eyes burning.

The boy opens his mouth, but no words come.

"That's a yes," the massive man answers.

The boy finds his voice. "Y-yes."

The man inspects the boy's face, his severed leg, and his utility belt. "You helped my sister, yes?"

The boy nods.

"Did you know my sister?"

The boy shakes his head.

"Did you know about me?"

"No..." the boy timidly says.

"Then, why are you here?"

"The seed..."

The man looks about the vault, then down the corridor. "A seed bank?" he says with discovery in his voice. "Brilliant." He turns back to the boy. "But not brilliant enough. They should have destroyed me when they had the chance."

"Are you going to kill me?" the boy squeaks.

The man ponders this. "Your magazines are full. Why didn't you shoot?"

"The soldiers did not deserve to die," the boy says.

"But they were trying to kill you."

"They were defending."

"So, did your comrades deserve to die, then?"

The boy thinks long about that and says, "Nobody deserves to die, including my mother. She's sick. That's why I came."

The massive man sits back on the floor, giving the boy some space. "What's your name, boy?"

“Samuel.”

The man’s eyes brighten. A smile spreads across his face. “That’s a *magnificent* name.”

CHAPTER ONE

“Clara Ocol, thank you for granting us this exclusive interview,” TWN anchor Celina Cobalt says. “But why now, nearly twelve years after you published Zion’s biography?”

Clara glances at the cameras and lights, masking the audience beyond. “It was time I set the skeptics straight.”

Celina brightens. “We all found it fascinating when you published his biography as a work of fiction. I know it’s far fetched, but are you certain there’s no truth to Zion’s stories? A growing number of historians are finding they answer some of Earth’s mysteries.”

Clara grins. “We must remind ourselves that Zion was a genius researcher and storyteller, unlike any the galaxy has ever known. He spent nearly three centuries digging into the histories and cuisines of thousands of cultures. It’s how he was able to establish galactic stability after the Arkathy Empire fell. Regarding human history, there is nothing in Zion’s tales that did not exist in what was already recovered after The Fall. He merely told it in a cohesive manner, with heart and soul, and a touch of fantasy.”

“I’d say a little more than a touch,” Celina quips.

“What’s life without imagination?” Clara responds.

“But, Clara, aren’t some of the characters based on real people?” Celina continues to prod.

“Loosely. And then, there’s Mermer, whom Zion completely ripped off

from the cartoon.”

“Mermer the Genius, my daughter loves that show,” Celina adds.

“So you see, while Zion told incredible stories, he never told anything new.”

“I... suppose so,” Celina says with a narrowed brow.

Phew, Clara thinks, relieved to dodge yet another bullet.

“It’s just...” Celina hesitantly starts again. “How Zion describes the Arkathy Empire’s dismantling strangely makes sense.”

Shit...

Celina senses Clara’s anxiety and grins slightly. “I mean, of course it’s fiction... Supreme Minister Hjordiana said so herself.”

Clara does not miss Celina’s hidden message, but hopes Supreme Minister Hjordiana, watching this interview’s taping, does.

“The Sorgan species perished long before that event,” Clara carefully responds. “And they had no vocal chords. They could not audibly speak. So, it’s physically impossible one could have convinced the galactic empire to rebel.”

“Then, why did Zion dream that up?”

Clara nods. “The greatest discovery I made about Zion, was that he suffered from Kaladian Degradation Disease, an extremely rare condition that unravels one’s DNA, having a particular effect on a patient’s mind. As one brain synapses uncouples, it tries desperately to reconnect, often finding the end of another uncoupled synapses to bond with, resulting in the crossing of memories. And we now know of Zion’s many psychotic episodes during his tenure, ones the council covered up. Truth is, he was sick his entire life.”

“But Zion was a genius,” Celina interjects.

“Yes, he was. Now imagine a genius who specializes in research having KDD, and how scattered and confused their mind would become.”

Celina’s eyes go blank for a second.

Her earpiece, Clara knows.

“Thank you, Clara, for clearing that up. You’ve certainly given us all a lot to consider.” She turns to the audience. “And that concludes this week’s episode of *Behind the Curtain*.”



Clara’s LightCab nears her apartment building at the top of Cobble Hill and navigates around paparazzi clustering the drop off. They lean towards the car, trying to catch a glimpse through its privacy windows.

Already? Clara thinks and sighs deeply. “Change of destination...”

Tempest University, Archaeology Center.”

“*Destination accepted,*” chimes the LightCab, turning back onto the street and to the upper ring road.

Clara’s eyes become heavy as she stares across Tempest City’s reservoir filling the basin below, reflecting skyscraper lights from across the water. It is mid-afternoon. *But it might as well be midnight,* Clara thinks whenever Titan reaches peak darkness of its eight day long night cycle.

The LightCab takes the University exit and plunges into a bamboo forest. Her view of the basin and skyline scrolling by is replaced by dark trunks furiously passing her window. It wakes her up.

“Coffee black, please,” she says.

“*Coming right up,*” chimes the LightCab and a humming comes from a synthesizer embedded in its central console. It dings, and a travel cup’s outline appears beyond the synth’s translucent door.

Aizen would be disappointed in me, Clara thinks, having spent a decade drinking her son’s true artisan blend. She opens the synth door, retrieves the artificial coffee, and sips. *Now, I’m disappointed in me.*

University lights twinkle through the bamboo and Clara’s cab passes the front gate unveiling the campus in full. Students traverse a quad between classes, navigating statues of archaeological heroes, many adorning patches of the History Recovery Guild upon their lapels. In the darkness they resemble a coven of vampires coming out to mingle.

The cab comes to a stop in front of the University’s Archaeology Center and its door lifts. Several students do double-takes as Clara enters. She makes her way from a large central atrium to the many lecture halls, and stops to check the schedule on hologram. *Where is he today?*

A lecture door swings open and students depart.

“And don’t forget...” comes a professor’s familiar voice, “...Your essays are due first thing on...”

Clara cups her hands around her mouth and calls, “Kip!”

“...Mon—” the professor silences. Hustling footsteps come and Jonathan appears in the doorway with a huge smile. “I thought you had the interview today!”

“Wrapped up an hour ago. Thought I’d catch a lesson,” she responds.

“You just missed Paris’s catacombs!” he says, but his smile dwindles.

His next lecture is on Paris itself, Clara knows, and that this is where Jonathan’s lessons diverge from the truth. *All to keep the Sorgans’ existence a secret.* She remembers how devastated he was when the creatures destroyed

the perfect buildings, bringing them back to the state of rubble humanity would expect. “This is how Paris was supposed to be found,” she had argued, trying to help Jonathan reconcile its destruction. *Still, he refuses to return.*

“Was home infested again?” Jonathan asks.

Clara nods. “And that was only after the taping.”

Jonathan shakes his head. “We’ll have to align our trip to Earth with the interview’s airing, then.”

Clara thinks about that. “Aizen still needs time alone.”

“You’d think a year is long enough,” Jonathan snips.

She gives him a look. “It took you fifty-four years to reconcile your own past, and you’re not even in touch with *them*. ”

His brow wrinkles. “I know... It just feels like the moment I take a position that doesn’t require the year-on year-off schedule, Aizen leaves, instead.”

“Maybe this is our punishment,” Clara jokes. *Kinda.*

“I just miss him,” Jonathan says.

“Me too, hon. We can send a message.”

“And hope he responds,” Jonathan grumbles.



Remnants of Addis Ababa appear just as the History Recovery Guild described, its city a pile of rubble beneath a glass dome and the anchor point of its great elevator obliterated.

I wish you could have seen it in its heyday, Sha sadly responds in his mind. *Addis Ababa used to be magnificent. Paris, too.*

And New York City, Justin chimes in.

And Toronto, adds Kwai Lan.

But it’s all destroyed, Aizen thinks back. *Earth holds no answers for me.*

Mermer comes into view at Aizen’s feet, staring at the barren crater. *What were you expecting to find?*

A clue as to how you exist within me.

We’ve tried answering that question before, the crustacean says.

And? Aizen asks.

I don’t think there’s a point to it, other than to keep going.

Aizen sighs deeply. *But it’s got to mean something.*

Does it?

Aizen kneels to the little crustacean. *Your home is the next to explore.*

If we can find it, Mermer responds.

How can you not recognize your own home? Justin scoffs.

Mermer points its claw at the crater. *You saw this through Sha's eyes. Do you recognize it now?*

Justin quiets.

Aizen thinks about that. *Actually, Justin, you might know where this all began. Mermer must have lived near your childhood home.*

Justin darkens. *I'll never return to that shithole! I'd rather die!*

You're already dead, Aizen states. *So, where is that shithole?*

Justin glares. *Near Portland...* Oregon, he mumbles and fades away.

Aizen looks to the others for clarification.

It was a city on the west coast of old Usonia, Kwai Lan says.

Well, that's a start, Aizen thinks and takes one last look across the crater. *It really stretched all the way into space?*

It certainly did, Sha says.

Crazy, Aizen thinks and boards his shuttle.



Aizen wakes in a cockpit seat to magnificent snow-capped mountain peaks holding clouds at bay below, reminding him of his Blood Mountain trek over a decade ago. His shuttle dips through the clouds alongside steep slopes, their barren rock quickly replaced by sparse trees, then thick forest as oxygen increases. When the coastline becomes visible in the distance, everything feels specifically *Earth* again. Soon, rugged stone cliffs hold an ocean at bay, sea foam spraying above as waves concuss. Even from the shuttle, Aizen can feel its ferociousness.

Are you sure this is Oregon? he asks.

According to the coordinates... yes, Kwai Lan says.

How are we going to find Justin's home? he thinks to Mermer. *You must remember something from your time with him.*

Mermer fades into view. *It's been over a thousand years... Erosion is far more aggressive on Earth than other planets. Any remnants of his hometown are likely gone.*

But the towns were never hit by the light beams, Aizen responds.

Dione appears. *That's part of the problem. Although the light beams decimated Earth's major cities, their destruction was preserved within the glass domes, while the settlements outside have deteriorated to dust.*

Then, again, there's nothing for me here, Aizen thinks.

Justin slowly fades in, wearing a horrible frown. *It's on Sayden Island, off Braxis Point.* He fades away.

Aizen searches the shuttle's archives to find an old map from just after

The Fall. *There are several islands along the coast, but nothing indicating Braxis Point.*

And everything's different with sea rise, Kwai Lan says. The island must be underwater now.

Aizen strafes the coastline in his shuttle, analyzing the water depth to determine where an island might have once existed. He comes across another shadow below the surface.

The shuttle chimes, "67% match."

Is it enough to warrant an investigation? Aizen thinks. "Simulate sand erosion back to the year two-thousand."

"*Simulation commencing.*" A hologram projects an ancient island's outline below and applies arrows in the water to indicate current. The outline shifts, the water level lowers, and an island appears. "*Simulation complete, 84% match.*"

Better, Aizen thinks. "Let's check it out."

The shuttle lowers to the churning water and Aizen makes out long linear formations below its surface.

Petrified trees! Sha says.

Aizen slips on his envisuit and hits a button, cinching it tightly around his body, then dons his helmet. His excitement surges as the shuttle hatch opens, revealing the chopping waves. *This must be how Dad felt when he discovered the WorldRing entry!* Aizen makes a note to send his father the recording. He freezes, realizing that he misses his parents for the first time since arriving to Earth. He frowns, pushes the thought from his mind, and dashes *Record* on visor. He clips a tether from his suit's coiler to the ship's frame and dips into the water. He leans forward against the current and lowers his head below the surface to see the petrified trees. His feet suddenly lose their grip and the waves pull him from the shuttle. The tether catches, and Aizen flails, trying to find the bottom with his treads. A foot makes contact with an old tree. Aizen quickly activates its grip. Then, his other foot finds a home. Slowly, clumsily, he traverses the ghost of an island, searching for any clue of ancient habitation.

He covers it all in three hours.

This isn't it, he concludes. *Did you know?*

Justin appears. *I must admit, Mermer was right about not recognizing home. I have no idea where it was.*

Aizen boards the shuttle, pulls off his envisuit, and takes the cockpit seat. His stomach growls as the shuttle rises. He studies the coastline, finding a

break in the rocky shore to make camp. When he lands and the hatch opens, Aizen is struck by the sound of crashing waves. Memories from a life beneath the water, of traveling from one rock to the next, dodging pelicans, falling in love, then losing that love, race through his mind.

For the first time, Aizen senses that Mermer is afraid. *But he's our pillar...* He cautiously steps upon the sand, feeling it shift beneath his feet. *Off with the boots, away with the socks!* Now, granules slip between his toes and stick to his soles. He breathes deeply, taking in the salty scent mixed with healthy decay. *Low tide.* He spies rocks covered in seaweed with water collecting between them. *Tide pools.*

He grabs his pack from the shuttle and sprints across the sand, marveling at how it feels. By the time he reaches the rocks, his thighs burn. *Earth gravity just cannot be replicated.* Even after a year, his stomach still feels like a rock and his heart exuberantly pounds. "Magsuits do little for internal organs and the weight of blood!" suddenly comes from an ancient memory. *But who had said that?*

He navigates the slick rocks, finding small pools hosting tiny fish. He dips his hand into a pool, closes his eyes, and listens for their voices.

Nothing.

Why is that? Aizen wonders.

He's so scared, Aizen thinks and opens his eyes.

He catches a scurrying in a pool ahead. An armored creature crawls into the crack of a stone. *It can't be!* He climbs closer and kneels, trying to get a better view. His heart races. Movement comes and a spiked leg emerges from the crack, then a claw and an armored head. Aizen holds his breath.

Don't get your hopes up, comes Justin's voice. *It's a Dungeness crab.*

Aizen thinks about that. *But it looks just like a grodote.*

That's because you've never seen them with your own eyes.

Aizen rummages through Justin's memories until a grodote appears. *Yeah, not even close.* He stands and breathes deeply, trying to subdue his adrenaline when a monstrous shadow passes overhead, sending his nerves through the roof, instead.

My god! A Pelican! Justin cries, pointing at a prehistoric looking creature drifting comically slow in the sky, as if suspended by cables. It teeters left and right adjusting to offshore winds, then circles above a tide pool, squawking.

"Ahlongee!" cries a voice from below. "Eh! Eh! Ahlongee!"

The bird squawks again and flaps away.

Aizen's eyes drop from the pelican to the pools to find a young woman with a fish writhing on her spear. She is dressed lightly despite the chill, and each item strapped to her leather belt appears to have a purpose. Her skin is weathered, her muscles are defined, and her hair is braided back tight. Aizen's excitement surges. *Not even Dad has seen a native Terran!*

The Terran whirls in Aizen's direction.

Shit! He ducks and stumbles into a pool. All is silent but the waves. Aizen closes his eyes and slips into meditation, but there is so much life on Earth that he is overwhelmed. *Just like every other time I've tried.* He drops his meditation and slowly peaks his head above the rocks. The woman is gone. He studies the ocean waves framing one side of the tide pools, then the rocky cliff framing the other. *Where'd she go?*

A powerful hand snatches Aizen's hair, pulling his head back, and the unmistakable edge of a blade meets his throat.