
Alliances Formed
Book Three: Hugh, Vampire
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By Robert P. Wills

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Deimos is nice in the summer though.



“You say you are here to talk, Hugh-san,
but I do not believe the men in that ship have brought their ears.”
- Akira Yamamoto, Samurai

One

Abigail sat in her house, puttering. After a dozen people had come in and cleaned, mended, and generally tidied up, there was absolutely nothing for her to do. Not that her house was in disarray to start with, but without her husband around, she had become a little lax in some of her housekeeping. She picked up a pillow and moved it to the other end of the couch. It had changed positions three times already and it wasn't even close to noon. "Oh." She wrung her hands. "Patience Abigail." She said aloud. "Patience is a virtue." She took a calming breath then decided she would go see what Eli was doing. He had gotten to the age where he didn't conduct any real community chores but he did help here and there when he felt up to it. At this time -before lunch- he would either be at home having a cup of tea or at the stable checking on the animals. "Tea sounds nice." She said as she grabbed her shawl and her bonnet and headed for the door. "I really hope it's tea."

She slipped the bonnet on her head and exited her home. Abigail looked left and right and decided she would go to Eli's home first. While she enjoyed being in the barn and interacting with the animals, the past few days she had not felt up to having a drawn-out conversation with anyone else; her mind was on her husband not any animal trivialities. She also did not want to have another discussion about what her husband might have been going through the past two years, or if he were actually still alive. Those were the two directions any discussion about her husband went. While she understood completely about "God's Will", she did not want to have to talk about it. As she walked toward Eli's house, a boy ran past her, going the other way. She didn't pay attention to the youth because they would often run to get wherever they were going. When a third youth ran past, she started to look around, worried that perhaps there were Inuits attacking, or worse; Wildmen. She walked quickly up to a man who, while he wasn't running,

he was definitely moving at a quick pace. "Good morning, Brother Matthew," she smiled nervously. "Is there… trouble?"

Matthew didn't stop walking. "Seems there's a gathering, Sister Abigail." He said as he continued walking right past her. "Mayhap they are upset about those others." He added over his shoulder as he continued quickly on his way.

"Now?" Abigail stopped in her tracks. "A gathering?" She looked up. "Or Hugh returning?" She took to a jog as she headed for Eli's home, hoping to catch him there. After only a dozen yards, Eli rounded a corner, shuffling as quickly as she had ever seen him move. "Brother Eli!"

"Abigail! Where are you going?" Eli stopped in front of her. "Where are you going?"

"I was coming to your house." She put her hands in her pockets. "I was hoping for some tea. But…" She looked up. "There is a gathering?"

"Perhaps." Eli shrugged. "Or Hugh has returned."

"Oh!" Abigail beamed. "That's what I just thought!"

"Then why are you heading away from the clearing?"

Abigail looked behind her- in the direction of the clearing. "I was going to your home? For tea?"

"We will do tea later." Eli took her by the elbow and turned her around. "Or perhaps I will have tea later and you can spend some time with Gideon." He started toward the clearing, still holding her arm. "That is what I am praying for, Sister."

"What if it is other gatherers and they are here because they are upset about… what happened. Like Brother Matthew suggested."

"Brother Matthew?" Eli asked.

"Leftie Matt," Abigail said, using the man's nickname. Of the four Matthews living in this part of town, only one was left-handed.

"Either way, we need to see who is here." Eli picked up his pace. "I hope you can keep up with me Sister. I feel in good form today."

While Eli's pace was more than a walk, it was not really at a point to be called a jog even. "I'll try my best." She said with a smile. To Eli's credit, he kept his pace up all the way to the clearing. When they got there, Abigail recognized the ship hovering over the clearing as the one that Hugh had taken. "It's Hugh."

"How do you know?" Eli asked as he tried to catch his breath.

"It looks like the same ship." Abigail said. "It has…" As she spoke, the ship moved off to the side of the clearing. "Oh, where are they going?"

"Maybe they are giving us more room?" Eli gestured- there were almost two dozen people in the clearing nervously watching. "No, perhaps not." The ship started back toward the center of the clearing. "I wonder how much practice Hugh has gotten over these last few days."

The pair watched as the ship got back to the center of the clearing then started to land. It seemed to be going much faster than when the Gatherers landed and when it hit, one of the rear legs of the ship made a loud noise as if something broke. "Oh my!" Abigail exclaimed. "I hope they are all okay."

"I am sure they are." Eli patted her on the shoulder. "I am sure they are all fine in there."

After two long minutes, the door opened up.

Abigail took a step forward. Then when no one came out, she took another step.

Eli moved beside her. "Remain calm, Sister." He said even though his insides was in knots. "If you could, please."

Suddenly Isaac ran down the ramp. When he got to the bottom he looked left and right, then ran to his parents who were among those anxiously waiting.

"Young Isaac is back with us. That is good news." Eli said with a smile. "Good news indeed."

"Just Isaac?" Abigail said. She had been worried that Hugh would not be able to find Gideon, or worse he had died over the course of the past two years. The conversations had her convinced he was dead. "I

was so worried he didn't make it." She said as she put her hands over her eyes. "Two years. It has been too long." She wiped tears from her eyes.

Eli looked at the ramp as Gideon walked down it. "My dear Abigail." He patted her shoulder. "All is well. *Look*."

Abigail looked up and met eyes with Gideon. With tears of joy now falling from her eyes she broke into a run towards him.

And he towards her.

Two

"Oh, Hugh-san, you must come look. A touching reunion." Hinata was leaning against the hatch watching and providing a running commentary on the Amish in the field. "A song is coming to life in my head. A song of reunion." He looked back at Hugh. "Hugh-san Nakoudo." (Matchmaker)

"That's the boy's parents."

"No, not the chattering one, although that is also heartwarming. It is the two lovebirds. Running and embracing like a romantic play written by some sobbing woman. "Young lovers, reunited, it is titled."

"They were already married, you romantic Samurai." Hugh was sitting in one of the chairs of the galley. He shook his head. "A song of reunion."

"Seeing this, I think you should find someone too." Hinata nodded. "Oh yes; it would do you good, I think to find someone to balance you. You are a paradox, you know."

"What?"

Hinata looked back outside. "A Kyūketsuki with so many friends. The stories of them being solitary hunters must have been wrong."

Hugh considered that. His knowledge of vampires was limited to what he had seen in movies and read in books. While they did sometimes lead solitary lives, they were more often portrayed as being part of a large family or even an entire secret society of vampires. He considered that. The thought of making someone else a vampire to just be his mate could lead to a great many issues- as often happened in the movies he saw of bands of vampires fighting one another. He also wasn't sure he wanted to condemn someone to the life he had. "I think the stories are pretty accurate." He said finally.

Hinata, his face serious stepped toward Hugh. "I must thank you for getting me back here. Dying on Mars would not have honored my

village." He straightened then bowed his head. "I truly thank you, Hugh-san for saving me from dishonor."

"No problem." Hugh replied. "It seems to be what I do nowadays."

Hinata pointed at him. "Yes, I must say it is unusual for a Kyūketsuki to be helping others. That is also not their way."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," Hugh said. "You did not seem surprised that I was a vampire. How is that? Have you met other vampires?" Hugh's life had been a solitary existence, then he met Benfleet -albeit briefly. Even so, it was the only other vampire he had met in the thousands of years of his life.

"It is a well-known legend, the vampire. I thought it was a story told to scare children." Hinata shrugged. "Then I learned of one in our village. Or one that came to our village, actually. Chiyo by name."

"Chiyo?" Hugh asked. "That's a girl's name. She was a *female* vampire?"

"Ahh, Hugh-san, Muzukashī mono." (Tricky one). "You speak far more Japanese than you let on."

"I've had a lot of time to practice."

"What other languages do you speak then?" Hinata asked, genuinely curious.

"Several local languages from around here." He panned his hands out. "This was my…" His voice trailed off. Calling it his hunting area was accurate but now it he didn't like the sound of it. "This was my home; I was living here before my accident. And," he continued before Hinata could ask what he was going to originally say, "I can speak Russian, Inuit, Icelandic and Norwegian as well. Oh and Spanish because why not."

"So do all of the people in this town know what you are?"

"No, they do not. Just a select few do." He pointed at Hinata. "You are changing the subject."

"Subject?"

"You were telling me about Chiyo. In your village." Hugh put his hands on the table. "If I could find her. Meet and talk to her, I might learn from her." He thought back to his brief interaction with Benfleet which had pointed him toward becoming a mist; something he had never considered. Since then he had been working on that talent- with only moderate success.

"Oh, that is not possible, Hugh. Chiyo is dead."

"Did you kill her?" Hugh narrowed his eyes at him.

"No, I was not aware of her existence until well after her demise. It just so happened that when she showed her true self, the Yama No Samurai were in the village and they dealt with her."

Hugh thought for a moment. "Mountain Samurai? Even so, a vampire is hard to kill. How many samurai died?"

"None, Hugh. The Yama No Samurai are formidable."

"You should join them when I take you back home." Hugh smiled. "You've definitely proven yourself as a warrior.."

Hinata looked back out the hatch. "No. They are… selective. Very selective. I could not do what needed to be done to join them." He looked at Hugh. "We will leave it at that. You will stay here?" Hinata asked.

Hugh shrugged. "I suppose for a while. They're sort of like family." Now he moved to look out the hatch again. "Friends even. It's a new experience for me. But I am different so I am sure at some point I will need to move on. Our ways of life are too different and I wouldn't want to corrupt them."

"I can imagine for a Kyūke… for you Hugh-san that staying in one place for very long would not work out well. Oh; someone approaches. An old man."

"That is probably Eli. One of the town elders. A trusted friend."

"He is one who knows?"

"Yes, he knows about me." Hugh said.

"Welcome, good sir." Hinata said as Eli entered the ship. "Eli-san." He bowed.

"Oh, hello." Eli said surprised. He looked from Hugh to Hinata and back again. "I wasn't expecting… others?"

"Hinata here." Hugh gestured. "Was an added bonus. A trustworthy and loyal person if there ever was one." He raised a finger. "He's Japanese, I should point out."

"Japanese?" Eli looked at Hinata again. "I would have thought he…"

"He does look like an Inuit but he isn't." Hugh stood. "The Japanese are a people from far away, on the other side of the ocean in fact." He pointed. "An island."

Hinata looked back and forth as the two spoke about him. He smiled wide. "An island?"

"I see." Eli said not sounding completely convinced.

"He's one of the good guys; I can tell you that." Hugh said picking up on his friend's tone.

Eli extended his hand. "Well, then that is good enough to me."

"Hinata." Hinata shook the man's hand. "Hinata Takahashi."

"It is good to meet you Hinata."

"Oh!" Hinata smirked. "It is good to meet anyone, I must say." He gestured toward Hugh with his head. "If it were not for him, I would still be in my cage."

"Cage?"

"I'll explain later." Hugh said. "First things first, I need to deal with the landing gear… feet of this ship because one was damaged when I landed."

"I heard the sound. Metal on metal." Eli said. "None of the other ships ever made that sound when they landed."

Hinata smiled wide. "Ahh, the Amish. Their words come straight like an arrow."

"Yeah, I figured something broke." Hugh ignored Hinata then looked down at the deck. "But not too bad because we're still pretty level."

"What can we do about it?" Eli asked. He looked around the ship. "This is all foreign to us."

"Metal is metal." Hugh said. "If you could get a couple of the blacksmiths to come out and look, they should be able to help, I'd think. The Amish are pretty crafty people."

Eli nodded. "I will do that." He started to turn then stopped himself. "Hinata is was good to meet you. Perhaps we can talk about this place Japanese, later. Over lunch perhaps."

"Oh!" Hinata smiled wide. "It will be my honor, Eli. To speak of the island of Japanese while we eat."

Hugh stifled a chuckle. "Gaikōkan Hinata." (Hinata the diplomat)

"What?" Eli asked.

"I speak a little of his native language." Hugh explained.

"I see." Eli brightened. "Oh, that reminds me! I have a plan I'd like to discuss with you concerning your ability with languages."

Hugh nodded. "Later, please." He looked up. "I really want someone to look at the ship sooner rather than later. We've got a lot of time before it gets dark and I need to get it moved out of sight."

"Right." Eli paused for a moment as he thought. "I will bring Ezekiel and Mattias." With that he turned and left.

"Hugh-san, while we are alone we must speak."

"Now what." Hugh leaned against the table. "What's on your mind; another song?"

"These people, your Amish." He gestured out the door. "From what I have been told… *at length* by Gideon… seem to be a simple, peaceful people."

"They are." Hugh said. "They do have weapons and hunt however. They eat meat and all."

"Yes. However these people that you have wronged, they are far from peaceful. And…" He hesitated. "I have to say my people are also the same."

"I understand the warrior spirit of the Japanese."

"Yes, well." Hinata started again. "In our village I was one of those warriors."

"Hinata Samurai." Hugh said. "Hai!" He swung an imaginary sword in a broad slash across his chest.

"Do not make light, Hugh. We live in dangerous times and our village… it was more a town than a village in fact, we fought for our very existence at times. And if that meant we took the battle to another's doorstep, we did that." He lowered his voice. "We were not Samurai; we were Senshi. I was to become a Samurai but I declined." (Senshi are Warriors). His voice lowered to almost a whisper. "We once even fought the Samurai. Mōkin-rui Samurai and it did not go well for us." (Samurai beasts of prey)

"I am sure you fought with honor and for what was right." Hugh said, not sure where Hinata's train of thought was going. "I do not think less of your for fighting for your town." He added since he was doing the same thing now. "Why is this important now?"

"Because." He pointed at him and furrowed his brow. "If you, Hugh outsider came to *our* town, assaulted the mayor and his bodyguards, and then stole from us, we would take the battle to your doorstep. Your very doorstep. And we would fight with a vengeance."

"Oh." Hugh looked up. "Well, I had thought that they would come looking for me and the ship. You think they will just attack the townsfolk?" Now he was worried as he imagined an assault craft just destroying the town from the sky. "Oh man."

"They did just that to my town, Hugh. They are cowards who did not meet us face to face. They threw fire from the sky and destroyed everything because we Shensi dared to fight the ones they had sent into

our town. There was nothing we could do to stop them. We were mice trying to fight eagles."

Hugh leaned back as he considered how he would also be unable to stop any sort of arial assault. They had not brought any weapons when they glided back to the ship and there were only two small sidearms in the ship's locker; nothing that could pose a threat to an aircraft. The ship itself was completely unarmed because it was really just a space-faring recreational vehicle. "Oh man." He looked up again.

"Staying here, at least until this matter is resolved, is dangerous for these people you have befriended." Hinata said. "They are timid mice."

Hugh shook his head. "Yeah, okay, I get it. So what do you suggest Hinata Senshi? What is your plan?"

"Move the battle elsewhere, Hugh. Quickly. Move it to where you *want* to stand and fight, not where you are *forced* to stand and fight. This town will be a distraction and will get you killed in the battle trying to save the people of this town instead of fighting your enemies. Facing the sheep is not how a shepherd fights the wolf."

"Well I don't see how they could know where we went. We went dark when we left Mars and we changed our name…" His voice trailed off. "Oh no." His heart sank. "No."

"What is it?"

"I named the ship the Knick Anchorage when I took it." Hugh shook his head. "Stupid!"

"Why?" Hinata moved to the table and sat. "Why was this stupid?"

Hugh pointed out the hatch. "When I first came to this town, when it was established long ago it was called Knick Anchorage. Now it is called just Anchorage. And they will know the name of the ship because that's what it was when we landed on Mars."

"And that will lead them to this town? Is this the only town called Anchorage?"

"As far as I know, yes." Hugh put his head on the table. "Oh, what a stupid thing to do."

"Then we must leave, Hugh. We must leave now." Hinata said. "Before they come looking here, we must lead them elsewhere. Now." When Hugh didn't say anything Hinata continued, "Hugh, Omoitatta ga kichijitsu." (The day you make up your mind to do something is a lucky day). "Let us go far away. To my home. We can fight them there. Now."

"But that will put your town in danger." Hugh's head was still down. "How is that better?"

"Did you not hear? My town is no longer there. You said it was across the ocean from here. So then that is where we need to lead them; far away where there will be no one but us and them. And since you have no association with the people there, anyone these enemy see will be of no concern to them because they will know they are not a concern to you. But we must act now."

Hugh lifted his head. "Yeah. Yeah, I get it." He stood. "Okay, keep an eye out for Eli and when he gets here, show them the broken leg. Hopefully they can fix it. I need to talk to Cynthia."

"The she-devil? Bah!"

Hugh smiled. Hinata had not liked that there was a disembodied voice within the ship that seemed to be alive. "Yes. I'm going to start working on a plan." He started for the cockpit. "Let me know what they say about the leg. Hai?"

"Hai."

Three

Hugh eased himself into the pilot chair then tapped several icons bringing up a display of the Earth. He scrolled the map around to Japan- it was quite a bit larger than what he had remembered. And in fact, it was connected to the Asian mainland at the top and the Sea of Japan looked quite small. "Huh. So much for it being an island." He started to scroll around the map then realized he didn't even know where Hinata's town used to be. "Cynthia. Are you able to track ships leaving Mars?"

"Yes. If their transponders are on I am able to track ships leaving and arriving on Mars."

"Right, right." Hugh said. He had had a lengthy discussion about turning off the transponder of the ship to not be tracked by Mars. "So can you tell if any ships are heading towards Earth?" A thought occurred to him. "Namely ships that are owned or operated by the Governor of Mars? Does he even have ships?"

"The Governor of Mars has two personal ships as well as a government-registered planetary flier. There are also four ships assigned to his security detail. Do you want the names of these ships."

"No." Hugh said. "No, I just want to know if any of those ships are heading towards Earth right now."

"None of the ships are heading toward Earth right now." Cynthia replied immediately. "There are however two other ships not affiliated with the Governor that are on a trajectory for Earth. Do you want me to tell you when a Governor affiliated ship takes off? There is one scheduled for tomorrow."

Hugh hesitated. "Wait, what? You know when his ships will take off?"

"Flight plans are public record." Cynthia replied. "Unless they are a military mission." She added.

"Where is this ship going? What ship is it?" Hugh cringed at asking two questions at once.

"The ship is the *Mons Highlands Two*. It is assigned to the Governor's security detail."

"Where is the *Mons Highlands Two* going?"

"It is not going anywhere right now."

Hugh frowned. "Where will it be going according to its flight plan?"

"It will be flying to Earth after it takes off tomorrow at nine hundred hours, Mars Capital Time. The flight plan does not give landing details."

"I've got a pretty good idea where it will be landing. When will it arrive in Alaska?"

"The flight plan does not indicate where the ship will be landing." Cynthia replied.

"Yes, fine. Extrapolate the time if the ship is coming to Alaska, what time will it arrive here? Here in Anchorage."

"If the ship follows normal operating speeds, it will arrive in Anchorage by thirteen hundred hours tomorrow."

Hugh exhaled. He had no idea of the amount of time it would take to fix the broken landing gear, or even how badly it was damaged. "Cynthia. How do the engines…" He stopped himself to ask a better question: "Cynthia is there a way to track a ship by its engine exhaust?" He asked, not even sure if the engines produced exhaust. From what he could tell, they created some sort of gravity field to push the ship around; nothing was really burned as fuel. And the Oganesson was just compressed to form a singularity so it wasn't really consumed. As far as he knew, anyway.

"In space there is no way to track the particulates from a Heyu-Simmons Drive engine, however in an atmosphere, ionized particles would be visible for a short period of time."

"Does this ship have a Heyu-Simmons Drive?" Hugh asked, unsure if there were a wide variety of engines used by ships. "Is that typical?"

"Yes, the Heyu-Simmons Drive engine which utilizes Oganesson to create a singularity is the prevalent space travel engine in use since it is

currently the most efficient. There are several other less efficient engines also used within the Solar System such as the Jeffries Collider and…"

"Stop, Cynthia. Stop." Hugh said. "What sort of period of time can the exhaust of this engine be tracked?" Hugh was worried he would have to delay taking off until the other ship was already in orbit, making it difficult for him to be prepared for them in Japan.

"It is dependent on atmospheric conditions. Anywhere from an hour to several days."

"Okay." Hugh nodded. "Taking into consideration the current and projected atmospheric conditions around Anchorage Alaska, how long will the particulates from this ship's exhaust be visible if we took off today within four hours?" He asked as specifically as he could because oftentimes a vague question resulted in similarly vague responses.

"Twelve hours." Cynthia replied simply.

"So the current weather conditions will allow that other ship to see where we went for twelve hours. Is there a way…" He stopped again. "Can we make the engines run less efficiently than they currently are so that our exhaust would be visible for a longer period of time?"

"This ship has only one engine."

Hugh exhaled loudly. "Can we make the engine of this ship run less efficiently?"

"The engine is currently running at ninety-two percent efficiency. Maintenance will be required on the power system within the next six months or efficiency will drop to eighty eight percent efficiency. Engine efficiency below seventy-five percent is not recommended for extended space travel and will void your warranty. Currently the ship is still under warranty and will require its yearly maintenance at a Class Six depot. Do you want me to contact Nelson-Healy Systems Incorporated on the asteroid Pallas to schedule this maintenance? There are several locations that can accomplish the maintenance."

Hinata leaned into the cockpit. "The metal workers are here. I will take them out to discover the damage."

Hugh nodded at Hinata then looked at the ceiling as he often did when speaking to the AI. "That is not what I asked, Cynthia. Can I make

the engine operate less efficiently so that our exhaust would be visible for, say twenty-four hours?"

"Yes." Cynthia replied. "However this will affect the speed of the ship."

"Will it void my warranty?" Hugh asked, now curious.

"If it is done temporarily, it will not."

"Fine then. We just need to get to Japan leaving a nice dirty trail." Hugh said. "Make the engine run less efficiently to leave an exhaust trail for… thirty hours." He said, wanting to make sure there was no chance they weren't followed.

"When do you want this inefficiency level implemented?"

"Wait until we take off for Japan."

"I do not know when that is. Do you want to file a flight plan?"

"No. I do not want to file a flight plan." Hugh said. "I will tell you when we are leaving for Japan. We will *not* be filing a flight plan."

"Okay." Cynthia replied simply.

"Okay." Hugh said as he pushed himself out of the seat. He looked down at the map of Japan, worried that Hinata might not be able to locate where his home was from a satellite image. "Oh man." He said now worried about that as well as how he had damaged the ship.

When he got to the galley, he looked out at the hatch; the sun was bright outside. "Just great." He sat in a chair waiting to hear hopefully good news from Hinata.

After almost half an hour, Hinata and Eli came in.

"Finally! I'm dying in here." Hugh said as he stood quickly. "Man!"

Eli smiled. "Calm down, Hugh. Everything is under control."

Hugh shook his head. "I wish that were true."

"Hinata explained to me why you need to move the ship." Eli said. He looked at the table. "Is this a place to eat?"

"No!" Hinata said so quickly and loudly that Eli jumped. "No." he said softer. "The food here is unacceptable to serve to a guest."

"That is true." Hugh smiled. "These are meals of last resort, Eli. I would hate to serve you anything in here."

"Hai." Hinata said.

"Well, I was going to bring a meal here from the town for us to share for lunch."

Hugh raised a hand. "Yes, we should have a quick meal but first, what is going on with the foot of the ship?"

"It has broken a retaining pin." Eli said. "Mattias said they can make a replacement one if you have a way of lifting the ship to replace it."

"Lifting the ship?"

"The weight will need to be taken off the leg for a new pin to be inserted through the pivot holes." Eli explained. "The pin allows the bottom portion of the foot to flex much like a knee does."

Hugh considered that. "Except…and please do not take offence… the metal you use will not be as strong as the metal this ship is made from."

Eli nodded. "Yes, Hinata explained that already. That is why Mattias and Ezekiel will be making four replacement pins and cotter pins for you. That way you will have replacements."

"Hopefully you learn to land better before we run out." Hinata said with a smile.

"I see that the straightforward ways of the Amish are rubbing off on you." Hugh said. "So how long until the bolts are made?"

"At most an hour. Probably less." Eli said. "They are a half inch pin very similar to the ones used for the gristmill. They will cut down some

stock they already have, and drill holes on each end for cotter pins. They are confident they will work just as well as what was originally there."

"Excellent. Then I say we eat while they make them and I'll talk to the ship about hovering so that the bolt can be installed."

"Talk to the ship?" Eli asked.

"It is difficult to explain." Hugh admitted. "But the ship is able to talk."

"Huh." Was all Eli said in response.

"So fresh food?" Hinata asked. "Would there be any chance of taking some with us so that there is something to eat until we reach my home?"

"It's an hour flight, Hinata." Hugh said with a headshake. "But I am sure that there will be plenty to take with us. The hospitality of the Amish is hard to beat."

"Oh." Eli said as he gave a nod; complements were something the Amish did not readily accept because it would seem prideful, except when it came to cooking and hospitality. "We do what we can. I will go gather a proper meal and be back shortly."

"Tell Abigail I will see her when I return." Hugh said. "I really want to be gone well before nightfall."

"I understand." Eli said. With that, he left.

"Ahh, fresh food, Hugh-san." Hinata said as he patted his belly. He looked at Hugh. "Will you also eat… food?"

"I can eat food." Hugh said defensively. "Especially their food; it is excellent."

"Oh, I cannot wait. I have had bland food for the past two years." He patted his belly again. "Go talk to the she-devil about how to get the leg up and I will wait for Eli and his supply of food."

"Hai." Hugh replied with a smirk

Four

"What's your status?" Governor Sykes snapped.

"Loaded and ready." Rex replied. "Ready to roll it on down to your home." He said, quoting a popular song.

"So you're taking off now?"

"No." Rex shook his head. "Tomorrow morning is liftoff. I went through the trouble of posting a flight plan and everything."

"Why not now?" Governor Sykes' face filled the screen. "What are you waiting for?"

"Daylight." Rex said. He held up a finger. "Obviously he's lying about being a vampire but that doesn't mean he's not some failed Venusian science experiment berserker primitive whatever running amok. In that case, landing there in his home territory at night time would be a tactical mistake."

"I don't care what he is." Sykes said. "You should just lift off now. If you don't already own night vision devices, pick some up and go. Expense it to me as usual."

"No. It may be your expense account, Sam, but it's my mission and my people. The issue is we would be fighting him on his home turf at night. No. If he gets the locals riled up…"

"Primitives." Sykes scoffed.

"Those primitives fire bullets the size of your thumb. That's a very inhospitable hole. *No.*" Rex said again. "We'll have a nice fight out in the open just like we planned. He'll be at a disadvantage and we'll have an easier fight without risking any of my team's lives."

"You should take off now. Who cares about nighttime when you're dealing with a primitive that probably can't even spell night vision. Take off now!"

"I'd love to do that." Rex shrugged. "But no one is here but me. Besides, I've put in my flight plan for tomorrow. Bust a plan, pay the man." He added, quoting another song. It was something that he knew Rex hated.

"Where are Herman, Redd, and Jennigan? What am I paying them for?"

"They're with their families, significant others, or at a bar. Or some combination of those. I told them we fly tomorrow so they went to do whatever they do when they're not actively on a mission." Rex snapped. "I've got a handle on this, Sam. Just calm down and wait to hear from us. It's my egg, remember?"

Sykes stared at the man for a long moment. "Right, right. It's your egg; suck it any way you want." He scowled. "But this mission better be an overwhelming success. These people embarrassed and assaulted me *and* generally pissed me off. I want these people."

"The alternative is that we'll be dead, so I'm hoping the same thing." Rex said. "The flight plan is set and we're legs up at oh-nine hundred hours. If we're still on the ground a minute past that, then you can complain." Without waiting for a response, he closed the communication link.

"He's awful pushy." Alice Jennigan said. She was sitting at the table to the far left, out of sight of the viewscreen. She had her feet up on the table and was reclined back. "I don't see why you put up with him."

"It's his piles of money." Rex said matter-of-factly. "But I still don't give him everything he wants. Otherwise he'd be even more overbearing."

"Come on now, a vampire? That primitive is lying through his teeth. And definitely a Berserker." Leon Redd said. He was sitting on the far right along with Felix Herman- of the entire group, these two were the closest friends. He slapped his partner on the shoulder. "Hey, maybe we should pick up some wooden stakes, aye Herm?" He put his feet up on an empty chair.

Herman brought his rifle up onto the table. "I'll stick with my Mönchshof Fifteen Zero Four." He patted it. "Unless he can regrow limbs on the fly, I won't need me a wooden stake."

"We're on a capture mission, Herman." Rex said. "Capture and return. *Both of them*."

"I don't care how much money he's paying us," Alice Jennigan said. "He can't pay enough to equal my life. If this goes sideways, I'm putting him down. Both of them."

Herman smiled wide. "Oh yeah, we'll sic Alice 'Just Kill 'Em' Jennigan on him." He looked at Rex. "Am I right or am I right?"

"Listen," Rex said as he put his hands flat on the table. "We're bringing that Hugh and that Japanese guy back alive so that the governor can have a word with them. I'm not going to have this simple snatch and grab mission fouled up. He wants them alive so he can talk to them, so that's what we're going to do."

"Now that his ear is back on, he can hear them talk back!" Felix Herman guffawed. "Am I right or am I right?" He slapped his friend's thigh where he had his leg up on the table.

"You're right, Herm." Leon Redd replied. "As usual."

"So we head out in the morning?" Herman asked. "Means I get me a couple of drinks. Nice."

"No." Rex stood. "We're up in an hour."

"Wait." Jennigan said as she swung her legs off the table. "What about what you said about night time?"

"And the flight plan?" Redd asked. He was still reclined. "Morning sure sounds good to me."

"We're doing this my way; Sam can't tell me when I take off. We'll bust our departure time so we'll get to Anchorage just about noon, or soon after. We'll have those two bagged and be on our way back before it's dark." Rex put his hands on his hips. "This is a quick turn-around. Stow your gear and be ready to lift off in an hour."

"Man. And I was going to get drunk." Herman said. "No chance of that, now."

"Well, you're right again." Redd smiled wide as he slapped his friend's leg. "Up and at 'em Herm. We got some hunting to do."

Five

Hugh sat alone in the galley of the ship, going over various scenarios where he would be fighting whoever the Governor sent. While he sat, he practiced trying to make his hand and arm turn into a mist. Only about half the time did his shirt also disappear. He wasn't sure what he was doing differently between the times it worked on his clothes or didn't. He also didn't try to think about how he should even be able to do such a thing- it should have been physically impossible.

"We are ready!" Hinata said as he jogged up the ramp.

"Finally!" Hugh sat up in his chair. "The pins are here?"

"No." Hinata shook his head. "No; the *food* is hereof course. We are ready *to eat*." He smiled as he patted his belly.

"We need to get going, Hinata. What is going on with the landing gear?"

"It will be fixed." Hinata assured him. "They are hammering heads onto the pins so they stay in place because they cannot just be shafts. And that way they only need one pin to hold it in place. Hammering a head on the pin is faster than drilling a second hole and it is one less thing to lose." He nodded. "When they are ready, then they will bring them." He looked around the area. "And the she-devil said she will raise the ship?"

Hugh hesitated. He had actually not talked to Cynthia about that. "Cynthia." He said. "Can you make the ship hover one foot above the ground?"

"What?" Hinata said. "Did you fall asleep, Hugh-san? Before your one task was complete?"

"It is against my protocol to operate the ship." Cynthia replied.

"What about the autopilot?"

"The autopilot is a separate system that only maintains programmed headings."

"You have not worked this out and yet you are in a hurry to leave, Hugh-san?" Hinata crossed his arms. "After I went through the trouble of finding the broken part so the two metal workers could have the pieces as an example?"

Hugh let out a breath. "Cynthia. With the current atmospheric conditions, can you tell me exactly what the engine outputs need to be to get the ship to hover one foot off the ground so the landing gear can be repaired?"

"Yes." Cynthia replied.

"Cynthia, are you a she-devil?" Hinata asked. It was the first time he had actually talked to the AI.

"No." Cynthia replied. "I am not a deity; I am an artificial intelligence program. And I am also genderless. My current female voice was set at the factory. There are several to choose from. Do you want to change voices?"

"Hah!" Hinata moved his hands to his hips. "Only a she-devil would pretend to not know the answer."

"No Cynthia, we do not want to change your voice. What level output do I need to apply to the engines to be able to physically pick the ship off the ground off the ground?"

"Applying point four percent engine thrust would allow the ship to be neutrally balanced."

"Neutrally balanced?" Hugh asked. "What does that mean?"

"The ship will be neutrally balanced and could be picked up with an apparent weight of fifty pounds due to residual mass. This is well within the lift capabilities of a typical human."

Hugh nodded. "Okay, that will work." He looked at Hinata. "When I start the engines, the ship will appear to be light so you can just pick it up for them to replace the pin."

"This ship? I will pick this ship up?"

"It will be like a kite or balloon." Hugh explained. "Do you know what those are?"

"I am familiar with both."

"We brought lunch." Eli said from the ramp. He was holding a large basket. "The pins should be ready within thirty minutes." He added as he entered the area.

"We?" Hugh asked.

Rebecca, Eli's wife stepped into the ship. "I heard you were leaving." She was also holding a large basket. "And I wanted to say hello."

Hugh had gotten to know Rebecca because she was usually home when he came to see Eli; she was always welcoming and friendly but conservative to a point where she would have easily fit in with the Amish of the 1800s. "Sister Rebecca; what are you doing here?" Hugh asked as he stood. "I never figured you would come aboard."

"Look; she carries more food, Hugh." Hinata said. "She should not be turned away."

"Hinata, this is my wife, Rebecca." Eli said.

Rebecca's eyes got large. "Oh. I…"

"I am not an Inuit." Hinata stood and gave a short bow. "It is good to meet you."

"It is good to see you again." Hugh said as he also stood.

"You haven't been by the house in a while and I wanted to make sure you were eating well."

Hinata opened the basket. "Odoroki! It is all fresh."

Hugh sat down. "That's how they do it here." He looked at Eli. "What did you bring?"

Eli placed his basket next to Rebecca's. "Mine is baked goods and mead. Hers is the meats and cheeses."

Hinata sat slowly as he peered into Eli's basket. "Oh, I take back the things I said about the Amish; you are wonderful people."

"You said bad things about us?" Eli said with raised eyebrows. "Why?"

"Oh, Hinata-san, that one sentence will haunt you for years." Hugh said.

"No, what I mean is…" Hinata began. He considered his next sentence. "No. I am done talking, good sir. I will sit with my shame and eat quietly."

Eli smiled. "Well, I hope you like the food." He pulled out a loaf of what looked like sourdough bread and a skin filled with mead.

"Ohhh." Hinata said. His eyes were trained on the fresh-baked bread.

"That does look good." Hugh admitted. "Especially after what *he's* been eating for two years."

Eli ripped the end of the bread, the crust crackling onto the table as he did. "My wife made this earlier today." He offered it to Hinata.

Hinata took the bread, bowed his head and touched it to his forehead. He took a bite; it was still warm. "Your wife Rebecca is an angel."

Eli laughed. "She is indeed."

Rebecca pulled a wooden plate with sliced meat on it out of her basket. "It is venison." She tilted her head. "It is meat from a deer. Do you know what a deer is?"

"The Nihonjika." Hinata took a piece of the meat off the plate. "It is a majestic… and delicious animal." He took a bite. It was also still warm. He gave another nod. "Arigatō."

"That means thank you." Hugh offered. He picked up a piece of the butter cheese to eat with the bread. Even though it did not actually contain butter, its flavor reminded him of buttery popcorn. "Elam's Butterkäse is outstanding as usual." He took a sip of the mead then passed it to Hinata. "Fermented honey."

"I will let Elom know." Rebecca said with a smile. Then she got serious. "Eli tells me you are leaving soon. Today even."

"Before it gets dark even." Hugh confirmed.

"But you just got back."

Hugh let out a long breath. This was a conversation he did not want to have. "The problem is that I am putting the entire town in danger being here. I… we…" He pointed between him and Hinata. "… need to be elsewhere when the people from Mars show up."

"Why would they come looking for you?"

"I was property on Mars." Hinata interjected as he recorked the mead. "As was that man, Gabriel." He put it gingerly on the table and took another piece of meat and bread.

"Like a slave?"

"Worse than a slave." Hinata answered Rebecca. "I was decoration. I was forced to stand in a garden for almost two years. Just stand. Then I was sold to another family who kept me in a cage for the sole purpose of tormenting me into killing myself so they could watch."

Rebecca gaped. "That is horrible!"

"Yes, well. Hugh here saved me. And that is the problem." Hinata said.

"Hinata, I think it's better if you let me…" Hugh began.

"Hugh, as far as the Governor of Mars is concerned," Hinata pressed on, "stole both me and your Gabriel. He is considered a criminal for that. A thief." Hinata looked at Hugh, who returned to eating the cheese, glad to not have to discuss cutting off ears or assaulting a half dozen soldiers. "And when they come looking for him, we cannot be here or they will destroy the entire town from the sky with fire as they did my own village."

Rebecca looked at Hugh. "Hugh?"

Since it was actually fairly close to the truth, he nodded. "That is the issue. So we need to be as far away from here as possible."

"Where will you go?" Eli asked.

"To my country. Japan" Hinata said, subtly correcting Eli. "The other side of the ocean so it is far from here. We will deal with their wrath there."

"And will you come back?" This time it was Rebecca.

"I would like to, yes. But it depends on how things go with the people coming here to find me." Hugh replied. It was also fairly truthful even though he knew he couldn't just keep living among the Amish. "But we need to deal with this problem. Find a solution for it so that Anchorage won't be in danger in the future."

"And they will be willing to talk to you about this?" Rebecca asked.

Hugh knew that the people the governor was sending had no intention of discussing anything. In fact, he thought their plan most likely involved killing them outright and sending a video feed of the attack to the Governor. Or even perhaps bringing them back to Mars to face the Governor in person. He took a bite of bread instead of answering.

"We will speak to them if they are willing to listen." Hinata said in what was as truthful a statement as possible.

Rebecca nodded. "Well, if this governor has an issue with what you did," she began, "and honestly keeping slaves is not right, you should speak to his superior. Then the governor would be forced to not seek retribution."

Hugh swallowed the bread. From his discussion with the governor, he knew that there really wasn't an overarching leader that he could go to. "They aren't really organized that way. Each governor does what they want unless several governors speak out against them."

"So it is like a council then." Eli offered. "So perhaps if you got other governors to agree that this practice of having slaves is bad, then the one on Mars you dealt with will be forced to change his ways."

"That is a possibility." Hugh considered that. "I did learn that not all of them kept slaves. But I expect a hunting party to arrive sooner rather than later."

"Is he married?" Rebecca asked.

"What?" Hugh looked at her, confused by the unexpected question. "Who?"

"The Governor." Eli smirked. "What Rebecca is thinking is that because if he is married, then he and his wife discuss their lives with each other to make decisions. However if she is unaware of these dealings with slaves, she may be willing to listen and perhaps change his mind on the matter."

"Does the governor have slaves as well?" Rebecca asked.

"I don't suppose?" Hugh leaned back in his seat. "I mean, I have no idea about either; having a wife or keeping slaves. Those subjects never came up in our conversation. But I didn't get the impression he did have slaves; he was just tolerant of other people doing it."

"I do not see how she could not be aware." Hinata said. "A husband and wife discuss all things."

"The governor did tell me that there were people on Mars that did not keep slaves, and other entire colonies that did not." Hugh shrugged. "So maybe he doesn't have any? I have no idea about a wife. Probably he does. Most politicians do because it makes them seem more personable to voters."

"Then that is who I would speak with if I were you." Rebecca gave a curt nod. "Her."

"But if his wife isn't as headstrong as you are…" Hugh began.

"Headstrong?" Rebecca eyebrows went up. "Me?"

Eli laughed. "Oh, Hugh, that sentence will now haunt *you* for years."

"What I meant was." Hugh's voice trailed off. He looked at Hinata for help. He was busy eating venison and bread. "Hinata?"

"Īe" (No) He shook his head. "I will stay out of that discussion with the maker of this meal." He said with a mouth full of food.

"Eli?" Hugh tried.

"Perhaps his wife is not an equal part of their marriage." Eli offered. "He may be an overbearing man."

"Yes, that's what I meant." Hugh said. "Perhaps his wife is meek." He added even though he now considered threatening the man's wife as a viable means of keeping any future hunting parties from looking for him, or any of his Amish friends. Even threatening his children if they had any. Cythia would definitely know,

"It is still something you could try." Rebecca offered.

"It is definitely moving up on the lists for things we can try." Hugh agreed, now wondering if Cynthia would have the Governor's wife's personal contact information. "Yeah…definitely."

Mattias walked up the ramp but did not enter the ship. "Hello?"

"Mattias." Eli said. "Would you care to join us?"

Mattias looked into the ship. "No, I would prefer not to." He said very quickly. Then he smiled. "What I mean is that we have the pins to repair the ship, Ezekiel and I. Is now a good time do install a new one? The other four we put in a box for storage."

Hugh looked at Hinata. "It's still light out so I can't go out there."

Hinata stood. "What do I need to do?"

"Pick up the ship when I tell you to, so they can insert the new pin."

"He is going to pick up the ship? That small Inuit?" Mattias caught himself again. "I mean… him by himself?"

"He is not Inuit." Eli said as he also stood. "He is from a country called Japan from across the ocean."

"Oh, I did not mean offence." Mattias said. "I have dealt with several Inuit and individually they can be very pleasant. Friendly even."

"Eustis is pleasant." Eli said with a nod. "That is true." He looked at Hinata. "Do not take offense, Hinata."

"I take none. It is an unfortunate fact that I look like your enemy." Hinata stood. "What I truly am is a formidable ally." He gave a bow to

the man. “I have great respect for metalworkers. I myself have made several blades.” He paused. “For digging that is. A shovel and a plough. Nothing as refined as your work, I am sure.”

“A fellow metalsmith. Excellent!” Mattias smiled wide. “See, I have created the craftsman who fans the coals into flame and forges a weapon fit for its task. And I have created the destroyer to wreak havoc.”

Hinata looked at Hugh. “A destroyer?”

“It’s from a holy book written by a man named Isaiah. Another formidable man.” Hugh explained. “I’ll get the ship ready and when it is, I will make the lights under the ship flicker so you know it is time for you to pick up the ship. Then just hold it while Mattias inserts the new pin.”

“Hai.” Hinata took a step away from the table, then returned and took another piece of venison and bread. “Hara hachi bu.”

Now Mattias looked at Hugh. “Hara what?”

“Eat until you are eighty percent full.” Hugh translated. “It is a Japanese proverb. It means to eat enough to sustain yourself but not to overindulge.” Hugh smirked. “Hinata isn’t eighty percent full yet.”

“Not at all.” Hinata said. “So do not put any of this away.” He moved toward Mattias. “Let us go Mattias-san.”

“That is a wise saying.” Eli said with a nod. “A wise saying indeed. We will leave all of the food with you, Hinata. For your journey.”

Hugh was going to point out it was only an of hour’s flight time but decided against it; hospitality was important to the Amish. “That is very hospitable.” He said instead.

Eli smiled at the compliment. “Thank you.”

“Ezekial has a hammer in case we need to be persuasive with the pin.” Mattias said to Hinata as the pair went down the ramp. “We checked it with our calipers but you never know.”

“If the ship is to be moving, we will disembark.” Eli gestured at Rebecca. “We will see them when they return.”

Rebecca looked between the two men.

"We need to get going, Rebecca." Hugh said. Then he sighed. "But I will do my best to talk to them and I will let you know how it went."

"That is all we can ask." Eli gestured again at Rebecca; she still had not stood.

"I need to close the ramp to move the ship, Rebecca. I can't risk it getting damaged." Hugh moved toward the open hatch but stayed out of the light pouring in. "Then the ship will be stuck here, attracting unwanted attention. Deadly unwanted attention."

With a nod, Rebecca stood. "That is understandable." She gave Hugh a smile. "But I tell you: I expect my baskets back, Brother Hugh."

"You will get them back, Sister Rebecca." Hugh replied. He held out his hand. "Brother Eli, I will see you all shortly and hopefully I will have good news for you."

"Yes." Eli moved toward him and shook his hand. He startled. "Oh! I almost forgot. I wanted to talk to you about your language abilities."

"My language abilities?" Hugh was caught off guard. "Really? Why?"

"Yes. I was hoping you would accompany me to the Inuit capital of Fair Banks to translate. So we could establish a peace accord with them."

Hugh was taken aback. "What? Do you think that would actually work?"

"They would definitely be surprised if we two walked into their city. They would be curious why we are there which would give us time to explain."

"And you think they'd listen to us?" Hugh said, still not sure of the idea. "Face to face is always a good way to get things done; trying to do it through intermediaries is difficult." He added. "But still, walking right into their capital city? Bold."

"Well." Eli smirked. "Face to face, you can be very persuasive."

"That is indeed true, Hugh." Rebecca said; she was aware of Hugh's vampirism.

"Brother Eli." Hugh said in a reproachful tone. "Are you suggesting I show them my true nature to get them to behave?"

"What? No!" Eli shook his head. "No; I do not believe that is your true nature. This." He pointed at Hugh. "This right here is your true nature; taking risks for your friends. *This* is your true nature Brother Hugh whether you care to admit it or not." He waved his hand dismissively. "The other is an affliction if anything. An uncurable illness that you must live with."

"It's nothing to sneeze at." Hugh said as his eyes glowed red. "That's for sure."

"Oh!" Rebecca laughed. "You are quite funny, Hugh. You see?" She pointed at his eyes. "If we did not know you, just that would have been very disturbing."

"So you agree that they may be willing to listen to what I have to say with you accompanying me?" Eli asked.

Hugh let out a sigh. "I suppose so. When I get back we can work out the details. But right now, we must get going. He had a strange feeling they needed to be gone from the town as quickly as possible." And his feelings were invariably trustworthy.

"Right, right." Eli gestured at the door. "Dear Rebecca, we need Hugh to be on his way."

"Yes, of course." Rebecca moved to the hatch. "We will see you soon then."

Hugh nodded. "Of course. Baskets and all."

With that, Rebecca walked down the ramp, almost getting bowled over by Hinata.

Hinata rushed up the ramp. "Hugh-san, I am getting tired trying to pick up this metal beast. And it is making me look foolish to those Amish men! Isoide!" (Hurry up)

"Listen Eli." Hugh ignored him. "I hope you know I'm going to do my best to get back but you know, sometimes things don't work out like they are planned. I have no idea who or what they are going to send down here. I do want to come back and help. But there's a chance I won't be able to."

"Be careful, Brother Hugh." Eli put his hand on Hugh's shoulder. "And not because I want you to accompany me to Fair Banks. You understand?"

"Hugh-san!"

Hugh nodded as he glanced at Hinata. "Yeah, I get it. I'll be careful. I have no problem turning tail and running if the situation gets out of control. Like it's getting right now."

Eli laughed. "It does seem that way."

"Hugh-san! I will not be ignored!"

Eli patted Hugh's shoulder then turned to leave the ship. He patted Hinata as well as he went past. "Stay safe as well, Hinata."

"I shall, Eli." Hinata said to the man with a smile and a bow. Then he turned toward Hugh, his face going from a smile to a frown. "We wait still!"

"Okay, okay! Give me a minute. When the lights flash *then* you can pick the ship up." He scowled as he walked toward the bridge. "I used to be a terrifying Vampire. Now I'm getting pushed around by everyone. How the mighty have fallen!" He was rewarded with a 'hah!' from Hinata.

Six

"Status?" Rex asked. He was busy on the controls flying the ship while Alice was manning the copilot seat. "See anything at all?" He had hoped to catch the ship while it was still on the ground and the two out in the open, unaware and with nowhere to run. Once he destroyed their ship, catching them would be a simple matter. "Anything at all?"

"No." Alice said with a frown. "It's not like he could have buried the thing. Herm?"

"Maybe he shut down the reactor. The ship's AI could have explained how to do that." Felix Herman said. He was sitting in one of the side seats in the large ship looking through a thermal imagery array. "I'll see if he's got it hidden in the trees. Reactor can't be that cold yet." He chuckled. "Or maybe he's hiding till dark because he is actually a vampire. Local time is eleven oh five, by the way. Sunset isn't for twelve hours."

"I'll make another pass." Rex said. "This guy is starting to piss me…"

"Ho ho, there we go!" Herman said. "Stupid primitive."

"What've you got Herman?" Alice said. "He in the trees?"

"Nah; he's not even here." Herman said. "Looks like he landed in that clearing for a little bit then took off, heading west. Probably dropped of that Amish primitive." He double tapped his screen then pushed it toward the main screen between the pilot and copilot. "See? There's his trail. Wobbly so he's still not good at flying that thing, but it's definitely heading west out over the water."

"Nice work, Herm'." Alice said.

"Thanks." Herman said. "So you want to set down now?"

"Set down? For what?" Rex asked. He zoomed out on the image Herman placed on the center screen. It was definitely a wobbly trajectory but easy to follow as it went west, all the way to the continent on the other side of the ocean.

"To get that stinking Amish guy."

"No."

"Okay, want me to power up the array so we can blast them?"

"What are we doing here?" Rex asked.

"What? Right now?" Herman hesitated. "Hovering? Waiting to flatten this stupid village?" He smiled. "Getting ready for lunch?"

"No." Rex shook his head. "What we're doing is searching for those two crumbs to bring them back to Sam. 'Hunting down wayward art' is not part of our plan, Herman. At all."

"But I thought we wanted that guy too." Herman said with a frown.

"Think Sam will pay us extra for bringing back that art that's not even his?" Rex shook his head. "Not a chance. He doesn't care that some scientist is missing his after-dinner entertainment. He wants that Hugh and that Japanese guy. That's it." He held up a finger. "Now, if at some later date, the esteemed Ferrule Rollins wants us to find that art, he can put up a reward to do that. *Then* we'll go find him. And if we flatten the town now, then we either kill him or they scatter so we'd never find him. No; leave those primitives all right here so when we get a contract, we'll know exactly where he is. Easy money. Right?"

"Right." Herman said with a smile. "Right boss."

"And when I'm right, I'm right." Rex said, using the other's catch phrase. "So we're going to follow that trail for the job we're being paid to do." He banked the ship right toward the ocean. Even though he didn't have any plans to destroy Anchorage, he still swung low over the town- a mere thirty feet then accelerated quickly leaving a sonic boom in their wake.

"Nice one, Rex." Herman laughed. "Their ears'll be ringing all day."

Seven

Hugh panned the map around. "Okay, so where exactly is your village?"

Hinata wasn't looking at the map; he was panning the camera around the terrain below. "It is near the water, on the bay south of Fujisan. You cannot miss the volcano. Steam rises from it daily. The year before I was taken, lava flowed down the sides of it for a month. It cannot be missed."

"Fuji erupted?" Hugh asked. He tapped the icon for the mountain on the map. "I remember the last time it happened. I wasn't in Japan but only read about it. I'll take us low over the coastline and you can let me know where your village is." He panned around the map as the ship traveled. While Japan was indeed no longer an island with the northern part of it connected to Asia, it was still recognizable. "That must have been a sight." He remembered when it erupted in 1707. He had been living in Tyumen, in Russian Siberia at the time and the local newspapers had a full page spread about it. Of course since it was 1707, it was a month after it had happened. Even, so there was a dramatic illustration with the article- the first he had ever seen in a newspaper. "Hey, are there any caves near your village?"

"Hai. There are several." Hinata said. He was still looking at his camera feed. "Did they move the entire mountain?"

"Any big enough to put this thing inside?"

Hinata turned to look at Hugh. He smiled wide. "Ahh, yes. Yes there are. That is a good idea." His smile faded. "Can you… pilot this beast into a cave?"

"No." Hugh raised a finger. "But I can hover it and you can push it in. It went pretty well putting that pin in, right?"

"This metal beast floated like I was pushing a boat that was in the water. Yes, into a cave would be easy as well. You are a cunning devil, Hugh-san!" The smile returned. "That cares about his friends. A caring

devil." He thought for a moment. "But if this craft is in a cave, how will those Mars devils find us?"

"We are leaving a scent trail." Hugh said. He didn't think explaining trying to explain to Hinata how the engines operated would be helpful. Especially since he really didn't understand it very well himself. "And with their viewers." He pointed at the screen Hinata was looking at. "They will be able to see the path we took."

"Then if they see that we flew into a cave, they might just destroy the cave without landing."

Hugh shook his head. "No, it's like you said, they want to look us in the eyes when they kill us. Actually, I really think their plan is to capture us alive and take us back to Mars to face that governor."

Hinata smiled. "Ahh, then that is good for us."

"How is that?"

"Their attacks will be reserved because they want us alive." Hinata sneered. "I am not interested in them being alive so my attacks will be full force. The battle will be in our favor; I am sure of it." Hinata pointed at the screen. "There! There is it. Fuji and below where I used to live."

"Double tap it."

"What?"

Hugh exhaled loudly, then reached over and tapped the screen twice. He leaned back to his side of the cockpit and called up the new icon on his screen. "Okay. Got it."

"Devil work." Hinata said. He looked up at the main view screen; it was black. "Is it dark out? It was daylight when we left, Hugh-san. And you said the journey was one hour."

"It is about four in the morning here. We flew west." Hugh explained. "And the sun rises in the East. We traveled away from the sun faster than it moves. It is actually at three fifty in the morning of the previous day from when we left."

"You are making fun of me."

"No." Hugh said. "You know the Earth is round, right?"

"Of course."

"Well, going west we traveled past the date line, going back a day before the sun has risen on Japan. We are moving faster across the face of Earth than the sun is."

"Devil ship."

"Definitely." Hugh lowered the ship's thrust and banked down over the town. Most of the houses were destroyed but several looked livable. "I'm, not seeing anyone out and about. Of course, it is very early." The viewer in front of him displayed the image across the full spectrum.

"That is because no one lives there." Hinata said matter-of-factly. "They were all killed."

"I just figured that locals would move into the houses that weren't destroyed."

Hinata shook his head. "To live in the house of someone who is dead? That would anger their spirits. No, no one would do that." He pointed at another area on the screen. "There, people live there."

"That doesn't make sense." Hugh replied. "You won't live in the house of someone who died? What if your father died? You wouldn't live there?"

"Having ones father die and leave you a family home or even having a relative die of illness or injury is one matter. However living in a home that belonged to someone who was murdered who is of no relation to you is a different matter." He shook his head slowly. "Fuun awaits one who does that." (Bad luck).

"Yeah, I guess so." Hugh was well aware of the spiritual nature of the Japanese; folk magic and cures were prevalent in their community even in the more modern times he interacted with them. Family curses were also things that happened. "Okay, so we need to find a cave close to the town because that's where I want to deal with these people. Some place with cover and concealment."

"Do you even know how many there are?" Hinata asked. "Five? Twenty? A hundred?"

Hugh was taken aback. "Oh man. That's a good question. Cynthia how many people are on the manifest for the governor's ship that is leaving for Earth tomorrow?"

"There is no ship affiliated with the governor leaving for Earth tomorrow." Cynthia replied.

"What? Just earlier today you told me there was. What's happened to that ship… the *Mons Highlands Two*?"

"*The Mons Highlands Two* left Mars two hours ago, relative time." Cynthia said. "Do you want the manifest for that ship?"

"Two hours ago? Oh man."

"They are on their way now?" Hinata asked. "Kuso. Tatakai wa hayaku kuru." (Damn. The fight comes early.)

"Yeah. Seems so." Hugh leveled out the ship. "Cynthia how many people are on the manifest for that ship?"

"There are four persons listed on the manifest. Rex Eckhoff, Felix Herman, Alice Jennigan, and Leon Redd. Rex Eckhoff is forty-three years old and is the head of…"

"Stop, stop. *Stop Cynthia*." Hugh cursed under his breath. "How long until that ship arrives in Anchorage?"

"An hour at their current speed." Cynthia replied simply.

"And if they travel at our speed, another hour here." Hinata said. "That gives us two hours to hide this metal beast, come to the town, and design a plan of attack. That is plenty of time. We should stop to have a snack as well."

Hugh cursed again. "Cynthia. Are there any caves nearby that are sufficient in size for this ship to go completely inside of?"

"There are three caves this ship will fit in. The closest one is two kilometers away."

"Excellent. Plot that cave on the view finder." Hugh looked at Hinata. "So I will hover close to the ground at the opening of the cave then you can push it in until it is out of sight from the sky. Okay?"

"Hai." Hinata said. "I will soon be an expert on pushing this steel beast around. Success is ours."

Hugh shook his head. "This isn't good."

"Why do you speak of failure?" Hinata said. "We will hide the ship and be waiting for them when they arrive."

"Yeah, in two hours or so. That means just before six in the morning." Hugh pointed upward. "When the sun has been up for almost an hour already."

"Kuso."

Hugh let out a sigh. While having Hinata push the ship into the cave meant it wouldn't be going fast enough to cause any sort of damage if it hit a wall, it would still be vulnerable to capture. Hiding for the entire day was impractical as well; he was sure they would just start damaging the ship until Hugh was forced to intervene. A morning confrontation was not what he was planning on. "Stinking daylight."

"Ahh, Hugh-san. We will fight them in the cave. In the darkness of the cave, a Kyūketsuki is a formidable enemy. We will wait for them there instead of in the town. The thin walls there will not protect you, but the stones of the cave will."

Hugh considered that. It wasn't what he had planned at all but it did seem to be a better alternative. "If we can draw them in there. It will give us more time to plan if we don't have to walk down to the town."

"I can go to the town and be the rabbit luring them to you. You can wait as a mist until they are inside." Hinata smirked. "A naked Kyūketsuki will catch them unawares to be sure!"

"I'm working on that." Hugh said. "Sometimes I can get my clothes to turn into a mist." He added defensively. "Sometimes."

"Devil mist." Hinata said.

"Definitely." Hugh agreed.

Eight

"More to the left!" Hugh shouted through the ship's exterior speakers. "Left!" He had forgotten until right before landing in front of the cave, that the ship was equipped with exterior speakers; he had even played music through them while he was dealing with the bodies of the ship's previous occupants.

"Whose left? Devil left!" Hinata shouted back. He was pulling on the ship using a long rope that was attached to two anchor points. "This is a task for two!"

The ship banged on the wall opposite wall this time. While the sound inside the ship was loud, the impact was at a very slow walk so it did not cause any sort of structural damage; paint was merely being scraped away. Since entering the cave, which according to Cyntha was called a Pahoehoe flow; a large tunnel formed by cooling lava that lead four miles underground, the ship had banged back and forth several times until it got past the smaller opening. Now in the deeper part of the cave, the walls were a two hundred yards away from each other. Hugh had remained in the ship to man the lateral controls leaving Hinata to pull the ship inward. Much to his annoyance, he was not adept enough to keep the ship off the walls.

After it had been a long forty-five minutes of pulling the ship, it was now a good distance inside the tunnel. The sky outside was past just developing a bluish tint; it was a lethal bright blue. "This is far enough." Hugh said through the speakers. "We will need to push it out so we shouldn't go any further in."

"We?" Hinata said as he dropped the rope angrily. "We? What have you done besides yell left and right from the comfort of a seat." He wiped his face with his shirt. "I will need new clothes!"

"Yeah, because you'd hate to look dirty before getting into a fight." Hugh said. "Lowering the ship so watch out." The ship was about four feet off the ground to clear uneven parts of the lava flow. Hugh slowly reduced the engine output by tenths of a percent, taking almost a minute for the ship to settle on its landing pads- the Amish forged pin supporting the weight of the ship nicely. When all the pads turned to

green on the display, Hugh reduced the engines to zero percent. He had also made sure when the ship was brought into the cave that it was facing 'forward' even though it could travel in either direction just as easily. He felt that if he had to leave in a hurry, having the controls set for forward travel instead of backing out of the tunnel would be easier. It also put the ramp at the back of the ship deeper in the cave, which for some reason made him feel better. "Okay, Hinata, great job. Come get cleaned up and get something to eat while I check out the cave." Hugh got up from the pilot seat and moved to the galley.

When he got there, Hinata wasn't there. He looked down the ramp- it was nice and dark outside. He remembered the ship had exterior lights. "Cynthia, turn on exterior lights at twenty percent, blue tint."

"Exterior lights are now at twenty percent."

"Good." Hugh said. He looked out again. He could now easily see down the ramp. Thanks to the ship's blue interior lighting, his eyes were already adjusted to the dark. To see in darkness like an animal could, he needed to change and because he wasn't sure if there were locals in the cave, he didn't want to do that just yet. He cautiously edged down the ramp. "Hinata?" He scowled. "First you want to change, now you're hiding." He stalked down the rest of the ramp. "Hinata, are you going to change clothes or what?" He snapped when he got to the bottom of the ramp. "Where you hiding?"

Hinata marched up the ramp past him. "Huh!" Was all he would say.

"Were you taking a nap?"

"Oshikko ga shitakatta!" Hinata shouted back. "And talking while I do that is not something I will do!"

Hugh let out a laugh. "A quietly peeing Samurai."

"I AM NOT A SAMUARI!" Hinata roared from inside the ship.

"Senshi. Peeing Senshi." Hugh shouted back just as loud. He looked out into the cave, realizing that not only the ship entering but their shouting would now have any locals in the cave on high alert. "Well, piss." He said. With a relegated sigh, he moved to one side of the cave; it was almost two hundred fifty yards across and high; except for

flat-ish floor, it was a fairly round tunnel. As he walked, he found evidence that the cave had indeed been used as a place to live. Whether it was a refuge from attackers or foul weather, or a more permanent home, he was unsure. Hugh changed somewhat so that he could see a better in the darkness. He looked toward the entrance; it was blindingly bright out there. "Oh man." He said. "What a trap this…" His voice trailed off when movement caught his eye. He crouched down and changed completely. It was now as if the cave had internal lighting and he could now easy to see all the rock formations, piles of trash- and a group of a dozen locals huddled along a wall. He took a step toward them, then decided against doing so while looking like he did. "Osorenaide kudasai." He said. (Do not fear.) "Tomodachi." (Friends). He smirked. "Mostly anyway." As he moved past the group, he noticed that there were several wagons with them, as well as some donkeys. "Tomodachi!" He said as he backed away. The last thing he needed was the locals attacking him. Keeping an eye on them, he moved to the other wall; there were several lean-tos there, probably owned by the group on the other wall. "A veritable metropolis." He said when another movement caught his eye. This was from further in the cave. There were three locals approaching. They seemed to be wearing heavy clothes or armor- it was hard to tell from the distance they were. They were making a lot of metal-on-metal noise, probably from carrying pots and pans. "Scavengers." He decided. He stepped behind a rock to hide himself and peeked around it. The three stopped when he did so. One pointed directly at him even though he was two hundred yards away and the cave was virtually dark.

"Oh man." Hugh said. He looked at the group by the wall- they had not moved. So they were either going to stay out of the fight, or they couldn't see him. He looked back at the three others. They had spread out putting almost five yards between them. They were advancing slowly. Hugh looked at the ship. He was only about twenty yards from it and the dull glow of blue it was giving off only really went out about twenty feet past the edges of the ship. Walking into the ship would silhouette him. Angrily, he stepped around the rock and started for the ship. If these were the group sent to capture him, he wanted to at least be close to the ship for help from Hinata.

Hugh noticed that when he stepped around the large rock the three stopped walking. When he reached the glow of the ship, they started toward him again.

Hugh changed back, not wanting to tip off the approaching trio if they were there to try and capture him, and moved to the ramp. If nothing else, he could move back into the ship and raise the ramp. A thought occurred to him- the ship did have two sidearms which while they weren't useful against another ship, they could be very useful against human targets. He jogged up the ramp. "Hinata. We have company!" He called as he turned toward the storage locker that had the two pistols. They were not any sort of energy weapon; they fired what seemed to be a small metal bullet. Hugh had removed their magazines while he examined them with Cynthia's guidance. They were four-millimeter rounds that expanded to ten millimeters when they struck. Each magazine held thirty of the tiny rounds. All told, there were three hundred rounds of ammunition which at first seemed like a lot to Hugh until he realized he really had no way to replenish his supply. "Hinata!"

"Why do you shout in this small space?" Hinata said as he stepped out of his cabin. He was fastening both his swords to his waist. He was wearing corduroy pants and a loose-fitting shirt.

"You should have kept that armor." Hugh observed. He took one of the pistols out of its bin as well as two of the magazines. It was relieved when he had discovered that it was similar to other pistols he had used; it fired rounds with the upper portion the 'slide' moving backwards to eject the tiny spent casing of the round and then move another round into the chamber. "It might have been useful."

"It was an insult." Hinata replied. "Company you say? From here or… elsewhere?"

"They are too far away for me to tell." Hugh said. "Well, there's a family or group or something by the wall of the cave over there pretty close by. They seem to be keeping out of it." He pointed. "And a group of three coming towards us from deeper in the cave. They might be from Mars or local scavengers." He pointed down the ramp. He looked at the ceiling. "Cynthia, when did the governors ship land? Where is it?" He wondered if there was a back entrance to the cave.

"The governor's ship is about thirty minutes away." Cynthia said. "However I cannot determine where it will land."

"Oh." He paused. "Okay. So it's not them so that's…"

"Or if it will land. Detailed flight plans were not…"

"Stop, Cynthia." Hugh said. "Just let me know when the ship lands, and where it lands." He looked back at Hinata. "We…" He was gone. "Oh man." Hugh slid the magazine into the bottom of the pistol and pressed it into place. He pulled the slide backwards to retrieve a round from the magazine and let it slide forward, putting a round in the chamber. "Cynthia, can you tell me where the ship will land?"

"I do not know where the ship will land."

"I mean, after it lands, will you know where that is?"

"Yes. The ship's transponder will indicate to me to know where the ship has landed."

"Great. When it lands, tell me where that is."

"Okay."

Hugh let out a long breath. "Thirty minutes. Great." He started down the ramp. "Hinata, talk to these people to get them out…"

Hinata was standing rigid while what appeared to be someone in full Samurai armor had a sword to his throat. A frowning Samurai. There were two other Samurai standing there as well. Their swords were at the ready. "Ohayō." Hugh said in as friendly a tone as he could manage. (Good morning.) "Friends of yours?"

"These are the Samurai I mentioned." Hinata said.

Nine

"Oh man." Hugh said. He had the pistol down by this side, hopefully where the trio did not notice it.

"Are you planning on doing something?" Hinata asked. "Something helpful?"

"Hinata, you may think my Japanese is very good, but it is actually limited and we don't have time for misunderstandings. Will you translate for me?" He pointed from himself to Hinata. "Kare wa hon'yaku… hon'yaku…"

"Kare wa hon'yaku shite kurerudeshou," Hinata said helpfully. (He will translate) "*Ie ga* hon'yaku shimasu" He corrected himself. (I will translate.)

"Hai!" The sword wielding Samurai said. He still hadn't moved or changed his expression

A smile played across Hugh's face. "We come in peace."

"Hugh-san." Hinata pleaded.

"We are not here to fight with them, Hinata." Hugh said. "Tell him we just need them to stay out of the way."

"They are not used to complying to the requests of others."

"Hon'yaku suru!" Commanded the Samurai.

"Hai." Hugh said with a bow. "Watashi wa *Hugh*." (My name is Hugh) He pointed at himself then at Hinata. "Hinata."

"Akira." The Samurai replied.

"We were past that part, Hugh." Hinata said.

"Okay, just translate then." Hugh said. He pointed at the Samurai. "Akira-san, we are here from a town across the ocean." Hugh said. Hinata didn't say anything. "Hinata, I'm giving it to you in bits so you can translate. So translate."

"Oh." Hinata said.

"Akira-san, we are here from a town across the ocean." Hugh repeated. He pointed out toward the water. "It is far away from here."

This time Hinata translated.

"People from the sky are some coming to fight us. They chased us from there to here and they will be here soon." Hugh continued. "We do not want to fight you. We want to deal with these others then we will leave. We have no quarrel with you."

The man listened as Hinata translated then replied.

"He says he does not care about your disagreement." Hinata tilted his head toward the trio. "They think you are lying and are also a gatherer. No one else has a craft like this." He tilted his head toward the ship. "I am afraid they will be hard to convince."

"Hard headed." Hugh brought up his hand. "Don't translate that. Tell them I stole the ship then rescued you and they are chasing us. Give them the short version of what's happened."

"Hai." Hinata said. After a few minutes of back and forth, he looked at Hugh. "They have heard what I have said but I do not think they believe. Or care."

"Are these are the Mōkin-rui Samurai?"

"Hugh!" Hinata said.

"Nani?" Akira roared. He shoved Hinata toward Hugh and drew a second sword. "Nanite yonda kke?" (What did you call me?)

"Hugh, what have you done?"

"What?" Hugh said. He thought back to what that word meant- beasts of pray. Hugh thought it was the name of their band of Samurai. An honorific; the Japanese language had many honorifics that were used for various people, places, things, and actions. However now it appeared it was a nickname others used for them and a terrible insult to their face. "Oh." He held up his hands "Matte, matte." (Wait, wait). "Akira-san, MATTE!" He raised his voice to the same level as Akira's.

The two Samurai moved away from the one in the middle, forming a half circle around Hugh and Hinata. It was obvious they were going to attack.

"Chinmoku!" (Silence!) Akira put one foot in front of the other and brought his swords down in front of himself. It was a classic Samauri pose. He let out a scream that turned into a howl as Akira transformed into a blue-black werewolf. The other two changed as well.

"Wait, what?" Hugh said. "I thought it was what they called themselves. Like a gang name or something. Not that they were actually..." His voice trailed off.

Hinata bowed his head. "Juujun Akira-san." (An act of submission.) "They are beasts, Hugh-san." Hinata still had his head down. "They are impossible to reason with."

Akira took another step, raising one sword high over his head, the other he moved behind it back. He let out another howl.

"We don't have time for this." Hugh said. He crouched slightly and transformed. He let out a growl of his own as his nails grew. "Watashi kara hanarete kudasai!" (Go away from me) "Ima!" (Now)

Akita stopped his advance and even took a step back. "Kyūketsuki! Mōhitori no Kyūketsuki!" (Another vampire!)

"Matte!" Hugh brought his hands up again. "Matte, Akita-san! Hinata tell him we are not enemies."

Hinata obliged.

Hugh changed back to being human. "We are not enemies." He said again. He pointed upwards. "There are others that are our enemies. And they are coming." He looked at Hinata who translated. "They take your people away to be slaves and destroy your towns. They are doing the same to my friends. So I stole their craft and now we are fighting them." He said, which while not entirely true he hoped it would help placate the three werewolves.

Hinata and Akira spoke for several moments. Finally, Akira sheathed his sword. He still had not changed back to a human.

"Well?"

"They do not trust you." Hinata said finally.

"Who would?" Hugh raised his hands plaintively. "Right?"

Hinata laughed. "A bunch of Amish sheep, Hugh-san! And this wayward Senshi, of course."

"Senshi Hinata Takahashi-san, terrible judge of character." Hugh smirked. "Say *that* in Japanese."

"Hinata *Takahashi*?" Akira asked. "Ōhata no musuko?" (Son of Ohata)

"Hai." Hinata bowed again.

The two had another quick conversation with a bit of gesturing as well.

"Hinata?"

"It seems, Hugh that my exploits in fighting the gatherers was talked about."

"Talked about?" Hugh smirked. "You mean they made *songs* about the great battle of Hinata Takahashi. Yūkan'na senshi." (Brave warrior). He looked at Akira as he pointed at Hinata. "Meiyo aru!" (Honorable).

"I think the stories have been exaggerated." Hinata said meekly. "I was unable to save my village."

"But you *fought them*, Hinata. That's what's important. That's what's important to them as well, I think." He thought back. "Why didn't you join them? You said you were unwilling or unable to?"

"I was not willing to become like them and leave my family behind. To be one of them…" He gestured with his eyes, not wanting to even say their name, "one must leave their family behind and live in the mountains with them for a time. A long time. Then they rejoin the village once they have learned."

"Yama No Samurai." Hugh said. He gave a deep bow as well. As he did, he slipped the pistol into his back pocket.

Akira said something in Japanese.

"How is it you a Kyūketsuki fights alongside with a Senshi?" Hinata translated.

"I rescued him from prison. Now we fight a common enemy. Slave traders." Hugh said. He raised a hand. "And I hunt only animals to survive. I do not feed on people."

Hinata looked at Hugh, eyebrows raised. "Is this really true?"

"I promised Abigail. So I've been hunting bear and moose."

Hinata translated to Akira and then the two conversed.

Akira laughed and pointed at Hugh. He said a word Hugh didn't recognize.

"What?"

"It is a man that is under the thumb of a woman."

"Now wait a second." Hugh said as his eyes flashed. "Just because I try to be nice to someone who is my friend doesn't mean…"

Now Akira raised his hands. "Gomen'nasai." (Sorry for that.)

"Wakatta." (Okay). Hugh shook his head. "Man; some people. But we still have an issue. They need to get out of here." He pointed at the mouth of the tunnel. "They need to be out of the way. Tell them the gatherers are coming for us. They probably don't even know about these three."

"I think they may also be interested in dealing justice to those that come." Hinata said. "Another ship was here last month and took three children."

"*Kids*? Man, I hate these people more every day." Hugh shook his head.

Hinata translated.

"Hai!" Akira changed back to human. Soon after his two compatriots did as well. "Hai." He repeated as he slid his swords into their sheaths. He rubbed his hands together then flexed his fingers.

"So… are they leaving?" Hugh asked.

"They will stay and fight." Hinata explained. "Their day was empty until now, it seems."

"Oh yeah. This will be good." Hugh said.

"What?" Hinata asked.

"They're coming here for a couple of primitives but instead they'll find three werewolves, a vampire, and a famous Senshi."

"I am glad we have food to spare so that we can feast once they are all dead." Hinata said. He turned to Akira and translated.

"Hai!" Akria said with a curt nod. He gestured at the lights and said something.

"He said to turn the lights off so that they will be at more of a disadvantage."

"I think they can see in the dark pretty well, so not too low. Then you wouldn't be able to see either."

"You can turn them down some, I think." Hinata said. "My eyes will become accustomed and theirs will be full of morning sun."

"Cynthia reduce exterior lights by fifty percent." Hugh said.

Dutifully the lights dimmed half as bright.

"Yoi?" (Good?)

"Hai!" Akira replied. He rubbed his hands together and spoke again.

"When do we kill these invaders?" Hinata translated.

"Oh man, I'm building a gang all of a sudden." He nodded at the man. "Soon. Twenty minutes or so." Hugh said. "So we need to come up with a plan. We need them to come in here since I can't go out there." He pointed at the bright light at the end of the tunnel.

"A deception to lure them in. I will ask them if they have an idea." Hinata said. He turned to Akira and the pair began to speak far too quickly for Hugh to follow along.

Ten

"What've we got?" Rex said as he flew over the village. "Where'd they go?"

"Give me a minute." Alice said. "Tracking. They passed low over that destroyed village then headed toward that large tunnel. That one." She double tapped the tunnel entrance then pushed it toward the main viewscreen.

"They think they can hide in there because the ship's out of sight." Herman said. "Stupid primitives."

"Yeah." Rex said, sounding unconvinced.

"You think they're up to something? They're not smart enough for that."

"Well, Herman we'll ask them once we've got them locked up. For now we're not going to rush headlong into some sort of poorly prepared trap."

"If it's poorly prepared, it's not going kill us, now is it." Herman pointed out.

"Yeah, right, right. So how much does it not work? Only one dead, two dead? Are you signing up to be the one on the slab for a poorly executed trap? I'll put that on your gravestone; 'the trap only worked a little bit'. How's that sound?"

"Nah. I don't think so, boss." Herman replied. "So what's the plan?"

"How far to that cave?" Rex asked.

"It's a tunnel, actually." Alice replied. "Left over from lava flows when the volcano blew. It goes in a few miles. Four and a half miles from where we are now. A mile from that abandoned village."

"How far in is the ship?"

"About a hundred yards." Alice replied. "That's some pretty good piloting, I must say."

"Well, we don't know how banged up the thing is, now do we?" Herman said. "It might be in a hundred yards because that's where it finally gave out on them."

"That could be true." Rex said. "Or we are dangerously underestimating this primitive. He did fly that thing all the way over here from Anchorage."

"That's a straight shot over water with nothing to hit. I don't give him too much credit for that."

"I suppose." Rex said, still not sounding convinced.

"Hey, remember that thing doesn't have any weapons either." Herman continued. "A recreational flier, that thing is. My brother's got one."

"What sort of weapons does carry." Rex cocked his head to the side. "Usually, that is."

Herman shrugged. "If it's like his, a couple of Bartlett pistols. Thirty rounds of four mil each. That's it."

"That's a lot of holes it can poke." Alice said. "Personally, one hole is one too many. Anything bigger he might have picked up?"

"No way." Herman shook his head. "No. The video of them two getting on the ship is real clear; they're both unarmed. So all they got is what they got. And that should be just two pistols. So there's that."

"Well, I'm wearing my body armor, so there's that." Alice said.

Herman laughed. "Yeah, me too, sister!"

"Well, make sure your dimwit cousin Redd is wearing some too. He's too big to carry out of…"

"I don't want any screwing around on this mission." Rex snapped. "We're in and we're out. No side hunts, no looting, no nothing. Two retrievals and it's back in the big suck to Mars."

"Roger that, boss." Herman said becoming serious.

"Got it." Alice said.

"Good. Setting down. We'll walk to the tunnel from here."

"You don't want to get closer?" Herman asked. "It's less distance to transport them."

"No." Rex replied as he started the landing procedures. "But if they get desperate I don't want them ramming us or damaging the Mons. We'll take the fight to them."

Herman nodded. "We've got about a mile walk to get to them so it's a two-mile round trip."

"So you'll get your exercise in." Alice said. "Quietly."

"Nice." Rex said with a nod. "Nice." He pressed the button to lower the ship's four landing pads. "Coming in." A red light flashed on his console. "Great." He scowled.

"The big boss calling?" Herman asked.

Rex pressed the incoming message icon. "Rex here." He said crisply. "It's the middle of an op, you know."

"Where is my update?" The Governor said angrily. "I haven't heard a thing all day." His voice got louder. "And the last I heard you weren't even leaving until tomorrow!"

"Well, we got some updated intel and wanted to get a jump on it."

"Yeah?" The Governor didn't sound convinced. "From who?"

"So we're tracking the two." Rex pressed on. His tone had not changed. "We followed to Anchorage then…"

"And what; you lost them?"

Rex took a breath then let it out slowly. "We followed them to Anchorage where they dropped off a passenger *then* headed west across the ocean. We are currently above the town they are in."

"So what…"

"When we have them, we will contact you." Rex interrupted the man. "We will be out of the ship and not responding to calls. *Mons Highlands Two*, *out*." He pressed the button to close the communication channel. "Rasmus, do not respond to any incoming calls until further notice. Let them eat static."

"Eat Static. Complying." A deep male voice responded.

The ship touched down lightly. "Okay, let's grab get those two get this done." Rex said as he pushed himself out of the pilot's seat.

Eleven

Hugh and Akira sat at the entrance of the tunnel watching the ship as it moved over the village then landed on a deserted street. The others had remained at the ship, eating a light snack. Thanks to Cynthia programming one of the ship's data pads with a translation program, Hugh now had a small digital PAD that would translate from English to Japanese and back almost instantly (depending on grammar and verb placement) with close to a ninety-five percent accuracy. It was sticking out of his top pocket so he didn't even need to carry it.

"They will walk in, it seems." Akira said. "Now we will see how many have come for us."

Hugh nodded when the PAD translated in a monotone male voice. "It should be four. It can't be that many more; that's not that big of a ship." He replied. "Not much bigger than what I have."

"I find it odd that a visitor would be allied with one of us. None that I have encountered have shown any kind of caring." He smirked. "Even with each other, they are often confrontational."

"I have seen that as well. I don't get it." Hugh said. "But I'm not one of them." He pointed at the ground. "I am from here, Earth." He frowned. "But to be honest with you Akira, up until very recently I was not a very caring person either." He looked at the man. "I only cared about myself and where my next meal was coming from. Other people's problems were not important to me at all."

"The vampire's bloodlust is not something that can be reasoned with." Akira said. Now he looked at Hugh and smirked. "Or at least that is what I believed… until very recently."

"How many vampires have you encountered?" Hugh asked. It seemed odd that in all his years, he had never seen a single one, now he had fought one, and learned about another that wandered into a village.

"Just the one. And until that encounter, they were just a legend." Akira explained. "Folk tales and such. We were very much surprised to deal with it."

"But you're *werewolves*."

"I do not understand."

Now Hugh smirked. "Up until very recently I believed that werewolves were folk tales and legends."

"One does not notice the shoes of others until they buy the same type themselves."

"I suppose that is true." Hugh said, not really understanding the metaphor. He pointed. "Here they come."

The hatch of the round ship opened from the bottom- much like the pulp fiction novels Hugh had seen in the 1950s and 60s. "If it all possible, I'd like to see if we can work something out with these people."

"Work what?"

"Establish peace. An accord of some kind." Hugh gestured at the three people who had just come out. "If we just kill these, they will send more. Or just destroy us from the sky." He said. If his plans did not involve keeping the ship, he would not have worried one way or another. However, having an easily tracked ship meant that at any time, the Governor of Mars could find him anywhere in the Solar System. And now that he had a spaceship, he was looking forward to using it. "I don't want to always be looking over my shoulder."

"That would make for an uneasy existence." Akira said. "Look, three, now four. Hopefully that is all."

"Unless they left someone inside to guard the ship." Hugh said.

"That is true. It would be unwise to leave it unattended." He shrugged. "Not that anyone here would be in any position to steal it."

Hugh watched as the four milled around the underside of the ship, pointing in various directions. "Coming up with a plan, it looks like."

"You say you are here to talk, Hugh-san," Akira said. "But I do not believe the men in that round ship have brought their ears."

"Yeah, well, I won't know until I try. It's still worth a shot." As he looked the one not carrying a long weapon pointed directly at them. "Huh, it doesn't look like we're going to need to lure them in here."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Hugh pointed. "Look; they're looking this way. I guess they can see the ship even in this tunnel. Hiding it from them is nearly impossible."

"I now understand why you want to establish an accord," Akira said. "Look; two return inside that craft."

As the pair watched, the group of four had a discussion and two of them returned to the ship. One of the ones that was outside sat on the ramp, then laid down on it.

"Looks like they're doing something first." A thought occurred to Hugh. "Let's get back to the ship." He crawled back from the opening then stood- even though he didn't think they could actually see him from a mile away.

"Yes; we can find out what plan Teruki as developed." Akira stood beside Hugh. "He is better at tactics."

"Good." As Hugh started walking, he took the PAD from his pocket. "Cynthia, can you hear me?"

"I can hear you." Cynthia replied.

"Find out where the Governor's wife is and be prepared to open a communication line with her."

"Do you want me to connect you to Ariel Sykes now?"

"What? No, not right now. I was just asking…" Hugh said. "Never mind." He put the PAD back in his pocket.

"Is there a problem?" The PAD went back to translating Akira.

"No, no; I forget sometimes that Cynthia is a machine so it doesn't need time to do things like a person would."

"I am not comfortable with Shinshia." Akira said, using the Japanese version of 'Cyntha'. "It is not natural."

"No; it is definitely not. But it can be a useful tool." Hugh agreed. When Hinata discovered that Cynthia could speak Japanese, he immediately began talking to the AI. The other two Samurai did as well. Akira refused to because he was sure it did not have a soul.

Twelve

Herman and Rex came down the ramp of the ship together. "Where we heading?" Herman asked.

"It's a mile that way." Rex pointed at the cave. "Up there."

"All the way up there?"

Alice came down the ramp. "It's not but a mile, you'll be fine." She said, even though it was actually a considerable distance due to the increased gravity. Being from Mars, instead of her feeling like she weighed a hundred forty pounds, she weighed three hundred sixty. It was a significant difference in weight. Thankfully, as with all Martians coming to Earth, they were wearing exoskeleton assisters to help them walk. Even so, it was tiresome moving and breathing in the heavier gravity. "We'll take it nice and slow like. The batteries are rated for ten miles. This is barely over two."

"Still." Herman looked up the slope at the entrance. This would be the farthest he had ever walked on Earth. "I'm going to need two days in a tank after this."

"Redd, where you at?" Rex shouted. He looked toward the cave. "You sure there're in there?"

"Who said they were in there?" Alice asked.

"You said they were in there right before we landed!"

"I said the *ship* was in there, Rex." Alice shrugged. "How am I supposed to know where they are? They're probably hiding in there. Where else would they be? I mean, who knows for sure?"

"We will when we walk all the way there." Herman smiled. "Am I right or am I right."

"Redd!" Rex shouted again.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Redd said as he ambled down the ramp. "I was getting geared up."

Alice turned to look at him. "Geared up? You put your Exo on before we landed just like we did."

"Yeah," Redd nodded. "That's a given, but the bossman here said we weren't going on a killing expedition so I grabbed a Kali." He patted the bulbous rifle he had slung over his shoulder. "Best non-lethal thing we've got with us except Herman's breath that is."

"Hey now!" Herman said, angrily. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Calm down, Herman." Rex said. "Redd's got a point. I'll stick with my rifle but you and Alice need to grab something else before we head out."

"Yeah, for our two mile walk in a ton of gravity." Herman said. "And dragging them back. Don't forget that part."

"We can bring a CART to carry them out." Alice suggested.

"That's a good idea." Rex nodded. "Yeah. Grab a CART, Redd."

"Just one?"

"I say we make it two." Herman suggested. "One each, right?"

Rex nodded. "Prep two, Redd. Yeah, with about a mile walk to get to them, it's a two-mile round trip. And they might not be too happy about coming back with us. Weapons disabled on them; I don't need those stupid robots ruining our bounty."

"Got it." Redd replied. "Two CARTs coming up." He turned and went up the ramp.

"Grab me a Kali as well; they won't be complaining if I get to blue them." Herman said. The weapon fired globs of cold plasma that were bluish in color, using magnetic accelerators. The plasma, while only three hundred degrees wasn't enough to cause severe burns, moved at close to a hundred miles an hour. With a mass of nearly a quarter-pound, it was like being punched by a very large man. "They'll be sleeping like babies after they get clobbered."

"Yeah, good thinking." Rex said.

"What do you mean by that?" Herman said defensively; he was used to being ridiculed for not being as smart as either Rex or Alice.

"I mean good thinking, Herman." Rex smiled at the man. "Bringing them home alive makes sure we get paid full-up." He looked at Alice. "You grab one as well."

"Sure thing." Alice said as she turned and started up the ramp. "But I'm still bringing my rifle with me. If they get out of control, I'm going ballistic on them. Bounty or no bounty, I'm making it home."

"Sure, sure." Rex said, now sorry he had brought her along. Out of the five security personnel he had working for him, she was the one most likely to just kill a subject. While this had caused issues in the past, it had also saved his life twice. Which was why he continued to bring her along. "But alive is what we're looking for here."

Alice didn't respond and disappeared into the ship.

Rex looked at Herman again. Of his five employees, Herman was the least intelligent by almost twenty IQ points. He was however, fiercely loyal and often put his life in jeopardy for his teammates. "Keep up the good work, Herman." He said.

Herman smiled wide. "Yeah, yeah thanks." He looked around then sat on the edge of the ramp. Even though the Exoskeleton kept him upright, standing for long periods of time was still uncomfortable. "I'll just sit here till they're ready." He let out a long breath. "Should have hit up on some stimulators." He said, then laid back on the ramp.

Thirteen

Hugh and Akira walked up to the ship- Hinata, Teruki and Ren were sitting on the ramp having what seemed like a heated discussion with Cynthia in Japanese.

"What's going on, Hinata?" Hugh asked. "Are you… fighting with the ship?"

"He is trying to convince the devil voice that she should release all the prisoners on Mars. However she says she is unable to do that." Hinata pointed at Teruki. "But Teruki believes that a devil is all-powerful and should be able to. He is calling her a liar. She is calling him ignorant."

"Listen," Hugh said. "We've got more important things to do that argue with the ship; they are on their way. Now."

After Hugh's PAD translated, Teruki stood. "Let them come. It will be the end of them."

Hugh sighed. "Yes, but as I was telling Akira, the issue is that if we just kill these, more will come. And there are a whole lot more of them than there are of us. Or they will just kill us from the sky. Or just sent a dozen robots."

"A what?" Ren asked.

"It is a mechanical beast." Akira explained. "It is made of metal so it is difficult to kill."

"These people coming might be difficult to kill as well." Hugh said. "They may be wearing armor." He paused. "Armor under their clothing that you can't see. So stabbing them might not work."

Ren drew his sword and slashed it at shoulder level. "Then we will part their heads from their shoulders."

"That should do it." Hugh said. "They also have weapons that can hurt you from a great distance. But I want to try to talk to them first."

Teruki smiled. “Yes; excellent idea. It will put them off guard. If you speak with them, we can move behind them. If the conversation does not go as you wish. We will end it.” He slid his sword back into its sheath with a clack.

“Speaking of long-range weapons,” Hugh said. “Hey Cynthia. Is the infirmary running?”

“The infirmary pod is always ready for use.” Cynthia replied. “Who is in need of medical attention?”

“No one just yet. But we are going to have a fight and one of us might get hurt.”

“I have Cy, Carl, Baxter and Felix’s blood types on file however I do not have yours on file. There are four units of blood on hand right now, two for Carl, one for Cy and one for Baxter. One unit of blood for Baxter has been removed.”

“I’m O-positive.” Hugh said. “So any blood works for me. I suppose you could check the others to make sure you have blood for them aboard. Not that we could do anything about it now.”

“Do you want me to get a sample of their blood now?” Cynthia asked.

“You want a sample of their blood?”

“I can generate blood types as well as harvest T-Cells to repair injuries.” Cynthia said.

“What level injury are you able to handle?” Hugh asked.

“A Hayden Bellows Medical Pod is certified as a Level Two Trauma facility.”

“What does that include?”

“Patient stabilization, stasis, and regeneration of limbs as well as organs.”

“You can regenerate limbs?” Hugh asked, surprised.

“I do not understand,” Hinata said. “This machine can grow an arm?”

"I am able to harvest T-Cells from potential patients and replicate them to have enough on hand to re-grow limbs in approximately two weeks. Internal organs can be grown in place in one week while in statis."

"Nice." Hugh nodded approvingly. "Real nice. Okay, the ship can act as a doctor to fix injuries." Hugh said. He paused as the PAD translated. "So it needs to take a sample of our blood so it is ready to deal with any injuries or to regrow any limbs or organs."

"We are able to heal very quickly." Akira pointed out.

"It is better to be safe than sorry." Hugh replied.

"I have cast my lots in with a most unusual group." Hinata shook his head. "Growing limbs. Devil magic."

"It's better than using a cane."

"Hai, Hugh-san, it is." Hinata frowned. "Fine then, let me go first. How does this work?"

"Let's all go inside to the infirmary and give blood samples just in case. There's no reason not to use the ship's tools if we can."

Teruki nodded. "I agree. More options is always better than less. Lead the way, Hugh."

As the group walked into the ship's infirmary, bright lights inside came on.

"Cynthia reduce lights in the infirmary to ten percent *immediately*." Hugh ducked and shielded his eyes. It felt as if his skin was heating up.

"The lights are an antiseptic precaution." Cynthia said as she complied.

"I am intolerant to ultraviolet light." Hugh said. "If I am a patient here, they need to stay down." He looked left and right. "It is okay for the others though."

"I understand," Cynthia said. "Who requires medical attention?"

"No one." Hugh said. "We are all giving blood samples so you can replicate blood and T-Cells for us in case they are needed."

"I am unable to store blood and T-Cells for more than six patients."

"There are five of us." Hugh said.

"Currently four storage units are being maintained for…"

"Dispose of those." Hugh interrupted. "They will no longer be needed."

"Okay," Cynthia said impassively. A thick robotic arm lowered out of the ceiling. It had several smaller appendages hanging from it that swung around as it went. "Please have the first patient place their arm on the pad."

As the arm swung down to the table, a smaller one with a concave pad on it lowered to the table. Poised above it was one with a needle sticking out of it.

"What?" Hinata exclaimed. "What devil work is this?"

"I'll go first." Hugh said. "First subject is me, Hugh." Hugh said. He put his arm on the pad. "Ready when you are."

"Okay." Was all Cynthia said then a strap rotated out from under the pad, holding the arm in place while the needle moved down and stuck into Hugh's forearm. It drew out a small portion of blood into a vial that was then sucked into the mechanical arm and out of sight. As other vial rotated into place, a pinpoint laser sealed the hole.

"You don't need to clean the needle?" Hugh asked. "That seems unsanitary." As he said it, the needle retracted into the mechanism for several seconds then pushed out again.

"The needle is sterilized after every use." Cynthia said.

"Next patient is Hinata." Hugh gestured. "Step up, Hinata."

"Hai." Hinata said, still not sounding sure about the entire process. "If you say so, Hugh."

Within minutes all the blood samples were drawn and the replication process started. According to Cynthia, she would have two units of blood for each person within a half hour. Then four units after an hour. Hugh was mildly concerned since he expected the attack to

happen within minutes, not hours so he had Cynthia use two slots for Hinata so that within the half hour, the ship would have four units for him and eight after an hour since he healed as a normal human.

"Let's go see where they are. Or if they're even heading this way yet." Hugh said. He looked toward the entrance of the tunnel. He was worried they would show up while everyone was in the ship- he had even forgotten to ask Cynthia to monitor for any people approaching- and now he wasn't sure why they were taking their time.

"I will accompany you," Akira said. "You three remain here. Ren and Teruki, you should be in the shadows when they arrive; they are not yet aware of our numbers."

"That is a good plan." Teruki said. "We will move some rocks and trash closer so we can hide behind them and still be close by."

"Hai." Said Ren. "Everyone to a task. Let us know when they are entering the cave so we can hide."

"Good plan." Hugh said. He slapped Akira on the shoulder and smiled wide. "Let's go see what these people are up to. They don't seem to be in much of a hurry; I'm beginning to feel unimportant all of a sudden."

"Insulting is what that is." Akira agreed.

Fourteen

After ten minutes Alice and Redd came down with two CARTS. Herman was laying on his back on the ramp blocking their way at the bottom.

"You taking a nap?" Redd asked as he nudged his friend with his foot.

"Oh, I'm tryin' to, but there's this boulder on my chest." Herman replied without moving. "Maybe them CARTS can carry me there, huh?"

"Come on, Herman. A little walking will do you good." Rex said.

"You calling me fat?" Herman asked as he sat up with a grunt. He grinned. "Because I am, you know."

"You're fine, Herm." Redd smiled at him. "Come on, the sooner we get there, the sooner we'll be back on Mars."

Herman moved to a standing position. With the help of the exoskeleton, he just stood straight up from sitting.

"What have you got that thing set for?" Alice asked.

"One point three Gs." Herman did a little hop- something he would never be able to do on Earth unassisted. "Still leaves me with plenty of battery since we're only going a couple of miles. Smart, huh?"

"Yeah, pretty smart." Alice said. She gestured at the two robots. "CART Alpha and Charlie. Ready to roll."

"Why not Beta?"

"Beta was configured with weapons, Herman." Redd said. "Easier to take the ones already with grabbers than to swap things around." She patted her weapon. "Since we got them, they don't need them." She smiled at the man. "Right?"

"When you're right, you're right." Herman replied. "Let's go so we're back before lunch."

Rex turned to the CART's. "Alpha, Charlie. Follow behind us. Do not become involved in any altercations."

The two robots just stared at him; they were not equipped with voice capability.

The communication device chirped in Rex's ear.

"Hold on." He reached up and tapped it. "Yes?" He said. There were only two people who could have overridden the ship's AI and insisted their calls be pushed through; either the governor or his wife.

"Rex." A woman's voice said.

Rex let out a long breath. "I need to take this. Everyone take five."

"Oh man, and I just stood up." Herman said. He squatted down, letting the mechanics in his legs support him as if he were in a chair.

Rex stepped away from the group. It was not common knowledge that he and Ariel Sykes were having a secret relationship. It had started suddenly about six months ago and while having an affair with not only his boss' wife but also the governor of Mars's wife seemed dangerous, she was quite alluring. And it seemed, clingy. "What is it Air?" He hissed.

"I was worried. You didn't say you were leaving. I heard it from Sam."

Rex frowned. Her clinginess would be his undoing. "It was a quick trip to Earth and back. Picking up an escapee."

"Someone escaped?"

"It was that one that cut off Sam's ear." Rex explained, not wanting the conversation to drag on too long. "Just a quick run to pick him and bring him back."

"So Sam can deal with him, I imagine." Arien said, disapprovingly.

Probably just like he would deal with me if he ever found out about us. Rex thought. "Well, he did assault several people and steal a ship. Listen Air, we're ready to roll here."

"Will you be home tonight?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know." Rex said. While seeing Ariel had become the highpoint of his days, he knew that sooner or later, Sam would find out. He hoped to distance himself from her and have her move on to some other man. So someone besides himself incurred the wrath of Governor Samuel Sykes. "I'll see what I can do." He said finally.

"Good, Sam's running to the mines tonight. There's some sort of convention there."

"The miners are threatening to strike so they can renegotiate their contract."

"He'll be gone for two days, he said. Maybe three. Going back and forth is sometimes a pain with the dust storms so he was just going to stay in one of the management apartments at the mine." Airel said. "I told him I was going to my sister's." She paused momentarily and her voice took a husky tone. "So I can come to your place for the entire night. How does that sound?"

Rex looked over at the group as she spoke. Herman looked to be asleep. Redd was fiddling with his rifle and Alice seemed to be staring straight at him. Of the three, he was fairly sure that Alice knew what he was doing. Why she had never said anything to gain some leverage over him was a mystery. "Wait, what? How does what sound?"

"I can stay over all night." Ariel said again.

Rex let out another sigh. "I'm not sure when I'll be done here. It might be late. And I might be tired."

"I'll wait up." The huskiness in her voice returned.

Rex noticed that Alice had crossed her arms. "Okay, I'll do the best I can. I've really got to go. The team's waiting."

"Team? There's a team? I thought it was just you picking up a primitive."

"Yeah, well, things got complicated so I've got Herman and Redd with me."

"Oh, that's…"

"And Alice too." Rex added.

"Oh." Now Ariel's voice had a coolness to it.

"There's nothing going on between us." Rex said defensively. "She's good at handling herself." *You're worried I'm cheating with a woman while you're cheating on your husband?* He thought sourly. "I got to go. See you tonight, I hope."

"Okay." She said again. The coolness was gone but so was the desire. "See you tonight then I suppose."

Rex tapped his earpiece to turn it off then he tapped it again. "Rasmus."

"Yes." The AI rumbled in his head.

"No calls through. We are *dark* on this mission."

"Complying."

Rex tapped his earpiece again then marched over to the group while Alice just smirked at him. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Business as usual is more like it."

"Sure." Alice said. She was well aware that Rex was seeing the Governor's wife. Because she and Sam had discussed the affair while they were having their own. His ability to take care of Sam's problems was really the only thing keeping Rex alive at this point. "Sure thing, Boss."

"Then let's head out." Rex nudged Herman with his foot. "Wake up, killer. You're back on the clock."

Herman stood and took a step forward then looked around. "Up there?"

"Yes. That big cave to the left. Remember?" Alice confirmed by pointing at the large opening. There were several smaller cave to the left and right.

"Roger that." Herman started purposefully in that direction.

"He's on a mission." Rex said as he started walking as well.

"Yeah, that ends with lunch." Alice fell in step beside Redd and the group began trudging through the ruined town.

The two robots bringing up the rear silently.

Fifteen

Hugh and Akira moved to the cave entrance.

"I do not see them." Akira said. "Perhaps they left?"

Hugh pointed. "The ship is still there. Maybe they got sidetracked?" He looked at the man. "Are there more of you running around the town? How many of you are there, anyway? Hinata said it wasn't a life choice he could make."

Akira shrugged. "It is a difficult life. At the moment, only one has a family; Sakura."

"Sakura? That is a girl's name."

Akira laughed. "It is a *woman's* name. If you meet her, do not call Sakura a mere girl, Kyūketsuki or not." Now Akira pointed. "There. They are still walking through the town they destroyed."

"I don't think that these are the ones that did it."

"They are all the same people." Akira said flatly. He pointed again. "There are now six of them although the two at the back do not seem right. Three have the long weapons they often carry."

Hugh looked where Akira was pointing. Three of the four humans at the front were carrying what seemed to be bulging rifles and there were indeed two figures that did not look human; they were taller with gangly arms and legs and squat heads. Their arms ended in to pincers instead of hands. "Those are robots of some sort."

"What is a robot?"

"A mechanical thing. A machine they can control." He jerked a thumb backwards. "Like the ship but smaller and it walks like a person. Devil machine."

"Can they die?"

"They can be broken." Hugh explained. "But they are made of metal so I am not sure how well a sword would work against them." He was not sure if the bullets in his gun would either. "Oh man. I wonder if they are armed as well."

"Their arms do not look right."

"You know, they don't. Oh, they are here to carry me and Hinata away. That's why their hands are like that."

"So they are expecting success in their mission. I wonder how they will take the disappointment."

"Yeah. I wonder." Hugh said. As the pair looked on, the four humans and two robots - Combat Autonomous Robotic Transporters turned down a side street, disappearing from sight. "They'll be here in half an hour or so." Hugh rocked back onto his butt. "Maybe I'll use the time to make a call."

"Call? Call who? The others?"

Hugh shook his head. "Here, move beside me. Maybe the advice of a friend will help with this situation now that there are six of them."

"The woman?" Akira smirked.

"You'd like her, I think. She's a strong woman, Abigail." Hugh said. He grinned as he thought back. "When I first changed in front of her, she slapped me. Hard." He raised his voice an octave. "Oh! Hugh, stop that this instant!" His voice returned to normal. "That was all she said."

"Hah!" Akira laughed. "Oh, I do like her already. A formidable woman. What was her advice?"

"To call the Governor's wife to tell her to tell him to stop trying to catch us. If not I was supposed to suggest she would be in danger."

"A formidable, *cunning* woman." Akira said. "But how can you speak with her here?"

Hugh took the PAD out of his pocket. "With this."

Akira smiled wide. "Let us call her together and make that suggestion. Tamping out the home fires would definitely be a reason stop."

Hugh tapped the Pad. "Cynthia, can you contact…" He forgot the woman's name. "The governor's wife and make it a video call on this thing?"

"Yes, I can do that."

"What is her name?"

"Ariel Sykes." Cynthia said. "Do you want to open communications now?"

Hugh looked at Akira. "Are you able to do that as well as translate into Japanese at the same time?"

"Yes. If you remove the earpiece from the PAD, it will translate Japanese into that."

"There's an earpiece?" Hugh turned over the PAD and examined it; there was indeed a small earpiece embedded in one side. On the other was a stylus. "Huh." He removed the earpiece. "Put this in your ear." Hugh mimicked putting the earpiece in his ear. "Then you will hear the translation."

Akira nodded then took the earpiece. After turning it over, he slid it into his ear.

"Cynthia, do all translations into Japanese into the earpiece. Keep the PAD in English."

As the earpiece translated, Akira smiled wide, "Ahhh, that is interesting!"

"Okay." Cynthia said simply.

Hugh paused for a moment then frowned. "Cynthia open communications with Ariel Sykes."

"Opening communication link with Ariel Sykes. She is at home."

After just a moment, a woman's face appeared on the Pad's screen. "Who are you?" She asked as she frowned. As the wife of a government

official, regular citizens were not able to contact her- otherwise she would be inundated with calls from people upset with her husband for any number of things. "And how did your call get through?"

"Huh." Hugh said. "Honestly, I don't know. I just asked to be connected." He smiled. "Lucky me." A thought occurred to him. "Oh, maybe it's because the Rollins family are friends of yours?"

Her face softened. "Yes, I am… I was friends with Cy Rollins." Then her frown returned. "And who are you?"

Hugh looked at Akira. He was sitting and listening in. Saying he was the one that killed her friend would definitely end the conversation before he wanted it to, so instead he said: "Listen Ms. Sykes, I don't have a lot of time right now so I want to tell you something and I want you to listen."

"Are you threatening me?" Her frown became more pronounced. "I'll have you know…"

"Listen Ariel," He said deciding at this point, formality was unnecessary. "I am absolutely positively threatening you because of what your husband is doing. And…"

"I don't care about you stupid miners."

"And…" Hugh continued as if she hadn't interrupted, "If your husband continues to try and capture me and my friend, once I have killed his team, you and all of your family will be next. Every single one of you."

"Why you! You're the one that killed Cy!"

"Yes, yes I am. And I will kill the entire team that is here on Earth trying to capture me and once they are dead, I will come back to your home and kill everyone in it in front of you, and then I'll kill you last." Hugh changed. "And there is nothing on Earth that can stop me from finding you!" He growled though his long fangs.

"What? Nothing on Earth?" Her eyes got large and she smirked. "And you expect to get to Mars? You stupid primitive!"

"I flew Cy's ship to Deimos without any problem. And got into their home without any problem. And I killed their son without any

problem." He added the lie because he figured since she probably didn't know who did the killing, it would add to his threat. He changed back. "And I got into and *out of* your husband's office without any problem. Then I flew out of the city without any problem! So yeah; killing you will be no problem. Once I've killed everyone else near and dear to you. Slowly and painfully. Everyone you know."

Ariel sat back and thought *Everyone near and dear to me? Like Rex?* Out loud she said "I… I don't know what you want me to do."

"I want you to tell your husband that he is through trying to find me or Hinata. Finished. Done. If I ever see anyone in my shadow, I'll kill them and then I'll come find you and kill you. Slowly and painfully."

Kill everyone near and dear to you. Ariel considered what the man said. Her husband had told her he had killed Cy's son as well as beaten up his security detail and left the office. All without so much as a scratch. She could pressure her husband; after all it was her family money that got him into politics. "I can talk to Sam." She said finally.

"Talk to him?" Hugh said. "Lady, I'm through talking. There's an armed team with a couple of robots on their way here right now." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "They're not here to talk, I can tell you that!"

"Hugh-san, they are here." The PAD translated.

Hugh looked at Akira. He pointed. "They near the opening."

"And it seems I'm through talking as well," Hugh let his eyes flash red. "I'll kill these and then work my way to you and yours."

"Wait!" Ariel exclaimed. "Wait. Don't kill Rex and I promise you Sam won't come looking for you ever again. Or your friend."

"Who the hell is Rex?"

"He's the man leading…" Her eyes lowered. "He's the leader of the group that's there."

"I see." Hugh scowled. "Friend of yours, I take it? A *close* friend?"

"Yes." Ariel wouldn't look at him.

Hugh shook his head. "Okay, fine. I won't kill your boyfriend."

"Kill the woman that is with them though." She said flatly.

"Come on now." Hugh said. "This is becoming a damned soap opera."

"A what?" Ariel said as she finally looked at him.

"Never mind. Fine. I'll not kill Rex and you will make your husband stop looking for us." He held up a finger. "And by that I mean, he will make sure no one ever comes to the town of Anchorage again. For any reason. Anchorage will be quarantined from now on."

"Yes, yes. I can do that." Ariel said. Saving Rex was topmost in her mind. "Kill Alice though."

"I'll kill who I want to kill!" Hugh pressed the red 'end' button on the Pad. "Women! I mean…what the Hell?"

"They seem to be the same everywhere." He gestured. "They are within a hundred paces. What is your plan?" He smiled. "Besides not killing that woman's lover while also killing her husband's lover, of course."

Hugh stood. He looked down the hill. The group was indeed walking up the steep incline toward the tunnel. They seemed to be tired by the effort. The two robots still behind them just marched steadily. He gestured outside. "It was much easier when I just ate people."

"That should always be an option to a vampire." Akira said.

Hugh looked at Akira. "Cynthia stop translating Kyūketsuki. It sounds better in Japanese."

"*Everything* sounds more noble in Japanese." Akira pointed out. "What is your plan?"

"To get them to the ship so we can deal with them there at the same time. Back where it's dark and our numbers are even."

"There are six of them and four of us. Do you feel that the two mechanical beasts will not join in the fight?"

Hugh shrugged. “It depends what they are here for. They look like they are here just to carry us away. They might just be like wagons; designed to carry and that’s all.” He pointed. “But the others have guns. Rifles even.” He looked at Akira. “Do you know what a gun is?”

“I know the long stick that makes a loud sound and throws small pieces of metal a long distance. Until now I did not know what it was called. But we are all familiar with them. A gun.” He cocked his head to the side. “Or a rifle?”

“They are all guns, but a rifle is the long tube. If it’s small and fits in the hand, it is a gun.”

“I am familiar with both.” Akira said.

“Good.” Hugh continued to look down at the group. “Well, I don’t want them chasing behind us where we can get shot in the back. So I’ll get their attention then we will run to the ship. I’m sure they know where it is and will come there.”

Akira now stood and peeked over the lip of the tunnel. “Are you going to shout an insult at them? They have no honor; an insult would mean nothing.”

“Okay. Maybe something with more weight than an insult.” Hugh bent over and picked up a fist-sized rock. He changed and took aim at the largest of the four Humans. He hoped the man wasn’t Rex. While he was walking ahead of the others -which is where a leader could be- he was also very fat and Hugh expected the man that was the lover of the very attractive and slender Ariel to be the tall and fit man walking next in line.

“You change to throw stronger.” Akira nodded. “Good.”

“It makes my aim better and yes, also makes me stronger.” Hugh explained. He had in the mid-1980s actually killed a man at fifty yards by hitting him with a rock he had thrown. Hugh had inadvertently killed the girlfriend of a gang leader. The killing wasn’t inadvertent; he was killing her to feed; he just didn’t know that she was the girlfriend of a notorious gang leader. Once the leader found out it was Hugh, he and the rest of the gang chased him into the woods to kill him. Since it was the mid-1980s, several of the gang members had fully automatic pistols; Uzis. Hugh did not want to have to deal with a hundred or so bullet wounds,

so when they approached, he threw a rock at the lead man with an Uzi, hitting him in the head and killing him. He then retrieved the weapon and used it on the rest of the gang until he ran out of bullets. By then, it was down to three gang members and he dispatched them by hand. "Like this." He focused on the large man's head then using a pitcher's form, launched the rock at him. Since the group was downhill from him, it was almost a flat trajectory for the sixty yards and he only led him by a couple of feet. When the rock reached Herman, he had taken two steps but thanks to the assistance of the ex-skeleton, he was farther along by just a little more than Hugh expected. The rock glanced off the side of his head instead of hitting him squarely in the face. Even so, the impact spun the man to the ground.

The other two men immediately looked up at the cave entrance while the woman rushed to the downed man.

"You have truly gotten their attention, Hugh." Akira said. "That was a fine throw."

Hugh watched as the woman helped the man to his feet. There was a bit of blood running down his face, but he was standing on his own. "Well, he's still alive so it wasn't as good a throw as I wanted." He pointed at the group then stepped back away from entrance. "Even so, that will bring them up here and they'll be mad when they come. So that's good."

"It is indeed." Akira said. "An angry man rushes to his death." He stepped back. "Let us go to the others and wait. They will be here quickly, I imagine."

"Definitely." Hugh said.

The pair turned and walked quickly to where the ship was parked.

Sixteen

"Jet packs." Herman said. "Why didn't we bring those along?"

"You know, if you used more energy for walking instead of complaining, you'd already be at the top." Alice said.

"And maybe if you'd…"

"I want to walk in quiet." Rex interrupted Herman. "Let's just get to the top and get this job done." He snapped, regretting bringing both Alice and Herman on the mission. While they both had positive attributes, they seemed to rub each other the wrong way and spent most of the time bickering. He would have thought they were interested in each other if Alice hadn't been in an affair with Governor Sykes. Which, he mused, was the only reason his wife was probably having an affair with him. "Horses for courses." He said aloud.

"What?" Alice asked. "Horses?"

"Nothing. It's nothing." He pointed. "We're almost there. Another ten minutes and we're in the cave."

"I say we take a few minutes to recover before moving in." Herman suggested.

"What?" Alice asked.

"We'll take a little to get organized, make sure all weapons are ready. Get the CARTs on task." Rex assured him.

"Pop a stim cap." Redd said as he slapped his friend on the shoulder.

"Or two." Herman replied. "Yeah, after that walk, I think I want to get pumped up before we run into those two."

"Yeah, I heard they did a job on those guards. Killed a couple of them even." Redd said.

"I didn't hear that." Alice said. "There were fatalities?"

"No one was killed." Rex said. "They knocked out a couple of them then jumped out the window."

"That's almost forty stories up."

"Yeah, Herm, but they had arrestor packs on so they glided away." Rex said.

"Oh man. Arrestor packs! Those would have been good for the way back to the ship." Herman said. "Glided all the way down." He made a gliding motion with his hand. "Next time, I'm gonna look over the packing list. Get those things on there."

"That's a good idea." Redd said with a laugh. "The CARTs could have met us once we were down."

"Or we could have had jumpers with us. Carried us all up there and back." Herman said.

"I thought we were going to walk quiet like." Rex said. "In case they're keeping an eye out. Let's just get there, okay?"

"Sure thing, Boss." Herman said. He pressed a button on a small control panel on his wrist. It was attached to the exoskeleton as well as a small medical pack on his back. "I've got just the trick." The medical pack released a healthy dose of Amphetamines into his bloodstream. With that he moved ahead of the group by five paces and didn't slow down. "Meet you there."

"He's going to blow up his heart one day." Redd said.

"Yeah, won't that be a great day." Alice said.

"I am sure that I asked for…"

Herman spun to the side as a rock hit him with an audible *crack*. It skittered to the ground between Redd and Rex still moving quickly.

"What the hell?" Red looked up the hill where the rock had come from.

"Herman, you okay?" Alice moved to Herman's side. There was a long gash in his head and it was bleeding heavily. She reached around to open his medical pack to grab an astringent.

"There!" Rex pointed. "That taller one threw it. Oh man, I'm going to beat him." He turned, "Herman?"

Alice was holding a medical pad on the side of Herman's head, letting the astringent stop the bleeding.

"Yeah, Boss?" Herman said sounding dazed. "Did I get shot? Oh man, I got shot in the head, didn't I."

"Stinking primitive threw a rock at you, Herm." Redd said.

"A *rock*? I'm gonna break one of his arms. That okay, Boss?" Herman swiveled his head around to look at Rex as Alice shifted to keep the medipad in place.

"Works for me. He just needs to be alive when we get him back to Mars. Sam can always have him fixed up before he starts to work on him, for all I care."

Herman nodded. "Good."

"Stop moving!" Alice said. She looked at Rex. "This is going to need medical."

"Once we get back to the ship." Rex said. "You okay to walk or you want to just wait here?"

Herman thumbed the button injecting more Amphetamines into his bloodstream. "Naw, I'm going. The bleeding stopped?"

Alice tentatively pulled the PAD away from the wound- it was a jagged gash but it had stopped bleeding. "Yeah, just don't get hit in the head again. And lay off the stims; your racing heart isn't helping."

Herman worked to his feet. "Let's go so I can get this thing looked at."

"It will be a nice scar, I think." Redd smiled. "The ladies will love it." He chuckled. "You just need a better story than 'a primitive threw a rock at my head' to get some sympathy."

"I'll think of something." Herman swung his rifle around to the ready. "Let's go." He looked up the hill but didn't move.

"Stay with the CART's, Herman. You're good at running them." Rex said. "Follow me." He took two steps when his communication device chirped in his ear. "What now? Rasmus! I said no calls!"

"Priority call incoming, Sir." The deep voice said. "Governor override."

"Hold on, everyone." Rex held up his hand. "Patch it through." Rex scowled expecting Sam to once again try to run an operation from millions of miles away. "What!" He said angrily. "What now Sam?"

"It's me." A female voice said.

"Come on! I'm working here!"

"Oh. I…" Ariel hesitated. "I spoke with that man and we agreed…"

"What are you talking about? Who did you talk to? What man?"

"The one you are going after. That cut off Sam's ear. I told him I would have Sam stop trying to get him if he would not kill you. I just wanted you to know that. That's all."

"You WHAT?" Rex roared. "Listen you crazy broad, I don't need you or anyone else bargaining for my life. Not from anyone. And especially not from some primitive!" He tapped the ear piece then took it out. He started to throw it, then just put it in his pocket.

"Trouble on the home front, Boss?" Herman said with a smirk.

"I'm glad you're feeling better, Herman." Rex snapped. He started back up the hill. "Maybe now you can keep up and not get hit in the head again. You're stupid enough as it is."

Herman's smile faded.

"Relax, Herman." Redd patted him on the shoulder. "He didn't mean it. He's just having girl problems, you know?"

Alice laughed. "The only girl problems Herman has is making sure he has them home in time to finish their homework."

Herman turned on Alice. "Shut up!" He swung his rifle around at her. "Or I'll give you something to smart off about!"

Redd looked at Alice, who seemed prepared to give a sarcastic response. “Let’s go Herman. You got to break this guy’s arm still, remember?” He put his arm around his friend and turned him. “Let’s go get him, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Herman said as he let himself get turned around. He started up the hill with his friend pulling him along.

When the group finally reached the top of the cave, Rex took a few minutes to ensure everyone’s weapon was operational and that the CARTs knew to stay out of the way until the two subjects were subdued. Since they did not have weapons, he didn’t want them getting in the way and possibly being damaged. It wasn’t that he was worried about their wellbeing; he really didn’t want to have to carry either of the captives down the hill.

Seventeen

"They are very loud." Ren said from under a pile of boards.

"Stealth is indeed foreign to them." Teruki agreed. He was standing inside a carefully stacked pile of boards and branches. His plan was to leap over the top of the pile and onto one of the attackers when they weren't looking. Ren had pointed out that he had in fact built a tiny fort at one point, bringing laughter from the other Japanese men.

It was decided that if each person took one of the attackers, Hugh would know how to deal with the robots.

"Okay, we need to subdue them quickly. The longer they are able to use their weapons, the more chance they have at killing one of us."

"I did not think a Kyūketsuki could die." Ren said.

"If my head is blown off, I think that will pretty much end it for me." Hugh said. "They have powerful weapons. Weapons I don't understand how they work so I don't know what they will do to us."

"Losing a head is death to us as well." Ren said. "We will make sure they do not have any opportunity to use their weapon. Or at least limit them."

"Good plan." Hugh said. "Ready?"

"Hai." Teruki said as he peeked out. "They are quite near now."

All three Samurai had changed into werewolves so they could see easily in the darkness. "They come four abreast." Akira said. He was crouched down behind Teruki's makeshift fort. "They do not seem worried about you two at all."

"That is because they do not know the songs of Senshi Hinata Takahashi." Ren said.

Hugh smiled. To some it may have sounded like an insult, but the fact of the matter was that the fearsome werewolf Samurai held Hinata in very high regard. He had learned from Akira that Hinata had managed

to kill two of the gatherers before they retreated to their ship to destroy the village from the sky. Against four seemingly god-like gatherers, his stand against them was epically brave.

"They will taste my blade." Hinata said. He was crouched down beside the ramp of the ship instead of building some sort of structure to hide behind. Hugh admitted that if he didn't move, he was difficult to see there. "Or one of them anyway."

Hugh changed slightly so that he could see in the night better. While not fully the night vision of a vampire, he could see the quartet of Humans approaching. They had their weapons at the ready. *I just need them to get closer before they open fire on us.* He thought. When they were fifty yards away he called out: "Do you think we can talk this over?"

Ren chuckled. "Hugh-san; the fisherman of gatherers lures them closer to the shore."

"The silver shores of the afterlife, perhaps." Teruki said with a chuckle of his own.

"Stealth, brothers. They do not know about us." Akira reminded. "Quiet until their end is near."

"Sure we can talk!" Rex shouted back, hoping to not have to do any sort of actual fighting. Once they were close enough, they could use their two Kali rifles to knock them out. Then they would be tied up, picked up by the robots and back on the ship within an hour. "We can talk this out, I'm sure."

"We're talking?" Herman asked.

"No. We're not talking." Redd explained softly . "He's just getting them to stand still so we don't got to go chasing them around in the dark."

Herman snickered. "Nice. Real nice. Then I'm gonna break that guy's arm over my knee."

"Just keep quiet. Let me do the talking." Rex said. He walked faster. In the dim light, he could see the ship and the one man silhouetted in it. One of the things they did not bring was night vision devices. "The last thing we need is the locals getting riled up with us." When they had started into the cave, one of the CARTs asked if a group of natives who

were huddled in a corner were who they were supposed to carry- since the robots could see through the entire spectrum of light. They had not considered that others lived in the cave until that moment. "In and out, nice and quiet like. There's no telling how many primitives are in here."

"Sure boss." Herman said.

Rex, Herman, Redd, and Alice walked into the dim glow of the ship. Both Redd and Herman had their weapons trained on Hugh, who was standing at the bottom of the ramp.

"So you want to talk?" Rex said.

"Not really." Hugh admitted. "But I did want to say that I spoke with Ariel and she said that if I didn't kill you, she would get her husband to leave us alone. I agreed to that. So if you all just turn around now, we will go with that plan and you all get out of this alive." He shrugged. "You should definitely confirm that with her instead of just taking my word for it. Give her a call."

"You stupid primitive." Rex said. "You can't demand anything from us. You have no clue who you're dealing with."

"No, Rex; *you* don't. You keep calling me a primitive but I can fly this ship behind me just fine. And I'll even show you why you're the one who doesn't have any idea who they are dealing with."

"Hah!" Redd said. "A vampire. Yeah we heard."

Herman chuckled. "Oooh! Scary."

Hugh changed completely. "You think this is Venusian tech, huh?" He crouched down. "Can Venusian tech do this?" He concentrated. "Because I'm pretty sure they can't do this ?" Hugh coalesced into a fog then puddled onto the ground.

"What the hell?" Redd said. He panned his rifle around. "What was that?"

"Where'd he go? He got a cloaker?" Herman said, referring to an active camouflage device that let the user blend into the background, almost invisibly.

The fog pooled to the ground and moved around the feet of Redd, Herman, and Rex. Alice was standing to the side to set up a crossfire.

Rex stepped forward out of the fog, as did Redd. Herman looked down at it then fired his weapon. It made a deep loud rapport that reverberated off the walls of the cave. The fog pulsated as the globule of plasma passed through it and spattered onto the stone floor, but that was all. "What you think about that, huh?" He panned his rifle around and fired two more booming shots into the mist.

"Herman, stop doing that." Rex winced at the sound. "You'll make us all deaf."

The fog quickly coalesced back into Hugh directly in front of Herman- their noses practically touching.

"What the!" Herman shuffled back and started to raise his rifle.

Hugh punched Herman in the throat hard. Herman's neck snapped and his head flopped to the side. Because of the exoskeleton, he remained standing for almost a full two seconds, then collapsed in a heap.

"I don't believe it!" Rex said. "A vampire!" He raised his pistol and pointed it at Hugh. "You're going to be worth a fortune!"

As Alice brought her rifle up to her shoulder and aimed at Hugh, Teruki leapt from his ramshackle fort, knocking it to the ground. He grabbed her by the arm and twisted it, breaking it above the elbow. Her weapon clattered to the stone ground as he bit her through the neck then let her go. She was dead before she hit the ground.

Rex brought his rifle around and shot Teruki, the bullet striking his shoulder making him stumble backward. "More of you, huh? Stinking primitives!"

Teruki staggered back into the darkness making it harder for Rex to shoot him. The several rounds he fired went wide.

Redd stepped forward and fired four times where Teruki had been standing. One round caught him in the thigh, knocking him to the ground. He advanced, still firing rounds at the fallen werewolf. One more shot hit him, skidding him across the ground.

As Redd stepped forward, he stepped right beside Akira who was still crouched down. Akira stood quickly and swung his sword down at him, cutting off both of his arms at the elbow. In a testament to the blade's forging, straight through the exoskeleton. Redd's weapon fell to the ground as he held up his bloody, spurting stumps. He gaped at where his arms now ended. Changing his downward swing into a low arc, Akira spun in a circle, cutting off Redd's head in one smooth motion.

Rex, not sure who to shoot at, fired a round at Akira, missing him.

Hinata stepped out from behind the ramp and raised his blade and swung it at the man's head.

"No!" Hugh said. "Don't!"

Hinata turned his blade sideways at the last moment as he swung at Rex's head. The flat of the blade caught him across the ear, bloodying the side of his face and stunning him.

Rex staggered to the side from the impact and as he put his hand out to the side to break his fall, Hinata kicked at his hand, sending the weapon flying. "You will sit!" He commanded as he swung the blade again, hitting Rex squarely on the top of his head with it, knocking him to the ground.

"Don't let him up!" Hugh said. "Or let him touch anything!" He looked to where Teruki was. "Akira, check on Teruki!"

"Hai!" Hinata said. He stepped in front of Rex and held the sharp edge of the blade against his neck. "I will no longer slap you like an obstinate mule! Move and you die!"

Hugh smiled, wondering if Rex even knew what a mule was. He looked around the area and didn't see one of the Samurai. "Ren, you okay?"

"I am." Ren said. He pushed one of the boards off of himself. "I could have taken a nap, it seems." He sat up. "Well done everyone. I believe my supervision provided the victory."

"Supervision?" Akira said. "You made a bed of wood and took a nap!" He reached down and pulled Teruki to his feet. He was holding

his hand on his shoulder and there was a large blood stain down his armor. "Teruki is bleeding badly."

"Hah!" Ren stood. "I was fully prepared to help where it was needed." He looked at the bodies. "But it was all well in hand." He turned toward Rex. "Perhaps I may kill this one since I am behind?"

Rex was looking back and forth at the Samurai. In the darkness it was difficult to make out features but even so none of them looked entirely human. "What… are you?"

"We are defenders of our people." Ren said. He drew his katana and took two bounding leaps toward Rex. He swung his blade, stopping as it touched his neck. "*You* are vermin."

Rex's eyes got big when the massive werewolf face moved to within inches of his. "Wha—what?"

"Ren, get Teruki into the ship so it can look at that wound." Hugh said.

"I will." Ren sheathed his blade. He leaned in close to Rex. "Then I will return."

Eighteen

Hugh looked at the two robots; they were standing still. "Cynthia, are you able to communicate with these robots?"

"Yes, due to their proximity, they are now on the same network as the ship."

"Make sure they don't do anything."

"They are doing nothing right now." Cynthia said. "They are awaiting instructions."

"Good. Make it so they will only accept instructions from me right now."

"Okay." Cynthia said calmly.

"Great. Okay. Time for one more call." Hugh said. "Do you have a comms with the governor?"

Rex was watching Akira and Ren help Teruki into the ship and did not seem to realize Hugh was speaking to him.

Hugh slapped Rex's face then grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him to his feet. "Do you have comms with the governor?"

Rex couldn't take his eyes off the three werewolves. As they entered the ship, they were clearly visible.

Hugh slapped him again. "Hey!"

Rex turned to face Hugh. "I… what?"

"Comms with the governor. Do you have them?" Hugh seethed. "I'm getting tired of repeating myself."

"Let us just kill him now." Hinata said. He still had his sword at the ready.

"A bargain is a bargain. Let's see how the negotiations go." Hugh took out his pad. "Cynthia, open communication with Ariel Sykes."

Rex's eyes got large. "What?"

"Communication channel is open. Ariel Sykes is at home."

Once again, Ariel's face filled the small screen. "Oh. I wasn't expecting… Oh… I…" She gaped at Hugh's appearance. "Oh!"

"Here he is." Hugh turned the PAD to show Rex. "So far he's still alive."

"Oh!" Ariel said. "Rex! Are you alright? I was so worried!"

"He is for the moment." Hugh said. "Tell her you are okay, Rex. Reassure your girl."

Rex looked up at the screen. "I'm okay." He said flatly.

"And you can make him stay that way, Ariel." Hugh said.

"What… What are you? Some kind of Venusian freak?" Ariel said.

"Ariel." Hugh said.

"Sam told me but I thought he was exaggerating."

"Ariel!" Hugh shouted. "You need to listen to me."

"Are you contagious?" Ariel continued. Her face scrunched up. "Being so close to…"

"Either you start listening to me, or things are not going to go well for Rex, here." Hugh said.

"I don't know if…"

Furious, Hugh held the PAD out to put both him and Rex in the frame as he grabbed Rex's hand. "Focus, Ariel!" Hugh bit off Rex's pointer finger, chewed it up and swallowed it.

"Odoroki!" Hinata exclaimed.

Rex grabbed his now bleeding stub of a finger and stared at it speechless.

"If your husband doesn't stop his vendetta against me and the people in Anchorage, I will personally *eat* all three of your children; Matt,

Christoph, and Samuel junior, and then Matt's wife, and then Rachel your granddaughter until they bleed out in front of you just like this. Then and only then will I kill you." He wiped his bloody mouth with the back of his hand. "Do you understand me?"

Ariel paled and looked sick. "You're a monster!"

"I sure am. And that's why you are going to leave me and the town of Anchorage alone. You don't want to deal with the likes of me." He pulled the PAD close to his face. "You do not want to deal with the likes of me, right?"

"No, no! I mean yes. Yes, I will tell Sam. It ends now." She looked away. "Thank you for sparing Rex."

Hugh pressed the icon ending the call.

"Oh Hugh-san, that was something I have never seen before." Hinata said. "I am also a little sick to my stomach, I am afraid to say. It was something to see, but also disturbing at the same time."

"Cynthia, open a communication channel with Governor Sykes."

"I am unable to contact Governor Sykes. Would you like to send him a message through his secretary?"

Hugh glowered at Rex. "Get him on the line. Now."

"Oh." Rex looked down at the Pad. "Cynthia, confirm voice and open communication with Governor Sykes. Priority call."

"Rexel Peterson. Confirmed. Opening communication channel now. The Governor is in his office."

"Is he alone?" Hugh asked. He changed back to human form.

"I have no way of knowing that." Cynthia said.

"Well that makes sense. Governor Sykes. We meet again." Hugh said when the governor swiveled his monitor around to look at it.

"You!"

"Yeah. It's me." Hugh said. He pointed the PAD at Rex. "This is all that's left of your highly trained team of assassins. And he's only barely staying alive at this point."

"There's no way…"

"Listen Sam." Hugh said. "I'm about done talking with any of you right now. The only reason Rex is still alive is because Ariel wanted him that way." He shrugged. "Honestly, killing him won't bother me any more than killing any of the other three that came with him."

"Alice… Alice is dead?" Sam sat back in his chair.

"You people. Yeah, I killed *your* lover because your wife wanted me to keep *her* lover alive. I guess you should have bargained with me first! And it seems that since it was her money that got you into politics, her money is going to keep you from coming after me ever again. As I told her, the town of Anchorage is now off limits to everyone from Mars or its moons."

"She wanted you to not kill… him?"

"That's about the size of it." Hugh said. "And she wanted me to kill that woman, so I think she knows about her Sam. So you have that to deal with as well, it seems."

Sam scowled. "Kill him and I'll never come after you ever again."

"What?" Rex said.

"No deal, Sam." Hugh said. "I just wanted to make sure you knew that if I ever see any of your people ever again, I'll come find you and your family."

"My… family?"

"Ariel will explain, I'm sure." Hugh said. "Goodbye forever, Sam. For your sake, it had better be forever." He pressed the end icon. "Well, well, Rex. What a twist that is." Hugh smiled wide. He still had Rex's blood in his teeth. "Fallen out of favor already."

Rex looked down at his feet.

"Okay, Rex. Here's the deal. I promised Ariel I wouldn't kill you. But that doesn't mean I'm going to help you either. So…" He looked toward the entrance of the tunnel. "I just had a great idea. A really crazy idea." He smiled at Rex. "Tie him up Hinata."

"Wait! I…I thought you were going to let me go!" Rex said as Hinata muscled him to the ground.

"No, I said I wouldn't kill you. That doesn't mean I'm going to give you a ship and let you fly off. You can just sit here on Earth until some other ship lands, then you can try to talk your way onto it. If the locals don't kill you first, that is. Or some animal doesn't eat you. I'll leave you your comms device so you can try to talk Ariel into sending a ship." He smirked. "I don't suggest calling your old boss or he might just send a hit team down here. Of course, it seems your girl thinks you might be contagious so she might not be interested in you either."

"Why can't I have… What do you want with my ship?"

"Maybe I want people to call me Commodore." Hugh said. "Cynthia, what kind of ship is currently parked in the town below the cave?"

"That ship is a Sprite Runabout model, with optional assault package built by Nelson-Healey Aerospace Systems Incorporated."

"The same as the ship you are on? What; are they the only manufacturer of ships?"

"They hold seventy two percent of the market." Cynthia said.

"So operating that ship is very similar to flying the *Alba Mons*?" Hugh looked at Rex.

"The flight systems of the ships are similar however the ship's capabilities and weapons systems are not."

"The *Alba Mons* has weapons systems?" Hugh asked. "Damn it all."

"It has navigational lasers which have no offensive capability however they are still classified as weapons systems for legal purposes, of course."

Hugh slapped Rex's head. "Shut up! Man, you have no idea how much I want to just kill you right now."

Rex returned to looking at the ground. He was cradling his hand close to his chest trying to stop the bleeding.

"Hinata, get him on the ship and get that finger fixed up. Don't grow it back or anything, just tell Cynthia to close up the wound."

"We are showing him mercy? *Him*?"

"No. I'm just making sure that when he contacts Ariel to come rescue him, if he dies it's not because of anything we have done so the bargain isn't upset."

"You really think those two will honor this bargain? They have no honor. None."

Hugh looked down at Rex. "I think Rex realizes his best bet will be to get as far away from Mars as he can. Sam didn't sound too pleased with him. So get that finger fixed, so he can tell Ariel where he is."

"Hai." Hinata half carried, half dragged Rex into the ship.

Akira approached Hugh. "Hugh, I do not mean to try to tell you your business but I think there may be an issue with what you have planned."

Hugh held up a finger. "Just a moment. Cynthia, since both ships are made by the manufacturer, can one ship pick up the other ship so they can both be moved at once? Can they link together, I mean?"

"Nelson-Healey Aerospace Systems Incorporated ships are designed to be able to assist like-manufactured ships. The *Alba Mons* is designed so the *Mons Highlands Two* will attach at the upper rear docking hatch."

"And I can fly both ships like that without any problem?"

"The ship's maneuverability within an atmosphere is limited however in space, navigation is unhindered." Cynthia replied.

"Nice." Hugh looked at Akira. "Sorry, I did not want to lose my train of thought." He considered what Akira had said. "What business is there an issue with?"

"I do not mean to offend." Akira began.

Hugh put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Akira-san, I am always open to suggestions. I am making this up as I go; if I have planned something wrong, please just tell me."

"You said you want to release this man for his lover to rescue." He looked at the ground. "But you have bitten him. A *Kyūketsuki* bite. He will become one himself. No?"

"Oh." Hugh looked at the ship. "Damn. My temper got the best of me." He frowned. "Yes, he sure will."

"Then he must be led to believe that he will be spared until he coordinates a rescue." Now Akira looked at the ship. "From your experience, how long until he… changes?"

Hugh considered that. "I have no idea. I have never let anyone live after I have attacked them."

"Then he must be killed. Burned. Burned completely, just as this woman must be because I bit her. But after he has spoken to that woman so that she will not suspect your involvement."

Hugh shook his head. "The last thing I need is someone like him becoming a vampire. I really shouldn't have bitten him but I was pretty angry. Okay, once his finger is fixed, I'm going to give him some supplies and sit him at the entrance to the cave and make sure he calls for help." Hugh looked into the cave. "Then all we need to do is have these locals tell whoever shows up a bear killed him." He raised his eyebrows. "Are there bear here still?"

"Oh yes, The Higuma are very big and very dangerous beasts. Even we avoid them." (A brown bear similar to the North American Grizzly in size and temperament- 1,000 pounds and ten feet tall). Now Akira looked into the darkness. "Yes, that will be an easy lie for them to tell. And with the Higuma, there would be no body to be found." He smiled. "Yes; that is an easy lie."

A thought occurred to Hugh. "Cynthia, are those robots fire proof? I mean, can they just walk into a fire and be okay?" Hugh asked.

"Oh, Hugh-san." Akira smiled wide. "Your cunning will bring tears to my eyes before the day is done."

"Combat Autonomous Robotic Transporters are able to operate in a variety of environments from the vacuum of space to underwater for extended periods of time. They are able to operate in hot environments up to eight hundred degrees. Where do you want to send them?"

"Oh, nowhere yet Cynthia." Akira said with a smile. "But soon, I suspect one will be taking a walk into a raging fire."

"Okay." Cynthia replied, not caring one way or another.

"Let's check on Teruki." Hugh said.

"You are a cunning warrior, Hugh. I am glad we fight on the same side." Akira held a finger to his lips. "I will continue your charade with that man."

Nineteen

Hugh and Akira found Teruki on the main operating table in the infirmary. The robotic arm was working on his shoulder with two different appendages and what appeared to be a large syringe.

"How does it look?" Hugh asked.

"The devil doctor has removed the piece of metal and is fixing the hole." Ren said. "Teruki is asleep right now."

Hugh looked over at Rex. "And him?"

"The smaller devil has already sewn his finger closed." Hinata pointed at the man. "He is ready for whatever awaits him." He tapped his hand on his sword.

"Take him to the opening of the cave and let him call for help." Hugh said. "I'll get a pack of supplies together for him." He looked at Rex. "I don't think you should need more than a couple of days before your girl comes to get you."

Rex didn't look at him. "Yeah, sure."

"Akira, if you can go down to the town to… Cynthia stop translating."

"Okay."

"Akira, Hi o okosu." (Start a fire.)

"Ahhh. Hai!" Akira said.

Hinata looked at Hugh. "Nani?" (What)

"Cynthia, resume translating from English to Japanese and Japanese to English."

"Okay." Cynthia said simply.

"Everyone to their task, Hinata." Hugh stared at the man. He then pointed at Rex. "Go sit at the cave opening. That will give you shelter

and as we leave, we will drop off some rations. Just sit there until someone picks you up. That was our agreement."

"Do I get a weapon?"

"For what? The locals are terrified of you." Hugh shrugged. "Be happy you'll get food and water for a couple of days. The last thing I need is you taking shots at our ship as we leave. That's the deal, take it or leave it."

"Say you do not agree," Hinata said. "Say it, you *dog*!"

"Fine." Rex stood. "Let's go." He still didn't sound convinced.

"Get him off my ship." Hugh said. "After you've dropped him off, give Akira a hand."

"Hai." Hinata said. "Move, dog! I will not carry you there!"

After the trio left the ship, Hugh leaned over Teruki. "That looks like it should heal nicely."

"The devil machine has done a good job," Ren said.

"Yes." Hugh agreed. He looked at the ceiling. "Cynthia, how long will he be sedated?"

"Patient Teruki will be sedated for four hours until the T-Cells are finished. Movement slows the repair process." Cynthia replied.

"Then he will be fully healed?"

"No, the bruises from the kinetic weapon will heal naturally over the course of two weeks. He also has a viral infection that has being treated."

"But the bullet hole?"

"Yes, the bullet hole will be fully healed. However the genetic damage detected while synthesizing his blood will require a level one trauma facility. The closest one is in Ayers Landing. Do you want to attempt to schedule an appointment?"

"What genetic…" Hugh's voice trailed off. "Wait, are you saying you can… cure him?" Hugh looked at Ren. "Cure him of his *genetic damage*?"

"No, that level of genetic engineering requires a level one trauma facility. The closest one is located in Ayer's Landing however they may not assist you since you are not a member of the colony. The next closest is in Lycus Sulci. You could ask Governor Sykes for assistance since that facility falls under his purview."

"Cure him." Hugh sat on one of the benches that was sticking out of the wall, across from Ren.

"Cure what? Did that weapon harm Teruki in a way I do not understand, Hugh?" Ren asked.

Hugh looked at Teruki. "And…" He hesitated, afraid to even ask the question. "Cynthia, have you analyzed my blood while synthetizing it?"

"Yes."

The answer boomed in Hugh's head. "And have you evaluated… my genetic damage?"

"It is not the same as Patient Teruki. You also have an autoimmune virus, three viral infections inflaming your liver, the bacterium Treponema pallidum, and a genital virus that is dormant."

"What is this injury, Hugh?" Ren asked again.

"The… mechanical doctor says it can cure Teruki of his… Raikansurōpu." (Lycanthropy.)

Ren stood. "That is not a sickness to be cured." He put his hands on his hips, standing akimbo. "We are not sick." He looked up, like Hugh did when he spoke to the AI. "We are not sick, devil machine! How dare you call us that!"

"No." Hugh said. "No, you're not sick, but the machine is able to remove… it from you."

"Remove part of ourselves?" Ren now crossed his arms. "Will it remove my right hand as well?"

Hugh remained seated, not wanting to agitate the man any further. "I apologize, no. That is not what I'm saying." He leaned back. "I mean… I don't know what I mean." He dreaded the question he felt he had to ask. "Cynthia, can a level one trauma center repair my genetic damage?"

"Yes; a level one trauma center can rewrite your genetic code to a normal baseline. However I am able to remove the other viruses and bacteria from your system. Do you want me to synthesize a CRISPR-Cas12 repair chain now?"

"Hugh-san." Ren said softly after the PAD had translated. "I am not sick." He pointed between himself and Hugh. "*We* are not sick. We are what we are." He sat on the bench. "*We are what we are*."

"But before I became a vampire." His voice trailed off. He thought back to when he had been brutally attacked but still survived thanks to the cold. And the old man -his first kill- and then running into the wilderness. He still couldn't remember anything before that time.

"Hugh-san, I was born as I am. My father was born as he was. As was his father."

Hugh looked at him. "Three generations?"

"Hai. Teruki is also third generation. Akira ten." The edge returned to his voice. "*We are what we are*."

"I'm just me." Hugh said, feeling empty inside.

"Do you want me to synthesize a CRISPR-Cas12 repair chain?" Cynthia asked again.

"What? Yes. Do that." Hugh said. He looked at Ren. "Those are for viruses that I am carrying, not for the vampirism. She said I would need to go to another place to deal with that."

Ren stood. "No! You are Hugh-san Kyūketsuki, defender of Anchorage. Defender of his friends, both old and new. A man of honor. *That is who you are*! That is what you were made to be." He spread his arms wide. "It is the grand plan of the universe that you defend those who cannot defend themselves."

Hugh thought back to his conversations with Eli. Suddenly they seemed ages ago. *The Lord works in mysterious ways, Hugh. And He picks the most unusual people to do His work.* Eli had said when Hugh was expressing remorse for how he had lived before he was frozen. "There is no way that I am part of any grand plan." Hugh looked at Ren. "Ren, I've killed people. For sport. For food. Because I was bored even."

"You do those things now?" Ren shook his head. "I have not seen that side of you."

"No. I don't do those things now." Hugh admitted. He lowered his head. "I mean, there are three dead people out there who would probably argue that I'm not the nicest person around."

"Those people came here to kill you." Ren pointed at the door. "And Hinata? Remember you freed him from a life of dishonor. And, your negotiations have not been for you, Hugh." Ren tapped his ear. "I have heard that devil box tell me what you say. And what you say is 'leave my friends alone because I am their protector. How many people are in this Anchorage?"

Hugh considered that. "Two thousand or so."

"Hugh-san, negotiating for the lives of two thousand people, most that you do not know and that do not know you. Is that right?"

"That's right." Hugh agreed. "I only know a handful of them. They are a peaceful people with no way to defend themselves and they are unwilling to even try. They are like sheep." It was the best analogy for the Amish.

"So you protect the flock with your life. A noble profession indeed." Ren smirked. "Hugh, who protects his flock when the wolves come. It is a noble title; Hugh-san, the good shepherd."

The sentence hit Hugh like a ton of bricks as a verse came to mind: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Hugh sat up straight. "Whoa, wait. Do not call me that. Just… just don't."

"I do not mean it as an insult." Ren said, taken aback. "It is a noble and worthy title."

"No, I understand that. There is someone else called that and it sure isn't me. It's just… that's a bit too much." Hugh shook his head. "Man, if you and Eli ever get together, I'm in trouble."

"Eli?"

"He is a good friend. And a spiritual man who talks to me about the path I am on."

"Ahhh; a Kannushi. They are wise indeed. To count one as a friend is a serious thing." (A cleric who tends shrines). He stook straighter, proudful. "My brother is one."

"Listen, Ren." Hugh began. "This is all a lot to take in. And I need to go over it in my head. In private. Can you not mention any of this to the others?"

Ren nodded. "I will keep your secret if you also keep in mind that we are not seeking a cure for our being who we are. It does not even make sense to try."

"I understand."

"Do not mention that to the others, it is very insulting to even suggest."

Hugh looked at Ren. "I never meant to insult you, Ren. I was caught off guard; this… this thing never even seemed to be a possibility. I was caught off guard."

"You see being a Kyūketsuki as a curse."

"Sometimes I do." Hugh admitted.

"I do not believe Hinata would think so if you asked him. Or the husband of your friend. Or any of the others in Anchorage."

"Well, there are some there that are not too pleased with me."

Ren stood. "And that is as it must be. If you try to please everyone, you will please no one. Especially yourself." He adjusted his swords. "So what of this fire that is being started?"

"Well, in my anger, I bit off that man's finger."

Ren smiled. "I found that pleasing. Unsettling but also pleasing." His smile faded. "Oh, wait. Bitten off by you." He nodded. "Yes, a large fire is indeed in order." He looked at the door. "But how will you get him to go into it? And does he suspect he is… becoming like you?"

Hugh realized Ren made a point not to use the word 'infected'. "Probably not. He thinks I was made by one of these devil machines." He gestured at the medical arms dangling down. "Cynthia, you can patch in to Rexel Peterson's communication device so we can hear what he is saying, right?"

"Yes. I can do that. Do you want to do that now?"

"Yes. And are you able to disable his communication device? I'm pretty sure I read that somewhere as well."

"I can disable his device. Do you want to do that now?"

"No. But when you do, will he suspect he isn't transmitting anymore?"

"Yes. He will know that he is no longer transmitting."

Hugh shrugged. "At that point, it won't really matter."

"What is going on?" Ren asked. "I do not understand."

"I told Rex to call for a rescue from here. So once they know to come here, I am going to have one of those mechanical men carry Rex into the fire. Then since he called for help, his rescuers won't suspect me so hopefully they will hold up their end of the bargain. And by turning off his communication device, he won't be able to let them know I did it."

"That is a cunning plan, but it is more than he deserves. Gatherers should be killed outright." Ren pointed out. "He is lucky he has lasted this long."

"Well, I am hoping that his woman will think that her husband was responsible for his death instead of us so she will take it out on him." Hugh explained. "And then neither of them will come looking for us again."

"Ahh. I feel tears of joy forming from such a cunning plan." Ren said with a smile. "So he will know we have deceived his woman and will not be able to do anything about it." He nodded. "That is indeed justice. And the mechanical beast will just walk into the fire with him? It does not care for its safety?"

"The fire shouldn't harm it. But even if it did, it doesn't have a mind or feelings. It is like a boat being sent over a waterfall." Hugh explained, trying to use terms the man would understand. "Rex is another matter entirely."

"I am on the verge of tears." Ren said. He rubbed his hands together. "He will shout in anger to no avail, the emptiness in him will be as if he is starving."

"The problem is that…"

"Rexel Peterson has activated his communication device." Cynthia said.

"Oh!" Ren leaned back and smiled. "Let us listen to his pleading."

Twenty

"Connect with Ariel." Rex said.

After a moment, Ariel responded: "Rex, is that you?"

"It's me." He let out a long breath. "What a mess."

"At least you're alright." Ariel said. Her voice perked up. "So… will you be home tonight?"

"No, I won't be home tonight. The bastard stole my ship so I'm stuck here." Rex snapped.

"Oh." Ariel sounded let down.

"Oh? That's all you have to say? All of my team is dead; I've had my finger bitten off and I'm stranded on Earth and all you can come up with is 'oh'?"

"Well, I'm sure Sam will send someone for you." Ariel said.

"He told that Hugh guy to kill me."

"Oh."

"Stop saying 'oh'!" Rex roared.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" Now Ariel's voice took on an angry tone.

"I want you to call one of your daddy's ships and have it sent here for me!"

"You know I don't like when you talk like that."

There was a long pause then Rex spoke: "I'm sorry. It's just a lot has happened. Everyone is dead, I'm stuck with no ship, I'm missing a finger, and I'm out of a job."

"You think Sam fired you?"

"He told this madman to kill me, Ariel; I don't think he's planning on depositing my paycheck at the end of the week." Rex let out another long breath. "I don't understand what they are doing."

"Who?"

"Those two down at my ship. They're starting a fire. I wonder if they think they can burn my ship, stupid primitives."

"It's probably for the bodies." Ariel offered.

"Oh. Yeah." Rex nodded even though it was only an audio call. "So can you ask your father if he has a ship nearby that can pick me up? Grab my location from my commlink because I don't think my ship will be here."

"They can't burn it." Ariel said matter-of-factly. "Not with a regular fire."

"No, but they can steal it."

"They're primitives. What do they know?"

"That one is pretty smart." Rex said. "He flew a ship from here to Mars. He flew it there and back. You know, tell your Dad I need to talk to him about some other primitives I've seen. They are worth a lot of money."

"Primitives?"

"These aren't normal prims, Ariel. They're something different. I think the biotech guys will want to have a look at them. I'll keep an eye out on where they go so they can get grabbed."

"I'll tell Daddy to send a ship then."

"Tell him to send ten or fifteen people. These things are serious."

"They're… not human?" Ariel asked.

"Sometimes they are. They're like those Venusian berserkers; fluid genetic types. But they seem to come by it naturally. They have to because no one down here knows anything about genetics. Well, the Venusians but they don't wander around like this."

"Okay. Well that will make him happy. Maybe he can get you a job too. So we can keep seeing each other."

"Sure. We can talk about that once I'm picked up." Rex said, planning on getting as far away from Mars, Sam Sykes, and especially Ariel Sykes as he could. And if he had to approach some other company about the shape shifters, he would use that to get a job with that company.

"Oh, that sounds like a good idea." Ariel's voice perked up again. "I really miss you. I'll see you soon?"

"Yeah." Rex said, not sounding very convincing. "See you soon. Sending my coordinates now."

"Got them. I'll call daddy now. Bye."

"Bye."

After a long moment, Cynthia spoke up: "Rexel Peterson has deactivated his communication device."

"Nice. Cynthia, keep monitoring him and let me know if he turns it on again." Hugh said.

"What does he want with us?" Ren asked.

"He wants to put you in a cage and have some doctors cut you into little pieces to see how you change into a wolf."

"I do not believe I want to give him that opportunity."

"Me neither." Hugh said. "Hey Cynthia, how long will it take to synthesize that crisper thing for me?"

"It took seven seconds to synthesize. Do you want to administer it now?"

"Seven seconds?" Hugh shook his head. "Yeah, I guess in twenty thousand twenty-seven, medical science has gotten a bit better than just twenty twenty-six." He nodded. "Okay, I might as well get rid of the

Hepatitis, AIDS, and those others. Not that I even notice them. What do I need to do?"

"Move to the treatment table." Cynthia said as the arm with the needle moved down. "And sit."

Hugh placed his arm in the indentation for injections as he sat in the swing-out stool. When the mechanical arm reached him, a fan of laser light passed over his arm twice, sterilizing the area.

"How long will it take for this to work?" Hugh asked as the needle moved into position. With one quick motion it entered his vein, injected what seemed to be a very large amount of murky grey colored liquid, then it pulled out. The fan of laser light passed over the injection site again before the entire arm retracted to the ceiling.

"Sixty seconds." Cynthia said.

"Wow." Hugh shook his head. "Modern medicine, right?"

"It takes approximately thirty seconds for blood to travel through the entire circulatory system; that rate is constant regardless of scientific advancements. The CRISPR serum works almost immediately on the various viruses."

"So this will cure those diseases? Will I be immune to them from now on?"

"Except for remote areas on Earth, the various hepatitis viruses, syphilis, and AIDS are eradicated."

"Nice. So no more communicable diseases. The slums must be really nice places to visit." Hugh said.

"There are diseases, just not those diseases." Cynthia said. "NRS and UBT are still prevalent in economically challenged areas as well as remote outposts on smaller asteroids. Some cancers occur due to poor shielding. There are also…"

"It's nice to know some things haven't changed." Hugh interrupted. "Makes me want to visit a Little Tokyo on some asteroid."

"Wow." Ren gaped.

"Oh!" Hugh said with a smile. "No offense, Ren."

"No." Ren said. "You look different." He pointed at Hugh. "Healthy."

Hugh looked at his arm. It was indeed more flesh-colored. Since he wasn't able to see himself in a mirror, he had assumed that through the years his yellowish pallor was due to not being in sunlight. He held both arms out. "Wow, that is weird."

"I assumed your color was due to your vampirism." Ren said.

"I did too, I suppose." Hugh stood then felt a wave of vertigo. He reached out to the table for support. "Whoa!"

"Are you okay?" Ren stood and moved toward him. "Is this an effect of what the mechanical doctor did?"

Hugh let go of the table. "No, it's just weird. I feel… I don't know; stronger? I felt like I was going to hit the ceiling when I stood up." He did several deep knee bends then flexed his arms. "Wow, this is weird."

"Could it be that the effects of the ailments that the machine treated are not there anymore?" Ren offered. "You do look much healthier now."

"It must be. I guess it happened slowly over time but my body fighting all those infections had made me weaker but I didn't notice." He clenched his hands into fists. "Where's a smart-mouthed bouncer now?"

"What?"

Hugh smirked. "Nothing. Something from my past." He took a deep breath then let it out. "I'm going to go outside. Test some things out."

Ren nodded. "I will wait in here, if that is okay."

Hugh grinned. "Tired from the fight?"

"Oh, what a strike, Hugh." Ren feigned injury by staggering backward. "It seems your wit has also been sharpened."

"I'll keep an eye out for the others and I'll get those robots to get rid of the bodies."

"If only Cynthia had a way for you to speak to Hinata or Akira." Ren said.

"Do you want to open communication with Hinata?" Cynthia asked.

"What?" Hugh looked up. "How can we do that?"

"He is still wearing the ear pieces and is in network range due to his proximity to the other ship."

"Nice." He gave a wave to Ren. "I'll be back in a little bit. Cynthia open communication with Akira."

"Akira is outside the other ship." Cynthia said. She seemed to be programmed to always give a location for anyone that was contacted for some reason.

"Akira." Hugh said as he left the ship. He walked to where the bodies were.

"Hugh? Where are you?" Akira sounded surprised.

"I am in the cave. I can talk to you through the thing you have in your ear."

"This is unusual."

"It is." Hugh agreed. "Is the fire going?"

"We have it started and burning well. Hinata was just going to run back to the cave to let you know. Now I suppose he does not need to; he will be glad. It is indeed a long way uphill."

"No. I will have the ro… the mechanical men carry the bodies down to the fire."

"And the other?"

"Yes." Hugh said. "Just make sure the fire stays nice and hot."

"Hai." Akira said.

"Cynthia," Hugh said. "Can you make the two robots listen to me."

"They are always monitoring their environment when they are active." Cynthia said.

"Can they speak?"

"No, they cannot speak."

"What are they called?"

"These are CARTs. Designated Alpha and Charlie."

"Right." Hugh walked up to the two robots. Neither had moved from when they first arrived. "Cart Alpha." Hugh said.

Cart Alpha didn't move.

"Cart Alpha." Hugh said again. Again, the robot didn't move. "Cynthia, are these things on? Why aren't they doing anything?"

"You have not given a command." Cynthia pointed out.

"Huh." Hugh shook his head. "*Robots*. Okay. Cart Alpha, pick up the three dead bodies and transport them down the hill to the fire. Place them in the middle of the fire."

Without a word, the robot moved to the bodies and scooped all three up. It turned and marched toward the entrance.

"Oh! Cart Alpha, remain at the other ship once the bodies are in the fire." He called after it.

The robot just continued to march off.

"They really need to be able to let people know they heard a command. A beep or a boop or something. A flashing light even." Hugh observed. He shrugged. "Cart Charlie. At the entrance to the cave is a human, his name is Rex. Pick Rex up and carry him into the center of the fire. Hold him there until he has burned up. Then go wait by the other ship."

Obediently the robot marched off.

"Cynthia, can you tell what those robots are thinking?"

"Robots do not think. They process information using available algorithms."

Hugh scowled. "Well crud." He started to jog to catch up with the robot. He was surprised at how easily -and quickly- he could move. He stopped and watched as the robot marched away, letting it get a full fifty yards ahead. Hugh planted his feet, leaned forward then took off at a sprint. Reaching almost forty miles an hour, he caught the robot in seconds. He skidded to a stop ahead of it. "Oh man." He said, not even feeling winded. "Alpha, if you understand what I am saying, raise your right hand."

As the robot continued to walk, it raised its right hand.

"You need a light or a speaker or something." Hugh fell in step beside it. "How are we going to become friends if you can't even talk back like Cynthia?" He saw Rex stand quickly as the first robot trudged past carrying the three bodies.

Rex looked over his shoulder as Hugh and the robot approached. "So you're just burning them?" He shook his head. "Figures."

"That's better treatment than you would have given us, I'm sure." Hugh said back. "We'd have been left for scavengers. At least they are getting burned with some dignity."

"Huh." Rex looked back out the cave where the robot was now walking down the steep incline.

"Oh!" Hugh remembered. "Cynthia, disable Rex's communication device now." He whispered as they got within ten feet of the man. "Cynthia?" he said louder. "Did you copy that?"

"Yes." Cynthia said through the PAD in Hugh's pocket. "Complying."

"Stinking savages." Rex said as he continued to look down the hill.

When Hugh and Cart Charlie got beside them, the robot grabbed Rex with both clawed hands and continued to walk without breaking stride.

"What are you doing? We had a deal!" Rex shouted.

"Yeah." Hugh skidded to a stop still within the darkness of the cave. "Then I heard you were going to cut up my friends to see what makes them tick." Hugh said to the man as he moved farther away.

Rex reached over and tapped his wrist communicator. "Ariel! Connect me to Ariel!" The device on his wrist stayed dark. "ARIEL!" He looked back at Hugh. "What have you done?"

"You're a horrible person, Rex. And coming from me, that's really saying a lot." Hugh had to speak loudly because the robot was still moving down the slope at a brisk pace. "The universe is a better place without you in it! Trust me on that!"

Rex looked down toward the bottom of the slope, at the roaring fire. "No! No! Listen, we can talk this through! Make a deal!"

"I'm through talking to you." Hugh called. "And Charlie there isn't much of a conversationalist." He waved. "Good bye, Rex." He turned and walked into the cave. "Cynthia, connect me with Akira."

"Communication open. Akira is outside."

Hugh smirked. "Yeah, I figured that."

"Hugh? Figured what?" Akira asked.

"Listen, the robots are coming down the hill with the bodies."

"Yes; I see them. I see that the other is with them as well. He does not look happy."

"Oh he isn't." Hugh said. "Listen, if you don't want to watch, you can come back to the ship. I would understand." While killing someone during a fight was one thing, watching a helpless man burn to death might be more than the man could stand. Even if the man was a terrible person. "Or you can wait in that other ship."

"Actually, we were going to walk to the village for a moment. How long will you be?"

"We have to move this ship out of the cave carefully, put it beside the other one, then put the other one on top of this one. All without breaking anything. I imagine a good two or three hours. But I won't

leave until you come back so you can take your time." He considered that. "I would like to be gone before night fall though."

"I understand. We will be back well before then." Akira said. "There are people that want to meet Hinata, and there will be discussions and probably a meal."

"Take your time. See you when you get back." Hugh said. "If you need to talk to me, just ask Cynthia to call me through your ear piece."

"Oh. Very good." Akira hesitated. "Goodbye then?"

Hugh smirked. Radio courtesy was obviously foreign to the man. "Yes. See you later. Bye." Hugh tapped the PAD to close the communication link.

Twenty-One

Hugh looked down the hill. The robots were about half way down and making good progress. Rex now seemed to be beating on the robot's head trying to get free. If it weren't light out, he would have been tempted to try gliding down it now that he felt stronger. As it was, the ship needed to be moved out of the cave. He decided he would get it out the same way he brought it in; with ropes. "Cynthia, will you be able to tell if Rex gets out of Charlie Robot's grip?"

"I can monitor the robot's systems. It is not something I do out of routine."

"Okay. Do that now. If he gets free somehow, let me know right away."

"Okay." Cynthia said. Not seeming to care that if the man didn't get free, he would be burned alive.

"Cynthia, do you know what the three laws of Robotics are?" Hugh asked as he started back toward the ship.

"I am not familiar with those laws."

"It was a long time ago, I suppose." Hugh said.

"Where in the Solar System are these established?"

"It was from a writer. He wrote stories about robots and he made up laws about how they had to behave. They were in his books. Science fiction stories."

"I am familiar with the laws of the various societies within the Solar System but not what you are referring to. I am familiar with science fiction."

"But you don't follow them." Hugh pointed out. "Laws that is."

"I do not violate laws." Cynthia said.

"You seem to be okay with old Rex getting burned alive."

"That is you violating the law against murder. I have not assisted in that endeavor. I merely relay CART Charlie's actions. Also keep in mind that while I am a complex artificial intelligence, I am not sentient. And as such I do not have a moral code I must follow. My ability to converse freely often confuses people on that point."

"Fair enough." Hugh said, sorry he had even brought it up. "Hey, Cynthia; will that ship that's down the hill listen to me like you do when I ask it things?"

"I do not understand your question."

"Well, I need to know how to set the engines to get that ship to hover so we can pick it up and mount it on the other ship. And I need to know how to get it latched on securely. There are probably more things too once that starts happening."

"The ship will answer questions from anyone aboard."

"Okay. I didn't know if it was programmed only to work with Rex's voice. Is that even something that can be done?"

"Ships can be locked with a failsafe command requiring voice recognition but it is not done frequently."

"No one steals ships, huh?"

"The rate of theft for ships is very low due to extensive tracking and identification procedures. Current events notwithstanding."

"Cynthia did you just make a joke?"

"It is a statement of fact. You have been in contact with two ships and have stolen both of them; your rate of theft is one hundred percent while within the general population it is under two percent."

Hugh smirked. "So this other ship. It has a different AI than you or is it the same? Will it be Cynthia over there too since the ships are made by the same company?"

"Ship's AI can be customized with dozens of options available. The *Mons Highlands Two* AI will have also learned from the crew of that ship to anticipate commands, just as I have with this ship. You can reset the

AI from its current setting of Rasmus to Cynthia but it will not make it more or less effective."

"I'll just keep that one like it is so it doesn't get confusing." Hugh said as he reached the ship. He walked halfway up the ramp. "Ren are you outside or inside?" He called.

"I am inside," Hugh's PAD translated. "I am studying the history of those people."

"You're talking to both of us at once, Cynthia?" Hugh asked as he made it to the top of the ramp.

"My processing ability allows me to accomplish millions of tasks at once." Cynthia said.

Hugh moved to the table and sat. Ren was watching a video of Mars.

"These are terrible people." Ren said.

"They probably aren't all bad." Hugh said. "A lot of them are just good people trying to live their lives and if they don't agree what their leaders are doing, probably just keep quiet about it so they don't get into trouble."

"Good? They have no honor."

"Both can be true." Hugh pointed out. "Listen, I need help moving the ship out of the cave and Hinata helped me last time but he's off in the village with Akira. So it's you and me."

"I cannot pilot this ship." Ren said. He gestured at the food dispenser. "This is foreign to me."

A thought occurred to Hugh. "Cynthia, can you swap the cockpit display to other languages?"

"I can change the display for one hundred thirty-four languages."

"Excellent." Hugh said. He looked at Ren. "Please do not be offended. Hinata was, now that I think about it, but… can you read?"

"I read and write both word and music." Ren sat up a little straighter. "In fact, I am an accomplished musician and I have composed several pieces that have been received quite well."

Hugh smiled. "You are truly an honorable people. Okay, so Cynthia is going to make the writing in the front of the ship be Japanese. And I'll show you what to do, then I am going to pull the ship out."

"I will be inside by myself?" Ren's eyes got large. "You will pull this ship? Truly your strength has doubled."

"Well, it's a lot easier than it looks. Kind of like a boat on the water."

"Still. Me inside? Alone?"

"I will be able to talk to you and so can Cynthia." Hugh reassured him. "It will be fine. Don't worry; it will be easy."

"What if something breaks?"

"Nothing will break. We will be moving very slowly. The most that will happen is the paint will get scratched." Hugh tried to assure the man. "And if it does get scratched, it's because I pulled the ship against a wall. Trust me, it will be fine."

Ren raised his eyebrows at him, "I will do my best, Hugh-san."

True to Hugh's word, the ship's departure from the cave was easy. And, thanks to Hugh, gained several more scratches on the opposite side of where Hinata had scratched it.

Twenty-Two

Hugh panned the camera around the ships. "Where did Teruki and Akira go?" As the ship was being pulled down the hill, Akira and Hinata walked back from the village. Once the ships were side by side, Teruki had walked out of it, completely healed. He had asked Akira to accompany him to the village, so the pair moved off. Hugh was worried that Teruki would relay the conversation they had had about curing lycanthropy and would be angry when they returned. He looked toward the village about a mile away expectedly. Even with it magnified fully, he could not see them.

"Hugh-San," Hinata began. "I have no issue saying that you are indeed wise and have a great deal of knowledge about these things." He pointed at the viewscreen showing the other ship right beside them. "However, there is this saying that a man can only ride one horse at a time." He now pointed across the water. "How do you plan on getting both of these crafts back to Anchorage?"

Hugh smiled. "I'm glad you asked that. Two things." He held up a finger. "First, the smaller ship will sit on the top of this ship so I can bring them both back to Anchorage." He held up a second finger. "Second, the smaller ship seems to be a better ship as far as combat. And third…"

"There is a third now?" Hinata raised an eyebrow.

"And third, I was hoping you would learn how to fly the ship."

Hinata shook his head. "Fly? I am able to fly within that devil machine but I do not think I could ever be the pilot of it."

Hugh pointed at Ren. "He was on the controls when we got it out of the cave."

Hinata gaped at Ren. "YOU?"

"Do not look so surprised, Hinata." Ren said defensively. "It was straightforward."

"You could read the devil writing?"

Ren shook his head. “It was Kana so I was able to read it.” (Japanese script).

Hinata looked at Hugh. “You can make it do that so I can read what is in there?” He pointed at the ship. “And yet you let me fumble with the devil food machine?”

“Those letters are printed on the machine; I can’t change those.” He considered that. “I guess I could write the words on a piece of paper in Japanese and put it over the buttons. But no, he means the window you looked at in the front of the ship. Cynthia changed the words to Japanese.”

“Still.” Hinata said. “Piloting such a craft slowly down a hill is not the same as flying across an ocean.”

“It’s not like you would learn in a week. I think I remember Cynthia saying it was a two-year process.”

“You learned in a week.” Hinata said with a frown. “Should I be insulted at the time it would take me to learn?”

“I could already fly other crafts. I just had to learn this one that was bigger.” Hugh smirked. “One can go from riding a pony to a horse easier than just learning to ride a horse.”

“You cannot just make up things as if they are wise old sayings.” Ren shook his head. He looked at Hinata. “Does he do that often?”

“That poor attempt was the first.” Hinata said. “I hope it is the last attempt at making up a wise saying.”

“Fine, fine.” Hugh said. “So what do you think? Do you want to learn how to fly this thing?”

“Hugh-san.” Hinata said after a long moment. “Truly you are a friend and I am grateful for giving me my life again. But…”

Hugh realized what the man was thinking. “Oh. Oh! Right, I mean, you can definitely stay here with your people. I’m not trying to force you to come along with me.” He said even though he had hoped that Hinaa would accompany him. The people in Anchorage were definitely friends now, but they had their own lives which centered around their religion and their town. He had hoped to gain a free-spirited companion, who

also wouldn't judge him if he killed someone. "You don't owe me that. At all." He said. "But really, having a second more capable ship could be useful for me as well; even without a second pilot. So either way I will be keeping them both."

"Well, to be truthful, I do feel obligated in helping you for all that you have done. And I would not have a problem accompanying you on the quest that elder Eli requested because it does sound like a challenge." Hinata explained. "Then perhaps I will return home."

"There is a quest?" Ren said, eyebrows going up. "What is this quest you speak of?"

Hugh laughed. "Come on now, you want to come with us?"

"Yours is an honorable fight against these evil doers, Hugh." Ren put his hand on his swords. "If you need assistance on a quest it is only right that we help."

"We? Are you speaking for Teruki and Akira as well?" Hugh was taken aback: first that these men would leave their homes to come with him after knowing him for only the day, and the fact that the hapless Inuit would now be facing an angry Sensei, a vampire and now four werewolves. Samurai werewolves at that. He wondered what Eli would think of the band of fighters he had somehow acquired. He looked at the two CARTs. He knew what Eli would think of the mechanical men so he would keep them out of sight if at all possible.

"There would be a discussion and a vote, of course." Ren tilted his head. "However I do not feel they would turn down the opportunity to help you." He hesitated. "How long of a quest would this be?"

Hugh smiled wide. "Worried?"

Ren shrugged. "Well, if we are gone more than a few days, a week really, then we would have to let the others know we were leaving and why. So they could be more aware of things around the countryside while there are less of us."

"Others?"

"These four are not the entire band of Samurai here, Hugh." Hinata said. "There are twelve, yes?"

"Well, twelve is the number however Sakura has just given birth so she is otherwise occupied." Ren said. "She should not be elsewhere right now."

"Is the father… What I mean is… is the child also…" Hugh's voice trailed off. "Or…"

"That is not something that will be known until the child reaches twelve or thirteen years." Ren said. "He may be and he may not be, since his father is *not*. But either way, the birth of a healthy child is a wonderful thing for them."

"Oh, definitely." Hugh said, knowing how much family was important in the Japanese culture. "Ko wa Kasugai." ('Children are a clamp'- that keep a marriage together)

Hinata pointed at him. "There. Continue to use our glorious proverbs instead of trying to make up your own, Hugh-san."

"Indeed." Ren laughed. "As a Kyūketsuki you are formidable, as a philosopher, there is much work to be done."

Hugh shook his head. "I mean, at one point I was terrifying. In charge of my life. What the hell happened?"

"Life can be a mystery." Ren pointed at the screen. "Look; they return. We can ask them directly if they wish to join the quest."

"I'm not sure quest is the proper word for what I am going to do."

"What is it you are to do?" Ren asked, curious.

"To march boldly and unannounced into the camp of the *sworn enemy* of his friends in Anchorage to force an audience with the ruler of their kingdom. There he will request a peace between them, using his powers as a Kyūketsuki if need be."

"That's a little more …" Hugh tried.

"Brokering peace between *kingdoms*? There is nothing more honorable. I cannot imagine them refusing your demand for peace. Otherwise they face their doom.." Ren's eyes flashed red. "Oh, it will be an epic story; A Kyūketsuki and a formidable troop of Yama No Samurai stand before an Emperor and demand a peace accord! Oh, what

a song that will be." He considered that for a moment. "Perhaps even a play!"

"I would play myself, of course." Hinata pointed out.

"That goes without saying." Ren agreed.

"This is getting a more than little out of hand." Hugh sighed.

Twenty-Three

The Japanese men stood and appraised the two ships. Connecting them had been straightforward with Cynthia and Hugh's guidance via the exterior speakers. Making the ship weigh a mere sixty pounds (lest the winds blow it away) they passed the ship up the side of the *Alba Mons* and onto the brackets that arose out of the top. After they clambering up onto the *Mons Highlands Two*, they secured the two ships together. Hugh made a point of asking both ship's AIs if the ships were securely attached to each other once they had put them together. The entire process had only taken a couple of hours so it was late afternoon.

While the ships were being attached, Hugh had explained through the *Alba Mons* speakers the history between the peaceful Amish and the more violent Inuit. He also made a point to explain how the Inuit had similar features to the Japanese in case they wandered around the town alone. If that happened, he had also supplied each man with their own PAD and ear piece so they were now all individually translated no matter where they were.

"It looks like a giant tick has attached to it." Akira said as he and the others walked into the lower ship. "It is good you cannot see how it looks because it would be embarrassing."

"It will not fly as well as it does by itself but it will still fly. That's all it needs to do right now." Hugh said. "So are you all sure you want to come to Anchorage for a few days?"

"Yes." Akira said. "We will help you in your quest for diplomacy. Besides, we have never seen the other side of the ocean, so that will be interesting."

"Okay then, we should get going. We will be back at Anchorage before sundown, about an hour before. So we will have time to visit before it gets too late."

"They sleep early?" Ren asked.

"They are up at daybreak tending their animals and fields." Hugh explained. "So they usually go to bed early so then they can be up early

to have a full day of work." He smirked. "The Amish are the opposite of lazy."

"They sound like an honorable people." Ren said.

"So helping them will be an honorable endeavor." Akira added.

"I suppose so." Hugh looked at the four men. Hinata was dressed in his typical brown pants and loose-fitting shirt. The other three were in full Samurai armor still. "You know, one thing that will probably make it easier for you while we are in the Amish town is for you to look less… I don't know… warrior like?"

"But we are warriors." Akira said to the nods of the other two.

"Well, yes that's true… but consider it a day off."

"A day off of what?"

Hugh pursed his lips. "What I mean it, what do you wear when you are not out Samurai-ing? Do you have comfortable clothes that you wear at home? What do you sleep in?"

"Ahh. Yes; those." Akira said. He looked at his two friends. "We shall get them if we will be leaving soon. Are we leaving soon?"

"Well, I was hoping to, yes. It's after mid-day here already and if we wait any longer most everyone will be asleep when we land. And I'd hate to wake up half the town."

"Then we shall go to our homes, pack some things for two? Three days?"

"I would pack for four days just in case. You should be back here on the fifth day." Hugh offered.

"Then that is what we will pack for." Akira said. "We will be back shortly."

"I will put out food for your return," Hinata said. "We can eat on the way there."

"It's a good thing we are going back; we are almost out of food." Hugh smiled wide, incisors elongating as he did. "Well not all of us." He narrowed his eyes at the three men.

"Oh, Hugh-san; jokes of that nature are not appreciated." Akira said nervously. "It is almost as bad as your made-up wise sayings."

"There is blood stored on the ship. I have seen Hugh drink it; there is nothing to worry about. It is the opposite of threatening, really." Akira offered.

"Oh man." Hugh shook his head. "I'll go get the ship ready to fly. Can you be back in an hour?"

"Hai." Akira said. "We will go now."

With that the three marched off the ship.

After they left, Hinata looked at Hugh. "You have built a formidable group, but it is important that you remind them that not only are you in charge, but your quest is not to start a war."

"You think Akira will try to take charge?" Hugh looked toward the ramp, now unsure if he should even bring the three werewolves. The last thing he needed was a melee in the middle of the Inuit capital city.

"Do not take this the wrong way because I do not say it as an insult." Hinata began. "But while they are people, they think like animals."

"So Akira is the leader of the pack. The alpha dog."

"Do not use that word around them again." Hinata warned.

"Pack or dog?"

"Neither, now that I consider it." Hinata exhaled slowly. "However it is accurate. The other two will follow what Akira tells them because he is dominant. And Akira follows what the leader of the Samurai, Norimoto Yoda says. He is the Daimyo. (Overall Commander). Akira is a Taisho; one of three. (General). If you feel him pushing you, it is a challenge; if you allow it, he will push more. Once you start to lose ground, regaining it is…"

"Difficult?" Hugh tried.

"Bloody." Hinata said. "It is another reason I did not join them; the pecking order is set by violence. But then you are expected to fight

alongside one another after being beaten down." He shook his head. "It did not sit right with me."

"I understand." Hugh stood. "Well, if you want to lay out the food, I'll go talk to the ship and make sure everything is ready to go when they return."

"Hai."

Hugh moved to the cockpit and eased into the chair. "Cynthia, do you have a flight plan to return to Anchorage?"

"It is the same one that brought us here but in reverse." Cynthia said.

"And the brackets are all secure?"

"The brackets are still secure. Do you want me to tell you when they are not?"

"Yes, do that." Hugh replied. He turned on the main view screen. "Of course, if that ship breaks free, I don't think I will be able to avoid it, so we will be out of luck. If we run into any sort of trouble, can we eject the *Mons Highlands* if there is an emergency?"

"Disengaging the docking brackets while in flight is very likely to cause catastrophic damage to both ships."

"That's good news." Hugh said. He panned around the map. "Are there other settlements near us?" he asked, curious. "How many people live in the Japanese peninsula?" He asked since it was no longer an island.

"Approximately eight thousand humans live on the peninsula and nearby islands." Cynthia said.

"Are any of them large settlements? Cities?"

"The largest one has nine hundred humans living in it. The others are all much smaller."

"So what's the largest city on Earth?" Hugh asked as he continued to pan around the map.

"The last report on the population states that two thousand four hundred fifty-three humans live in Ayers Landing. This was four months ago. However due to the growth indicated that number has increased by now."

"Wait, that's that level one trauma center you mentioned earlier. How can that be on Earth?"

"Ayers Landing was founded on Earth, so it is on Earth."

"Ayers? Like Ayers Rock? Is it is Australia?"

"Yes, both Ayers Landing and Ayers Rock are in Australia. Do you want to plot a course to there?"

"No. I don't think I want to visit any more Martians. Once was enough."

"No Martians live in Ayers Landing." Cynthia pointed out.

"So are they Earthlings then? How can there be an advanced trauma center there when there seems to be no technology on Earth?" Hugh sat up, now very interested in this new development. "Are they the last holdouts?"

"They classify themselves as Earth Colonists from Venus." Cynthia said. "The colony has been present on Earth for one hundred twenty-one years. A new one is being established nearby on the Gulf of Carpentaria. It is expected to be larger than Ayers Landing. Plans are in place for an initial migration of one thousand Venusians to that location once the buildings and infrastructure are complete."

"So Venus is repopulating Earth?" Hugh asked. "Why would they do that?"

"Venus' population is limited by living space. There are eight thousand floating living areas on Venus of various sizes. It was determined that to increase the population, a more stable and resource abundant environment needed to be used."

"And because Venus is about the same size as Earth, the gravity is the same so they can live here without any issues." Hugh smirked. "Unlike their Martian cousins."

"Martians and Venusians are not cousins; they are all homo-sapiens. However there are physiological differences due to gravitational effects."

"And how do the Venusians feel about their fellow homo-sapien Martians? Are they on friendly terms?"

"The political relationship between Venus and Mars is uneasy. At the moment, Mars has the majority of votes which prevents many Venusian initiatives from passing the Senate."

"But with more land, the Venusians can outvote them." Hugh smirked. "I wonder how long it will be before the Earth-Venusians start voting their own way instead of following the Venusian-Venusians. Hey, Cynthia, can you project when that will happen?"

"It will take about eighty years at a sustained three percent growth rate for the population of Earthbound Venusians to overtake the ones on Venus."

"Just eighty? That's nothing." Hugh said. "So what do these Earthbound Venusians… Can I just call them Australians to make it easier?"

"The colonists will not be aware of what you personally call them. However I will make that distinction from now on."

"Nice. So do the Australians also keep Humans for art and entertainment?"

"There is a flourishing artistic culture in the colony in Australia however none of it includes keeping slaves for entertainment or decoration."

"Huh." Hugh considered whether he wanted to visit the colony now. If they were also anti-slaves then they might be willing to help pressure Mars into stopping the practice. "I might just go visit them to say hello at one point. Hey Cynthia, are there any Venusian ships nearby?"

"The closest Venusian ship to our location is the one that has been on station, twenty thousand feet above us, monitoring the activities of you, the *Alba Mons*, and the *Mons Highlands* beginning twenty minutes after we arrived."

"What!" Hugh said. "There's a ship sitting up there watching us and you didn't say anything?"

"I was not given instructions to report when another ship was nearby. Since we have landed, six ships have passed within five miles. One from Mars, three from Ayers Landing, and two from the Republic of Free Asteroids."

"Holy Hell." Hugh said. "What about while we were at Anchorage?"

"Four ships passed within five miles of our location there. All from Ayers Landing." Cynthia said. "There were fifteen that passed within a hundred miles of that location. At this location, twelve have passed within a hundred miles. Within a thousand miles…"

"Stop, Cynthia. Stop." Hugh said, exasperated. "Fine, there's a lot of traffic out there; I get it. Okay, if any ship passes within five miles of us, let me know."

"There is a Venusian Corvette hovering three point seven eight miles above us."

"Yeah, I heard that; twenty thousand feet. And it's a Corvette? So it's some kind of battleship?"

"A battleship is a large, heavily armed, and armored warship for attacking other ships and planetary targets, while a corvette is a small, fast, and highly maneuverable planetary patrol vessel designed for roles like missile attacks and fast response." Cynthia said.

"Well, that sure doesn't make me feel any better." Hugh said. "Has it tried to hail us?"

"It has not."

"That's good." Hugh said, now unsure if he wanted to hail the other ship. "Oh man. Now I just want to leave those three behind and leave now." He turned the monitor to look at the village and zoomed in. He was unable to see any of the Samurai. "Great." Another thought occurred to him. "Would we be allowed to land at Ayers Landing?"

"You would need to request permission to land before attempting to do so."

"Yeah, I'd hate to get shot down."

"While there is political tension between Mars and Venus, individual trade and travel is typically cordial. The reports of violence against citizens from one planet while on the other is under three percent. It is a legal requirement to request permission to land within incorporated city limits, floating cities, as well as established colonies. If you wanted to land outside the colony and walk in, you would not need to request permission however it may cause undue tension."

"So no shooting me down." Hugh said. "That's one thing, I suppose."

"It would be very unlikely they would fire on an unarmed vessel that is not showing hostile intentions, however there could be fines levied once you landed."

Hugh laughed. "A parking ticket. I can't remember the last time I got one of those." He panned around the village again. "Where are those three?" He half considered moving the ship closer to the village but was worried about how the ship would handle with all the extra weight. "Okay, keep an eye out for other ships and let me know if they try to hail us."

"Those instructions have already been implemented." Cynthia reminded him.

Hugh sat and watched the monitor for almost thirty minutes before the trio came into view. "Finally!" Hugh noticed that when he spotted Akira, the other two were walking slightly behind him. "Alpha up front." He said with a smirk. He pressed the ship's intercom button. "Hinata, are you ready to go back there? They are on their way now."

"I have been starving while waiting for them to return." Hinata replied. "Tell them to move faster!"

Hugh pushed himself out of his pilot seat. He had been reading articles about the ongoing political climate between Venus, Mars, and the several independent nations in the solar system. It seemed that Mars tried to rule over the entire system and was mostly able to since it had more population and therefore more voting power. On two occasions; the Republic of Free Asteroids and the Confederacy of the Moons of Saturn had gotten into skirmishes with Martian military. Both times, the

smaller 'nations' were overpowered. Even so, the Martians suffered some losses which would invariably make others think they had a chance against Mars.

Hugh walked into the galley area and waited. He looked down at the food Hinata had laid out. He had added some chili as well as noodles to the spread. "A little bit of everything?"

"Ren seems to like the chili and noodles." Akira explained. "So if he eats that, it leaves more of the other for those of us with more refined taste."

Hugh laughed. "That makes sense. Yeah; he must have an iron stomach if he likes that stuff. If I ever make it to one of the other planets, I'll swap out the meals on this thing."

"That is an excellent idea." Hinata picked up a small piece of cheese and ate it. "I may not make it, Hugh." He lamented. "That was the largest thing I could pick up in my weakened state."

After another few minutes of banter; Hugh had seen them almost a mile away, the trio walked up the ramp.

"Okay, here we go." Hugh said. "There are two cabins back there that aren't being used. One is a single cabin and the other has two beds in it." He pointed. "Once you put your things in there, you can come watch from the front while we take off but there isn't enough room for you all to stay there while I fly the ship."

"We understand." Akira said, even though he didn't. "If you prepare to fly, we will put our things away."

"Good." Hinata said. "Then we can eat."

Ren looked at the table. "Ahh, there is more of the chili and the long noodles."

Hugh shook his head and went forward. "I'm taking off in five minutes even if you people aren't ready."

He eased himself into the pilot chair and tapped several icons. "Cynthia clamps?"

"The clamps are at one hundred percent." Cynthia responded.

He looked back then scowled. "We're off." He pushed the throttle level forward as he held the control stick. The ship wobbled slightly but took off without hitting the ground again. "Better each time." He said to himself. He increased power to ten percent and began to rise straight up.

After the ship was a hundred feet above the ground, the earth under it exploded. The shockwave rocked the two ships back and forth as Hugh fought to keep it from tipping completely over.

"The Australian ship is hailing us." Cynthia informed him.

"Is that what that was?" Hugh said. He tapped the flashing comms button. "What the Hell?" He shouted.

"*Alba Mons*, you are to proceed to the colony of Ayers Landing." A male voice said tersely.

"Cynthia what is that ship's name?"

"The ship is called the *Bamanga*."

"*Bamanga*," Hugh said. "I say again: what the Hell?"

"*Alba Mons*, do you copy?"

Hugh reverted to his casual pilot tone as Hinata and the others piled into the cockpit. "*Bamanga*, I confirm receiving and transmitting in the clear. I'm worried however."

"Worried?" The man said, sounding confused.

"Roger that *Bamanga*. It seems parts of your ship are falling off. One just landed right where I was parked. Was it something essential? Are you in need of assistance? Maybe I can take you on as cargo as well."

"*Alba Mons*, you are to proceed to Ayers Landing. Do you need assistance on a route?"

"Not at all, *Bamanga*. I have it laid in as a follow-on to Anchorage. Perhaps later this month if the mood strikes me."

Another bolt of energy sizzled by the ship. It was close enough it overpowered the monitors, bathing the cockpit in blue light.

Hugh had continued to gain altitude as he spoke so the impact on the ground did not rock the ship. It could be heard however. "Was *that* part important? How did you manage to get a hangar queen off the ground?"

"I'm getting a little tired talking to you, *Alba Mons*." The man said. "If you're not going to head there, then you're heading to the ground. The choice is yours."

"Landing?"

"Flaming."

Hugh pressed the 'mute' icon. "Cynthia, plot a direct course to Ayers Landing. It seems we don't need to request permission to land there; we've been invited."

"Okay." Was all Cynthia said in return.

In just a moment, a flashing blue icon appeared on Hugh's screen. He tapped it and an overlay of the Earth with a southward curved route from Japan to Australia was overlaid on it. It showed that it would take three and a half hours to fly there. It was only five hundred miles farther than Alaska but the loaded down ship now had to fly slower. Hugh tapped the 'mute' icon again. "Estimated time of arrival is three and a half hours."

"Yeah, that's what I thought you'd say." The voice said with a chuckle. "*Bamanga* out."

"What does that all mean, Hugh?" Hinata asked.

"It seems we will be delayed because we have to fly to another colony first."

"It is on Mars?" Hinata said worriedly.

"No; it's here on Earth. South of us about the same distance Anchorage is from us." He pointed at the map. "This is us; this is where we are going. It's run by people from Venus who don't seem to get along with the people from Mars so…" He shrugged. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend?"

"That does not make sense." Hinata said. "If one group is your enemy, their attitude towards a third party has no bearing on their allegiance to you. It would be foolhardy to trust them on such an absurd conclusion. They are more likely *both* your enemy."

"It would be better to attack while they are distracted with each other." Akira said. "In the heat of their battle, strike them both down."

"That would be the best option." Hinata nodded. "Yes. Do that."

Hugh smirked. "Huh. I guess Sun Tzu has run his course."

"Who?" Hinata asked.

"He was a general from a long time ago. It's not important." Hugh explained. "Well, you might as well get something to eat and get comfortable; we've got a three-and-a-half-hour journey ahead of us." Hugh looked at his now healthy-colored hands. *To a place with a level-one trauma center that can cure vampirism.*

Twenty-Four

"Listen, Ayers," Hugh said again. "I would really like to have a landing location away from other ships." Twice now the operations section of the colony had ordered him to land directly next to the main building- ostensibly because security was there waiting for him.

"What is the issue?" The woman said, sounding suspicious.

"The issue is that I have landed this ship a total of four times after teaching myself to fly it just a week ago." Hugh said. "And the last time I landed, I broke one of my landing struts. Now I've got another ship strapped on top of me and I'd rather not put down next to anything that I can hit or break." He let out a long breath. "Honestly, tell your security to stop being lazy and to jog out to one of the outlying landing pads. Oh, and it might not be a bad idea to have some sort of fire suppression team out there as well."

"Are you joking?" The woman said.

"Not one bit. You can ask my AI if you don't believe me. Cynthia, how many times have I landed this ship?" He asked.

"You have landed the *Alba Mons* three times; twice successfully and once you damaged the ship. You have taken off successfully four times."

"Wait," Hugh said, "Don't I get some credit for Mars?"

"That was an automated landing." Cynthia informed him.

"But I got us close. Be aware Ayers Landing, I want to update my experience to three and a half good landings and one not so good one."

"Now I don't want you to land here at all." The woman said.

"Listen, I'm with you; I was planning on flying to Alaska but the *Bamanga* had other plans. Blame them. So where am I putting this thing?"

"Landing pad six." The woman said.

"Which one is that?"

"The one with twenty foot tall red 'six' painted in the middle of the yellow circle, *Alba Mons*." The woman snapped. "You can read, right?"

Hugh frowned as he panned the ship's camera around, finally finding the appropriate landing area. "Roger, Ops. Got it." His voice returned to pilot-ese. "Coming in slow so you can get your teams out there. *Alba Mons* out." He tapped the ship's communication. "We're coming in to land so find someplace to sit. We're fat and heavy and this is only my fifth actual landing." He tapped that button before anyone could say anything back.

Hugh let out a long breath as he feathered the controls. Luckily the winds were light. He positioned himself above number six landing pad at a thousand feet and slowly reduced thrust. The ship crept downward slowly, taking a full ten minutes to reach the ground. When it landed, the replacement pin broke with a loud 'ping', the landing gear icon went immediately to yellow, and thanks to the extra weight, the ship sagged to that side.

A large crowd of security as well as fire and rescue had gathered there and to witness it.

Hinata stepped into the cockpit. "I do not believe the Amish steel is up to the task of two vessels."

"No kidding." Hugh said.

"The landing was quite soft however. That much has improved."

Hugh looked at Hinata- he was smiling broadly. "Are you done?"

"I am Hugh-san." Hinata fought the smile from his face. "What is the plan now?"

"The plan? I have no idea." Hugh jerked a thumb at the monitor. "Those people forced me to land here. Now there's a crowd out front, some of which are security people. And I can't go out there because it's light. So they're going to storm the ship when no one disembarks."

"That is an issue." Hinata said, becoming serious. "I will go out and talk to them for you. Invite the one they elect as their speaker to come

into the ship." He looked back through the door. "I do not recommend one of the Samurai going out to speak with them."

"Now I'm sorry I brought them along." Hugh admitted. "Three loose cannons."

"A what?"

"You know what a cannon is, right?"

Hinata nodded. "We have them, yes."

"A loose cannon is one that wasn't tied down properly so when it was fired, it would roll around dangerously and unpredictably."

Hinata smiled again. "Ahh yes; that is them. So I will go."

"We are being hailed." Cynthia said.

"Here we go." Hugh let out a long breath. "Open communications, Cynthia."

The same woman's voice came over the speaker. "… you read? *Alba Mons*, do you read? Over? Do you…"

"This is *Alba Mons*." Hugh said. "We read you. Sorry about that."

"You weren't kidding about being new to landings." The woman said.

"Hah!" Hinata said. "I like her already."

Hugh glowered at Hinata, then calmed himself. "Sorry for the delay. Dealing with passengers." He lied.

"Roger, *Alba*. Welcome to Ayers Landing."

"Thanks. Opening hatch. See you shortly."

"Not me. It's the head of security you'll be seeing, Hugh."

Hugh did a doubletake at the speaker. "What?"

"Ayers Landing Flight Operations *out*." The woman said. Then the communication link closed.

"Oh Hell."

"It is odd that she knew your name, isn't it?"

"Odd isn't the word I was thinking of. Troubling and terrifying come to mind." Hugh said. "Oh man. Go see what they want."

"They seem to want you." Hinata pointed out.

"Go. And be pleasant?"

"When have I ever otherwise?" Hinata turned and left.

Hugh pressed several buttons to turn on the ships cameras as well as the outdoor speakers- which acted as microphones as well. After a moment, he got up and went to the galley to make sure the others remained on the ship.

Twenty-Five

Hinata walked down the ramp. There were a dozen people standing around it. "Good day to you all." Hinata said. He gave a deep bow. "I am Hinata Takahashi. At your service." He put his hands on his hips- being friendly did not mean he wanted to show weakness. "Why have you ordered us to land here instead of where we were going? We have pressing matters to attend to and you have delayed us. For what reason?" He looked around the group. "Who is in charge who can answer those questions?"

A man stepped forward. "That would be me."

Unlike the ones on Mars, this man was heavier- not fat by any means- but definitely not gaunt and long-limbed like the Martians. His eyes were also round like Hughs but his skin was much darker, from years of living in the sun probably. It was obvious he led a good life and was active. "Then you will be able to provide those answers." Hinata pointed into the ship. "Come, we will speak inside."

"Where is Hugh?"

"Hugh waits inside." He gestured up at the sunlit sky. "He has a condition that makes bright light uncomfortable. Speaking to him inside the shade of the ship will make for better conversation."

The man looked into the ship. "Reports say there are three others with you. Three armed men, in fact. I'm just supposed to just walk in there, four… five against one?"

"You have received my name." Hinata snapped. "Give me yours before you continue to insult me."

The man smiled at Hinata. "I am Claude Ventas. Head of Security."

"For the entire Earth?" Hinata said. "Then I would like to file a formal complaint; my fellow villagers are being attacked, killed, and kidnapped and you are doing nothing to stop it."

"For Ayers Landing." Claude clarified. He frowned. "I am aware of the attacks on the people of Earth."

Hinata spread his arms out wide. "And with all of this, you are unable to stop it?" He put his hand back on his hips. "Or are you just *unwilling* to stop it?" He shook his head. "It is dishonorable for a man to allow such acts to continue when they have the means to stop it. Women and children taken, and killed, and worse. You have no honor, Sir. *None*."

Claude's hands went to his hips. "Now see here. I didn't ask you here…"

"Ask us? Is that was that was? Firing on a defenseless ship?" Hinata took a step toward him. "That is how your kind asks? With threats and violence?"

"All I wanted was to talk to you." Claude said, realizing he was losing control of the conversation. "If you'll just…"

"Then you could have done it through the devil voice on the ship. Others have spoken to Hugh that way; you could have also done so."

Claude smirked. "Devil voice, huh? Oh my."

Hinata took two more quick steps toward the man- he was within ten feet now. "You will not insult me again." His hand went to his side but his sword wasn't there. He looked down at his side then at Claude. "You have come very close to dying today."

The four men around Claude all stepped forward, in between the two.

"Settle down, Hinata." Claude said, he raised his hands plaintively. "I do not mean to…"

"Are you in need of assistance?" Akira said from the top of the ramp in Japanese. The PAD in Hinata's pocket translated. Ren and Teruki were with him.. "It seems this Claude is lacking the manners of a proper host."

Hugh had been watching the entire interaction from the cockpit. He was hoping the man would just tell Hinata to leave. Now it looked like it was going to spiral out of control. "Hinata, please just invite Mister Ventas in so we can talk."

Hinata looked at the camera built into the ship above the ramp. "Hai," He looked at Claude. "Claude-san, I invite you in." He gestured at the ramp with a short bow. "As my guest, I assure you, you will be treated with respect and honor."

Claude stared at Hinata for a moment. He had studied the Japanese (as well as other Earth cultures) for the past twenty years he had been at the colony and was well aware of their code of honor. "I accept your invitation, Hinata-dono." He said, using a higher honorific than 'san'. "And I apologize if I have slighted you, Wakatta?"

"Ohhh." Hinata said. "It seems the fly has invited the spider in."

Claude laughed as he started up the ramp. "I've never been called a spider before. I do just want to talk."

"Then we will talk." Hinata said. He hesitated for a moment. "I would offer you food but the food the devil machine provides is not fit to serve guests."

Claude laughed again. "Oh, I'm aware of the food in some of these Nelson-Healeys." He stopped at the top of the ramp. Three Japanese men were blocking his way. "Hello. I was invited in to speak with Hugh." He said to the angry looking men.

"We are aware." They moved to the side. "Welcome." The tallest of the three, still a foot shorter than Claude, stepped to the side. "Welcome, Sir."

"Claude. Claude is fine."

"Akira." He gave a short bow. "My companions Ren and Teruki."

"It is an honor to meet you all." Claude said. He stepped into the dark area. "Wow. Okay then." He waited until his eyes adjusted to the dim blue light. "Hello?" He called while he waited.

Hugh stepped out of the cockpit. "I'm coming." He moved to the table. "Hinata is right. All of the good Amish food is gone. The best I can offer is water."

"Water is fine." Claude sat at the table.

"We will go outside and look around." Akira said. He looked at Claude. "We have only ever been in our village and the surrounding hills. It would be interesting to look."

Claude's eyes had adjusted enough to see none of them were wearing swords. "Well, the man at the bottom of the ramp; Eustis is my second in command. I will tell him to give a short tour."

"A short tour?" Akira asked. "We are not welcome longer?"

"Hinata said you had pressing business and he is right that I brought you here without even asking first. So I won't keep you very long. Thirty minutes at most." His eyebrows went up. "Unless you want to stop by the Cantina for some better food."

"Ahh, that sounds like a good idea." Teruki said. He rubbed his belly. "It has been a while since I ate."

"It was three hours ago when we took off." Hugh said with a headshake. "But I'm sure the food here is much better than the ship's."

Now Hinata's eyes got large. "Do you have rice?"

"We do." Clause tapped his wrist communicator. "Eustis. Take these four gentlemen to the Cantina. They are in need of a good and proper meal."

"Roger that, Chief." Eustis said back. "Easy task."

"Then let us go now." Hinata said as he started down the ramp. "Come!" He called over his shoulder. "Let us eat."

Teruki was close behind.

"They will ask for food to go with them." Akira said. "Will that be acceptable?"

"Oh?"

"The Amish don't have rice." Hugh explained. "If you have a couple of bags to spare, they would really appreciate it."

"I think I can make that happen." Claude said. He raised his wrist again. "Eustis, seems they might need some rice to bring home. Get

them whatever they need. Chow is on me." He looked at Akira. "Good?"

"Ahh. Then we leave you." Akira stalked out of the ship- even when he seemed pleased, he still seemed angry.

With a "Good Day." Ren followed him out.

"They are a polite people." Hugh said.

"They usually are." Claude agreed. "When you stay on their good side. Otherwise they're fierce warriors."

"Well, that's all fine and good but when they are dealing with overwhelming firepower, that doesn't get them too far. Swords against blasters isn't a fair fight." Hugh pointed upwards. "Those Martians are kidnapping men, women, and children to use as display art. *And worse.*" He fought to keep his emotions under control. "And you people do nothing about it."

Claude leaned back. "What can we do? Start an interplanetary war? Let me tell you that wouldn't last that long." Now he pointed upward. "Your visits were short so you probably didn't have very many conversations with local Martians but universal conscription is a way of life there. Every male and female serves two years in the military in one capacity or another. Then they go to whatever civilian life they want. But they're trained and keep their weapons."

"I didn't know that."

"Almost four hundred thousand people live on Mars. At any given time, Mars has a standing military of Sixty thousand men and women." He held up a finger. "And they can call up another seventy thousand in a week."

"That's a lot of troops. What does Venus have?"

"We have forty thousand inhabitants *total.* Our military is eight thousand. And I should point out our cities are precariously floating in the sky. There is no way we can take on Mars in a force-on-force war."

Hugh considered all of that. He had pretended to be in several military units during wars, sometimes for months. Since he spent his

time on the front lines, he was well aware of what an overwhelming force could do. "That's a problem, I suppose."

"Yeah, that's a problem."

"So what's that got to do with me?"

Claude smiled. "You, Hugh are an important person."

"Okay, how about you start by telling me how you know my name?"

Claude shrugged as he looked away. "I have contacts in the security organizations on Mars, among other places."

"So the security forces get along, huh?"

"Politics are politics. Security is another matter. When it's all boiled down, we are all still Humans. So when someone shows up out of nowhere causing problems, notices are sent out across the Solar System, politics or not."

"Am I wanted?"

"On Mars you sure are." Claude jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Those folks back in Japan weren't there on a whim; the governor sent them you know."

"I figured." Hugh said. "Has his ear regrown?"

"They reattached it. It's a simple outpatient procedure."

"Figured as much."

Claude smiled wide. "You are truly an enigma, Hugh."

Hugh crossed his arms. "Why's that?"

"Well, I got your biometrics from Mars. Full set. You know what?"

"What?" Hugh said, really not wanting to know.

"You aren't real." He spread his arms out. "No one anywhere has record of you. No prints, no retina scans. No pheromones. Nothing."

"That's definitely odd." Now Hugh looked away.

"So, when you assaulted old Sam Sykes." Claude leaned forward. "Which I especially approve of. They sent your info out." He leaned back and brought his hands out wide again. "And… nothing. Nothing from anyone in the system. You're a big zero, Hugh. The mystery of the century; the man who doesn't exist."

"Sorry the web didn't help you out."

"Hah!" Claude pointed at Hugh. "There! Right there. You did it again!"

Hugh startled. "What? What did I do?"

"*The web*." He shook his head. "Twenty first century term; the World Wide Web. I only happen to know that because I came across it while looking up Bob Pardo. He's a twentieth century pilot. A Hell of a pilot, but still twentieth century. So is *the head*. No one says that anymore. No one in about a thousand years."

"You are monitoring my comms?"

"As soon as I saw you flying across the sky in a news bulletin holding that crazy Japanese man under you, you're damn right I did. I put in a warrant for all your comms. I tapped your ship." He raised an eyebrow. "The Knick Anchorage. Come on now. That's twentieth century too." He narrowed his eyes. "So then I started watching your ship's feeds. Yikes!"

"My… feeds?" Hugh thought back to the several times he had changed while on the ship, and had drunk three units of blood at different times; once while his arm was frozen solid. "Oh."

Twenty-Six

Hinata and the other three followed Eustis across the landing pads to a gate in the fence that ran around the area. "You are worried your ships will disappear?"

Eustis got to the gate and opened it. He smirked. "Fences make good neighbors."

Hinata shook his head. "I do not believe that is the case." He looked at the gate. "It is open?"

"Yes. It's not locked." Eustis pointed at the handle. "It's just dangerous with these large ships coming and going so we try to keep people from just cutting straight across the landing areas."

Akira smirked. "It is important to protect people from their own foolish decisions."

"That is very true, Sir." Eustis said with a laugh. "Right through there." He gestured through the gate and pointed. "It's that large red building."

"Is it red so people know the food is there?" Ren asked.

"No, it's just the person that build that building wanted it red." Eustis gestured around. "The bosses think the colors brighten up the place." The buildings in the colony were indeed brightly colored blues, yellows, greens, and reds. There didn't really seem to be a rhyme or reason on the coloring. Scattered among the colors were tan and grey buildings as well. "Do you color your houses bright colors?"

Akira shook his head. "If it were like nature, the bright colors would indicate something poisonous or dangerous. Where we live, it just attracts raiders because if you have the ability to spend time painting your home bright colors, you must have plenty that can be taken."

Eustis smiled at the man. "Please don't take offense, Akira, but I have to say you… all of you, have taken to using technology very well. Often the locals around the colony here look at technology as some sort of witchcraft or demon work."

Ren tapped his PAD. “Oh, this is devil work indeed. But it is useful devil work.” He pointed at Hinata. “He does not need it because he speaks your language.”

After the last of them passed through the gate, Eustis pulled it shut and latched it. “Oh? How is it you learned to speak English?” He started toward the large cantina.

Hinata let out an angry breath. “I was put in a garden to stand for two years as a decoration. People would talk around me and I would listen. Then when I was back in my cage, I would hear my owners speak and watch them do things and I learned that way. When I was sold and was sent to Deimos, I was able to speak fairly well. Sitting in the house there, over the course of another year, it became better.”

“Oh.” Eustis said, shocked by what he had just heard. “Well, at least you were indoors, right?”

“I was in a glass box with no privacy for anything. Even ablutions. And all the time the family goaded me into killing myself so they could watch. They dressed me like a clown and encouraged me to kill myself. But at least it was indoors.”

“Ahhh…” Eustis stopped walking. “I’m… I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry?” He put his hand on Hinata’s shoulder. “I am truly sorry. And I won’t bring it up again.” He looked at the others. “Were you also…”

“We are free men.” Akira said. “And we fight to keep our village free from these oppressors. As much as we can with the weapons we have.”

“If that other is speaking to Hugh about fighting these men from Mars, then you should know I endeavor to kill every single of them that I encounter. Every one .” Hinata said.

“Well, we are working to stop them from doing what they do.” Eustis started walking again, happy to have changed the subject somewhat. “But we are limited.”

“With these things, you are limited?” Teruki jerked a thumb back at the landing pads. “How can that be?”

"We are only forty thousand. They are two million." Eustis said. "Their military would destroy us in less than a week."

"Huh. Yes; that is indeed a problem." Hinata said. "Well, Hugh can help some. And you also have my sword which is formidable."

"We are only here to assist Hugh with speaking to the Inuit." Akira pointed out. "We will then return to our duties at out village." He shook his head. "We will not be brought into a conflict between you and the people of Mars. Being outnumbered is regrettable and we condone your killing of them, but we cannot stay here to help; our services are needed elsewhere."

"I understand completely. I think Claude said you were taking off in a half hour? So then you can be on your way back home." He opened the door to the cantina.

"First to Hugh's town of Anchorage, then to the capital of the Inuit, then we are home in four days." Akira said. "That is the plan."

Eustis nodded at the man who was obviously in charge of the others. "Well, we will help keep you to your schedule."

Ren looked into the cantina and sniffed. "Those are glorious smells."

Eustis laughed. "Well, we will make the most of our time." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, and get you some rice to take home with you as well."

"We have rice," Akira said. "It is Hinata that is in need of rice." He pointed at him. "For while he is with the Amish."

"Okay. Easy." Eustis said. "In we go." He stepped into the large dining area and the other four followed.

The cantina was mostly empty since it was after the typical time for dinner. Even so, there were a few dozen people scattered around sitting at various tables and benches.

"You all eat together?" Hinata asked.

"Well, some of the homes have kitchens in them where they can cook simple meals with things they get themselves, but it just works better to keep track of supplies by having the food produced centrally."

Ren smiled. "It smells like they know what they are doing, these cooks." He looked at the far wall. There were three different serving areas set along it. "That is where the food is distributed?"

"It is. Let's go over. The left one has pastas and breads, the middle one meats, and the right one has soups and salads and such."

"So there is a choice of what to eat." Ren said. "Personally, I think I will try the meats." He hesitated. "And this is not like the food on the ship?"

"The meats are fresh. We have a large herd of cattle as well as chickens and emu."

"What is an emu?" Teruki asked.

"It is a very large bird." Eustis held his hand above his head.

"Like a giant chicken?"

"No, it doesn't look like a chicken. Maybe if there is time, I can show them to you." Eustis said. "Here, take a tray and then you can take the food you want from the bins. Just please don't take more than you can eat. We try not to waste things here."

"Wasting food is a terrible thing." Ren said.

"You never do," Teruki said as he took a tray. "Watch your fingers, Eustis. It is dangerous when Ren starts eating."

"Okay." Eustis said. "We have water over there to drink. And milk and coffee."

"Is there tea?" Teruki asked.

"We do have black tea." Eustis pointed at a container with small bags in it. "The hot water is in that silver machine."

"Ahh. I may stay longer than half an hour." Ren said as he moved to the meat station. There were thin steaks as well as pieces of chickens. "What a glorious meal this will be."

Hinata picked up a tray. "Now it is your turn to not be offended." He moved beside Ren. "But from all the foreigners we have met, you seem to be by far the most hospitable."

"Well, we try to be."

"The spider is also hospitable, building a beautiful web for others to come to enjoy." Hinata raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"I suppose so." Eustis said. "But we aren't spiders, Hinata. Now don't get me wrong; we have fought with some of the locals and with the Martians. We do fight and kill to protect our own people."

"But we are not your…" Hinata's eyes got large as he realized. "You think us less than you? Like children or sheep?"

Akira turned to look at the pair. "What?"

"No, it's not like that at all." Eustis said. "We… oh boy." He frowned. "Why don't we get our food and then we can sit and talk about this calmly."

"Like children?" Hinata said again.

"No. You aren't children. You are definitely not children. But." Eustis hesitated. "You are not equipped to fight the Martians." He pointed at Akira. "You yourself said so. Swords are ineffective against a flying ship. We just see that as wrong." He tucked his tray under his arm. "Maybe because we live in small groups on Venus and have to travel to visit other groups of us. Maybe…. We don't see you as children, but you are more primitive than they are."

"And your people as well." Hinata pointed out.

"We will fight them until the last of us!" Akira's eyes flashed red. "We are not helpless children!"

"I get that. And all we're trying to do is keep them from taking advantage of you here on Earth. Keep them from abusing and assaulting and stealing from you." He shook his head. "They already do that to us and we can't do anything about it because they outnumber us."

Akira's face developed a bit more hair. "There is much we can do!"

"Akira." Hinata said. "Please calm down." He noticed that several people were now looking their way. "We do not need to draw attention to ourselves."

Akira growled then nodded. "Fine. Let us eat then get back to the ship."

"If there is time, I want to see an Emu." Teruki said. "Will they grow where we are in Japan?"

"Well, they are just large birds so they grow anywhere that you keep them, I suppose. They don't seem to mind the cold but you'd have to have barns for them."

"I shall taste one first." Ren picked up a large drumstick. "Leg of Emu." He held it up. "This will determine their fate!"

Akira laughed. "I shall taste one as well. Ren, the culinary diplomat."

Relived to have changed the subject, Eustis moved to the serving line and took a chicken breast. "I'll stick to their smaller cousins. Are you going to eat any vegetables?"

"We will have rice if there is enough to spare." Hinata said. He looked in the direction of that station.

"There is. Rice grows well here and it stores easily; there is always plenty of rice." Eustis said. "I'll go with you." He pointed as he and Ren walked off. "Drinks are over there. Pick a table and we will find you."

After the pair walked away, Teruki, Akira, and Hinata walked to the drinks station and all chose water and tea.

"Do you trust him?" Hinata asked.

"Hospitality may be paramount to them. As it is with us." Akira answered. "But to answer you; no I do not trust these people. While they look more like us than the other thin ones, they are still foreigners; what do they gain from generosity towards us?"

"Perhaps Hugh has learned that."

"While I fight with him, I do not fully trust the Kyūketsuki either."

"Well, we will see what he has learned once we return to the ship." Hinata said. He walked toward some tables, thinking he trusted Hugh far more than he trusted Akira.

Twenty-Seven

"Oh yeah; the interior feeds from your ship were very educational. Anything your cameras saw, I could see. It was in the scope of the warrant." Claude whistled. "And I have to tell you, Hugh. I saw some things that were unbelievable. Un… believable."

Hugh looked away again.

Claude looked at the door. "I'm glad we're having this conversation alone, without those others listening, Hugh. I have to tell you; I was planning on pulling you into a private room to have this conversation. This is just between you and me."

"You mean pulling me into a cell?" Hugh looked at the man, deciding the fastest, easiest way to kill him. His eyes flashed red. "Right?"

Claude pushed his chair back away from the table. "Take it easy Hugh. Just sit and listen because I think I'm your only friend in the world."

Hugh narrowed his eyes at the man. "I have lots of friends back in Anchorage. Good friends. Hinata is my friend. I don't need more of them." He decided that punching him in the throat would be the most effective method and would keep him from calling for help. "I have more friends than I know what to do with."

"When I say world, I mean the *modern* world. Those guys back there." His eyes got wide. "And let me tell you, I saw some video feed of three of them that would make a great horror movie. But they're locals so they're also behind the power curve."

"What do you want, Claude?" Hugh asked, pretty much completely decided on killing the man. He looked at the table, judging the best way to vault it. From how he was sitting, he thought he may have to just leap across it, arms first.

"I want to make life hard for the Martians here on Earth and I want you to help me do that." He put his hands on the table. "Just hear me

out and keep that 'I'm going to kill Claude' plan that's percolating in your head as a plan b for a little while. Okay?"

Hugh smirked. "You sure play it straight, Claude. Is that a current phrase?"

"It is." Claude nodded. "It is indeed." He fought to keep a smile from his face. "So how old are you *really*?"

Hugh let out a breath. It wasn't as if he had any secrets from the man who was watching the interior and exterior feeds of the ship. "I am eighteen-thousand six-hundred sixty-eight years old. Give or take a year or so."

"Hah!" Claude laughed out loud. "I knew you had to be old using those terms that no one has ever even heard before." He held up a finger. "Oh, the same goes for 'hangar queen.' They just figured it was some sort of insult that they didn't understand." He shrugged. "Which I guess it was. But that still doesn't explain how you just popped into existence. Oh, and the cities on Venus aren't HAVOC. I had to look that up as well; High Altitude Venus Operational Concept? Twentieth Century term. We're way past a concept of living on Venus; forty thousand people past. So…" He gestured at Hugh. "Spill it."

"I was frozen in a glacier in 2026." Hugh said, not wanting to discuss the murderous rampage he had been on immediately prior. "Then about six months ago, the glacier thawed down to where I was and I woke up."

"In Alaska?"

Hugh nodded.

"And that's when you met your Amish friends."

Hugh nodded. Again, not wanting to discuss killing seven of them in cold blood after only being unthawed for a couple of hours.

"Amazing." Claude clapped his hands once and rubbed them together. "Just amazing."

"So…" Hugh began.

"So?"

"So how does this all pertain to me and those four men out there?" Hugh asked. "And making life hard for Martians?" Realization hit Hugh. "Oh! You want me as a *proxy*. A mercenary soldier. Some sort of hired hand killing Martians for you because Venus can't." He narrowed his eyes. "Or won't."

"We just *can't*." Claude said. "I explained it; we can't take on Mars in open conflict. But we are working on a plan."

"What's that?"

"This." Claude pointed at the deck of the ship.

"This ship?"

"No! The colony; Ayers Landing. And Arnem Falls is getting set up now on the opposite coast. That will give us control of the entire Gulf of Carpentaria."

"How do colonies on Earth help with a fight against Mars? You going to conscript the locals?"

"No, we're going to *outbreed* the Martians."

"Outbreed them?"

"With a fairly high but sustainable growth rate of two and three quarters, it will take us a hundred forty-four years to do it."

"That's kind of a long-term plan." Hugh said, not wanting to mention the time Cynthia said it would take for the Earth-bound Venusians to outvote the actual Venusians.

"Said the eighteen-thousand-year-old man." Claude pointed out.

"Touché." Hugh said. "Is that still a phrase?"

"There are French speakers. So… yes." Claude said. "Really we only need to get close to them in population to outvote them because we can surely get others to join us. Probably closer to just a hundred years."

"The Confederacy of the Moons of Saturn and the New Republic of Free Asteroids." Hugh said.

"That's almost ten thousand votes right there. Plus Uranus and Neptune will join in. Definitely once the C-M-S and R-F-A are on board. Once others realize they can outvote Mars, they will join in Suddenly that's another fifty thousand votes."

"I can't see that happening." Hugh admitted.

"Why's that?"

"If Mars thinks the other planets will out vote them, then they'll use that standing military to get rid of you."

"They can't get rid of all of us, and Earth is where a lot of their resources come from. At that point, we will be able to blockade the Earth if it comes down to it to keep them in check and abide by the vote."

"Well, armies do move on their stomachs." Hugh said. "That always holds true." He nodded. "That does sound like a good plan. A long term one, but a good one."

"So if you're willing to help us, I am willing to help you."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Hugh asked, still not convinced.

"We will take this ship off you." Claude pointed upward. "Scrub it so that it looks like a regular, clean Venusian ship for tracking purposes." He smiled wide. "We'll even plug in a new galley in this thing."

"That's a big one." Hugh admitted.

"You'll have a safe port here in Ayers Landing and anywhere else we set up." He pointed downward "And we can fix that gear pin you seem to have broken."

"That's Amish steel. I didn't consider the added weight on it."

"We'll put something stronger than steel so it's not a problem again. I'm curious; how did it break in the first place to need local steel put in there?" He smiled. "Oh, right; you're still learning to fly this thing. You were an atmospheric pilot before, right?"

"I was." Hugh said. "Don't change the subject; this is a lot to consider."

"It is." He pointed at Hugh's pocket. "Your PAD?"

Hugh looked down. "Yeah. It's so I can understand the others."

"Hinata's English is pretty good." Claude said.

"He was captive for almost three years. For two he just stood in a garden, for the rest of the time, he lived in a glass cage while the family goaded him into killing himself." Hugh said.

"I am sorry." Claude said. "I'm sure Sam told you that this practice has been going on for several hundred years. So it's not going to go away overnight." He put his hands in his lap. "But we are doing our best to make the Martians stop doing it. Among other things."

"There's more?" Hugh asked.

"They heavily tax other governments and use force to implement their policies on the other planets."

"I can see why they are not popular." Hugh said. "But I need to consider this."

Claude pulled out his PAD. "Hold yours out." He tapped the screen on his. When Hugh took his out of his pocket and held it across the table, expecting Claude to take it, Claude just flicked his finger from his screen toward Hugh's. Hugh's made a 'ding' sound. "That's my personal contact. When you decide, you can contact me and we'll work out the details."

Hugh put his PAD back in his pocket. "It's a lot to think about." He looked around the ship. "The repairs would be nice, but I need some time to think." He explained. *And talk to Eli about this.* He thought. Thinking of Eli brought something else to mind. "So you're wanting to enlist me as a mercenary to kill these Martians where I find them?"

Claude shrugged. "I mean, you're a vampire; you kill people. I saw what you did to those four in Japan." He shuddered. "I mean, extra points for the creative use of a CART, but… damn."

"They were there trying to kill me, dammit."

"Well, plenty of other Martians will be coming to kidnap locals for art and as you said 'things even worse than just art', so there's that."

"I just need to think it over." Hugh said again.

"Fine, fine." Claude said. "But in the meanwhile, I'll get that ship off your back and scrubbed." He held out his hand. "And if your answer is 'no', then we'll stick it back on top of this thing and you can fly off with it. Same with the pin and the galley pod. No strings attached."

"No strings attached." Hugh said, not really believing the man. "Well then, I'd like to ask for one more thing."

"What's that?" Claude asked.

"Stop bugging my ship."

Claude laughed. "Right, right. I will do that as well. Cynthia?"

"Yes Director Ventas?" Cynthia replied.

"Turn off current security warrant monitoring programs and delete them."

"Okay." Cynthia said in her typical non-emotional voice.

"Wait! Cynthia you knew you were bugging our ship and you didn't say anything?"

"It was a legal warrant so I was required to comply." Cynthia explained. "There is legal precedent."

"Are there any more surveillance programs running?"

"No." Cynthia said simply.

Hugh looked at Claude. "If there were and you were ordered not to reveal them, would you?"

"No."

Hugh let out a long breath. "Hell; that's just great."

"Cynthia, security override by Ayers Landing Security Manager Claude Ventas. Are there any other surveillance programs running on the *Alba Mons*?"

"There are not." Cynthia said.

"There you have it, Hugh; you're free and clear." Claude said as he pushed himself up from the table. "Do you really have pressing matters in Anchorage?"

"Well, we are going out with one of Anchorage's leaders to try and work out a peace treaty with the Inuit. Why do you ask?" Hugh stood as well.

"Well, to be honest with you, it would be a lot less of an issue if we get the pins fixed today, then install the galley module tomorrow morning. You could leave by noon with all the repairs done."

"All day to replace one pin?"

"No; we'll replace all of them with upgrades." Claude snapped his fingers. "Oh! And we can upload a landing routine to help you out."

"A landing routine?"

"Yeah," Claude said. "When you turn it on, it will monitor your landing procedures and if you are doing something that will cause damage to the ship, it will let you know and override you."

"That might be helpful." Hugh admitted.

"We run it on our training ships for the kids. After a while, it will just stop taking over because you'll have landing down pat."

Kids? Hugh frowned. "Okay then." Hugh sighed. "I will consider what you said and let you know." He held out his hand then looked down at it. "People still shake hands when making a deal, right?"

"They do." Claude took it and shook it firmly. "I've been listening to you talk to your friends here on the ship and on the ground, Hugh, so I know when you say you will consider it, I know you're telling the truth. You are definitely a man of your word." He let go of Hugh's hand. "And I understand from my dealings with them, the Amish are a very religious people and your friends there will not be amenable to you being involved in violence."

Hugh nodded because he was sure Eli would definitely feel that way. *A man of my word* He thought. *Is that what I am becoming?*

"Remember you need to keep the bigger picture in mind." Claude pressed on. "You flew to one of Mars' moons with practically no training at all to rescue the husband of a woman you haven't known six months. And you saved Hinata as well while you were there. You barged into the governor's office and threatened him to his face. You care about these people you have just met a lot; I get that. Imagine how much you will care for them in a year? Five years? Ten? The cold hard fact of the matter is that unfortunately in the world we live in, keeping them safe requires bringing violence or inconvenience to those that would cause them harm." He put his hands in his pockets. "Don't think that my hands are clean as well. I've had several crafts destroyed once they were on the ground and it could seem like the locals did it. Several I've blown out of the sky; mechanical failures they were deemed. But there is only so much I can do. The last thing I need is a contingent of Mars soldiers staying here in Ayers Landing."

"You have to be discreet." Hugh said.

"Exactly. My superiors look the other way because nothing I've done ties back to them. If it helps any, you won't be the only ship here on Earth dealing with Martians. Piracy is still a thing that happens."

"I'll think about it." Hugh said. "I mean it."

"That's all I can ask." Claude said.

"Wait.. your interactions with the Amish? You visit them?" Hugh asked. "No one has mentioned visitors there that weren't Martians."

Claude smirked. "Well, Hugh, around here I'm known as Security Manager Claude Ventas. In Anchorage I'm known as Wildman Eustis, friendly trapper. I wander into town, trade goods, talk to folks, then wander off."

"You're Eustis?" Hugh said unbelieving. "That's absurd." His eyes got large. "You picked your deputy's name to use? That's even more absurd."

"It's easy to remember." He shrugged. "I can't stay penned up here in Ayers all the time." Claude pointed at him. "Just make sure you don't blow my cover."

"Sure, sure." Hugh said with a head shake. "Do you go under cover anywhere else?"

"I visit towns around the planet. Two other Amish communities, several indigenous ones down in the swamps of southern North America. Some miners in Europe. And the ones I don't go to, other agents visit."

"And they blend in?"

Claude nodded. "Once they establish themselves as a friendly itinerate trapper or gatherer they can come and go as they need to. It usually goes pretty smooth. There are a couple of groups in South America that try to eat visitors so we don't go down there anymore. No one does actually, so that's a win."

"I suppose it is." Hugh sighed. "It's just that I'm trying to become a better person, Claude. I've killed…" He hesitated, not wanting to say "tens of thousands" so he instead pressed on with: "people in the past for food and sport, and sometimes just out of boredom, or they annoyed me. I'm trying to do better. Be better. So hiring me as a killer doesn't sit right with that plan."

"We're working the long game here, Hugh." Claude paused. "And don't think that all my agents are out there just killing Martians every chance they get. A lot of times… Most all of the times actually, they're just harassing them, or causing issues to where they just leave. It's surprising how much just a little face to face confrontation will have them pack up and leave. After all, they are a long way from home without any support. The Mars Marines aren't going to fly a platoon all the way over here just because you punched someone in the face."

"Oh, well truth be told, I'm good at that." Hugh admitted, thinking he could just toss people back into their ship from fifty feet or so, to get the message across.

Clause smirked. "Yeah, I've seen you when you get angry. Pretty scary stuff. And I say that as someone who has several Flu-Gens on his team."

"Flu what?"

"Fluid genetics; they can change on the fly. Bigger muscles, breathe under water, big fangs." He waggled a finger at Hugh, "But not turn into a mist. That alone will scare off most of the Martians. That's some scary stuff, my friend!"

"You know, you've been pretty cavalier about me being a vampire." Hugh said. "Why aren't you trying to put me in a cage to see what makes me tick?"

Claude shrugged. "We've got those Flu-Gens doing some pretty good stuff. Effective stuff. Hell, I could make my own werewolves if I thought they'd be worthwhile. And as I said, we're working the long game. Having you on my team helps that happen. Especially since you'll be alive to see the entire thing through." He laughed. "What's another hundred years after eighteen thousand, right?"

"I suppose." Hugh said. "I'm not immortal you know. I can be killed."

"Here's hoping." Claude replied. "Just give it a thought; you can be the one that frees Earth from Mars. How's that for being a better person? Hell, at that point you can even be one of the voters *against* Mars. How about we make you a naturalized Venusian?"

"Yeah, I suppose." Hugh admitted. It did sound like a good plan and the fact he wouldn't need to kill people was also very appealing. As well as having Venusians as allies. The Amish were very nice but having friends who were technically equal to the Martians was definitely a good thing. "Oh; I'd like to talk to whoever goes into Fair Banks before we go visit them."

"Sure; I'll send over Sidney in the morning; he goes there often." Claude looked at the ramp. "Sundown is in two hours. Once that happens, you're welcome to wander around the colony. Just be aware…" He fought to keep a smile from his face. "A lot of these people have heard of Amish folks but they've never met one so they're going to come up to talk to you." He waggled a finger at him. "So be on your bestest behavior."

"No cursing?" Hugh tried.

"Don't eat anyone."

"Oh." Hugh was taken aback. "Well, that goes without saying."

"I'm kidding. You need to lighten up, Hugh. We're the good guys, remember?" Claude gave a sloppy salute then walked off the ship.

Hugh sat at the table, trying to process what Claude had said. Could he act as part of the secret mercenary arm of the Venusian resistance? How would Eli take this development? And more importantly, could he control the Samurai while he was in Fair Banks? He looked toward the door. The thirty minutes had come and gone and he hadn't heard a thing from any of them. He scowled as he tapped his earpiece. "Hinata! Are you four done eating yet?" He snapped.

Twenty-Eight

"Hugh-san!" Hinata said. There was a long pause. "We are now having sweets with some more tea."

"Oh, well, I'm really glad you're all enjoying yourselves. A lot has happened here and I want to fill you in."

"We will be back quickly so we can leave." Hinata said. "Yes?" He said to the others at the table since they could hear the conversation as well.

"Yes. We will make haste to return." Akira said.

"Well, there's no need to do that really." Hugh admitted.

"Why?"

"Well, they are going to take the top ship off and keep it here for me. And they are going to fix the pins that are breaking."

"That is very nice of them." Hinata said. "What else are the spiders doing?"

"Spiders?" Hugh asked. "They're going to change the food machine on the ship so that it has better food."

"I like them even more." Ren said. "And you must try their Emu. It is delicious. I want to bring some back to breed them at home. They are apparently easy to care for."

"We are not putting live Emu on the ship." Hugh said firmly. "What's this about spiders?"

"They are like spiders, making a lovely home for us to visit. Then they kill us and eat us when we let our guard down." Teruki explained.

"Well, they do have motives for their actions, but they are all against the Martians. They are trying to enlist us to fight them."

"I have told Eustis here that Teruki and Ren and I will be returning home. Our fight is there." Akira said.

"Eustis is there with you?" Hugh asked, surprised that Hinata was calling the man a spider while he sat at the table with them, eating his food.

"The spider is here." Eustis said. "Beware of the spider. So is Claude getting teams over there to take care of all that now? That's a tall order for one day. He usually forgets the little details about the big things he promises. And it's really late in the day too. The techs are going to be pissed."

"He said it will take until tomorrow to get all the work done." Hugh said. "So we're here for the night."

"Do you need us to put rooms together for you?"

"No; there's plenty of room on the *Alba Mons*." Hugh said.

"Sleeping in your own webs?"

"Something like that." Hugh said, when really the bigger issue was not having Akira and the other two stalking around the colony at night. "But I appreciate the offer. Maybe on our next visit." He said, wanting to at least keep them on good terms until he had talked to Eli.

"Deal." Eustis said. "So are you coming over to the cantina to get something to eat?"

He really doesn't know what I am. Hugh thought. "I've got a couple of things to take care of on the ship. Couple of hours then I can come over."

"Okay. I'll see what they want to do and keep you posted." Eustis said. "I think they want to see the emu."

"I'm not putting live emu on my ship." Hugh said again. "That would be absurd."

"We can give you a couple dozen or so fertilized eggs. You'd have close to fifty days before they hatched."

"You can spare that many eggs?"

"Hugh, we have six hundred Emu running around here. Each female gives about forty eggs a year. We've got more emu than we know what to do with."

"Wow. That's a huge herd… flock?"

"I have no idea what the collective is. They live alone or in pairs but we've got a thousand acres fenced off that they wander around in. Every couple of years, we'll drive out a few hundred of them to cull the flock. They are the opposite of an endangered species around here. They'd be annoying if they didn't taste so good."

"I see." Hugh considered that. If he had a way of helping the people in Akira's village easily, he felt he needed to at least try. *Caring for people is really becoming a hassle.* "Fine, fine. We'll take some eggs back with us. Do we need an incubator or something?"

"Just keep them warm until they hatch. Then feed them grain and let them catch whatever bugs they can. That's pretty much it with them. Give them someplace covered to go when it snows. In ten years, you'll be up to your ears in the damned things."

"Fine." Hugh said again with a head shake. "Well take them to Anchorage then run them all back to Japan when I drop off the others." A thought occurred to him. "If you do have extra, can I bring some to Anchorage as well? They already have cattle, horses, goats, and chickens. Why not emu?"

Eustis laughed. "Sure, we can do that too."

"Okay, let me… finish up here and I'll come that way in a little while." Hugh said. He closed the communication link. "Cynthia, how long until sundown?"

"Sundown is in one hour thirty-seven minutes."

"Do we have any place on the ship where we could safely transport emu eggs?" Hugh asked.

"The eggs can be stored in storage compartment two behind the living quarters. The temperature in that area can be raised to be amenable to the eggs separate from the rest of the ship."

Hugh nodded. "Well, that solves that problem. Now what the hell am I going to do for another hour and a half." He said sourly.

"Would you like to play a game?"

"No." Hugh said emphatically.

After a long hour and a half of sitting watching the sun set on the cockpit monitor, Hugh finally lowered the ramp and walked out. As he looked around, he noticed that the other ship was no longer on top of the *Alba Mons*; it was almost fifty feet away sitting on its own landing gear. "What the?" There were three people huddled around the forward landing gear. "Hey!" He called. "What are you doing?"

One of the men looked over. "Oh! We didn't know anyone was still inside." He smiled wide. "We're on the last one." He tapped the landing gear. "Should be done in thirty."

"Oh." Hugh remembered the agreement. "Sorry; thanks." He said simply.

The man pointed upward. "We're past quitting time so we'll swap that food station tomorrow. That all right?"

Hugh nodded. "Yes, that sounds just fine." He looked around. "Which one is the cantina?"

"The big red one between those two blue buildings." The man pointed. "Can't miss it."

Hugh looked. The colony was a brightly colored as it looked like on the monitors. He had though that perhaps the monitors had brightened up the buildings. "Okay. Thanks." He said as he walked toward the building.

"Hey, Earthling!" The man called after him. "Not that way!"

Hugh turned around. "What?"

"The gate is over there." The man pointed in a different direction. "Of course, we'd love to laugh at you while you climbed the fence. So that can be plan b if you want."

"Right." Hugh said as he turned and now started toward where the gate was. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he noticed there was a fence around the landing area and indeed a tall gate in the direction he was now going. He shook his head. "I'm completely losing control."

Twenty-Nine

The next morning, Hugh was awoken by someone banging on the hatch of the ship. It was only seven AM and Hugh had just gotten to sleep. No one else aboard seemed interested in seeing what the commotion was so he got out of bed and went to the hatch. Even inside the ship, the sun seemed to sap his strength. When he reached the hatch he pressed the intercom button. "What, what what!"

"We're here to install your Bellows Food Genie." A voice said through the speaker.

"My food what?"

"There's a requisition for a new food station for the *Alba Mons*. That's you right?"

"Yeah, yeah; that's me." Hugh pressed the button to open the hatch and moved quickly to the side as sunlight streaked in. He stood in the shadow to the side of the door for several seconds. "Well, get in here!"

A man in an orange overall stepped into the ship. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Listen, I was up all night and I just got to my rack. Do you need me here while you install that thing?"

"No, Sir." The man said. He looked over his shoulder- there were three other technicians on the ramp and a very large food station on rollers. "We'll try to be as quiet as we can."

"Fine." Hugh said. "Thanks." Without another word he turned and walked to his cabin. When he got there, he locked the door. "Cynthia, can you monitor the workers to see if they do anything besides install that food station?"

"If other systems are affected I will be aware of it." Cynthia said.

"Good. If that happens, wake me." Hugh said as he remembered how Claude had bugged the ship and Cynthia had allowed him to do it. "Okay?"

"Okay." Cynthia responded.

Hugh went back to his bed and got under the covers- the extra layer seemed to help with the pounding sun outside. Being so close to the equator seemed to make it far worse. He was awoken several times in the next three hours by loud banging by the workers. When a lengthy conversation between them and Hinata did not seem to have any end, he opened his door and shouted a warning to the four of them. He wasn't sure where the werewolves were but since they were being quiet, he didn't care very much; nightfall was still nine hours away and it didn't seem like he would be taking off any time soon.

At noon, his PAD chimed. With a growl, he rolled over and picked it up off the side table and pulled it under the blanket. "What is it now?"

"You asleep?" It was Claude

"No. All the racket is making sure I'm actually not getting any sleep."

"Well, I hate to say it but you're getting more visitors."

"What now?" Hugh asked.

"Three folks are dropping off two dozen emu eggs."

"It takes three people to do that?"

"They weigh a pound each and are as big as your hand." Claude said. "Plus they're stacked in wood crates with hay for save traveling. If one breaks open, you'll have half a quart of emu egg draining on your deck."

"Fine." Hugh said- it was something he seemed to be saying often. "They can put them in our storage locker. I'll let Hinata know. What temperature do I need to make that room?"

"Twenty-six degrees is good." Claude replied.

"The hatch is probably still open. I'll let Hinata know."

"I'd like to stop by before you take off."

Hugh let out a long breath. "When will those techs be done banging on my ship and talking loudly in the galley?"

"Probably another hour. How about I come by in three?"

"Fine." Hugh said again. "Talk to you then."

"Claude out."

"Cynthia." Hugh said. "Set the temperature in the rear storage area to twenty-six degrees centigrade. Whatever that is in Fahrenheit."

"Twenty-six degrees Centigrade is eighty degrees Fahrenheit." Cynthia informed him.

"Don't care." Hugh said. "Hinata." He said into the PAD.

"Hugh?"

"They are bringing some boxes of eggs on board. They go in the back room. Stack them up and tie them down so they don't fall over. They're pretty big so they'll make a mess if they break."

"Hai." Hinata said. "They are almost done here."

"Yes, I know. That Claude guy is going to stop by before we take off. In about three hours." A thought occurred to him. "Where are those werewolves?"

"Hugh-san!" Hinata scolded.

Hugh frowned; the PAD did not translate for Hinata, it was an open communication device. "You know what I mean." He tried, hoping the technicians weren't paying attention.

"They have gone to eat lunch at the cantina. They ate breakfast there as well. It seems the food there agrees with them."

Hugh had to admit that his meal there last night was actually very good- everything had been either freshly grown or cooked. "Did you get your rice?"

"I have thirty pounds of it in two bags. Also in that back room."

"Fine." Hugh cringed. "Get those things stowed and I'll try to get some sleep so I can fly this thing. If you can keep it quiet out there."

"I will continue to make no noise, Hugh." Hinata assured him.

"Sounds good." Hugh said, refusing to say 'fine' another time. "Oyasumi." (Good night). He turned off the PAD and put it back on the table, then put his pillow over his head because he could hear Hinata talking once again. "Cynthia play some white noise in here."

"Sounds of the ocean. Okay. This is the Pacific Ocean."

Hugh did not even want to start a discussion with the AI on why different oceans sounded differently, so he just pulled the sheets over his head and listened to the sounds. After a few minutes, he finally fell asleep.

Thirty

Hugh opened his cabin door three short hours later. The ship was quiet. "Absurd." He said to no one. "Now that I'm awake it's quiet in here." He looked at the other cabins- the doors were closed. With a growl, he moved to the galley. "Hinata?"

Hinata was sitting with a cardboard plate in front of him. There was tomato sauce smeared around the plate but nothing else.

"What was that?"

"It was the breast of a chicken cooked with a tomato sauce with cheese on it, served with long noodles." He looked down at his plate then back at Hugh. "It was delicious."

"You know that's for when the ship is going places; they have a place to eat not five minutes away."

"I felt it was my obligation to test out the new device." He took the last bite of the chicken. "I approve."

"And the… other three?"

"They are somewhere in the town. They seem to enjoy using their translation devices." Hinata stood and threw away the plate. "Do you want me to go look for them while I go eat."

"You just ate." Hugh pointed out.

"Well, yes." Hinata looked at the door. "But only a little bit." He looked back at Hugh. "I will find the others and bring them back with me."

"Fine." Hugh said. With a scowl he sat.

"Do you want me to bring you anything?" Hinata started for the door.

"No. I'll just have some coffee." Hugh replied. "See you in an hour or so."

"Yes." Hinata started down the ramp then stopped. "Claude, Hugh is awake." He said with a short bow.

"Excellent. I hope he got some sleep."

"I endeavored to be as quiet as possible." Hinata assured the man as he turned around. "So his mood should be good."

"Forget something?" Claude asked.

"Hai." Hinata said. "If you are speaking with Hugh, I should just listen in now instead of getting it piecemeal later on." He gestured at the hatch. "So…"

Claude walked into the ship. Hugh was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee. "Want the hatch closed?"

"Yes. That would be helpful." Hugh nodded. "Coffee?" He looked at Hinata. "I thought you were leaving."

"I felt I should hear this first hand. Then I will retrieve our wayward companions."

"Good idea, I suppose." Hugh looked at Claude again. "Coffee?"

"No thanks. You know, I just realized what your problem is." Claude slipped into the chair across from Hugh.

Hinata sat where he had been earlier, put his hands on the table and listened.

"What my problem is?" Hugh said defensively.

"I don't mean it in a bad way." The man held his hands up plaintively. "No offence."

"There's a good way to have a problem?"

"Yes, actually." Claude nodded. "You see." He gestured around him. "We've been fighting the Martians in the background for five hundred years." Now he pointed downward. "This colony is a hundred-and four-year dream. It's the bridgehead; a beginning of our plan to finally outvote them. It was a battle to get this approved and getting these buildings set up took close to fifty years."

"I see." Hugh said, even though he didn't really understand how that pertained to whatever problem he seemed to have. "And?"

"And our plans are moving along; birth rates are high. Higher than Martians by seventy-five percent." He winked. "They kind of have a space problem as well. Too many more people and they'll have to build a whole new domed city, so they keep it just head of mortality. Because expanding their living areas is expensive and uses a lot of resources. Resources they need to get from other planets that are already not happy with them and the locals know this. So the government decides to give them a distraction. Something better than kids crowding up their cities."

"Earthlings as art."

"They started by voting to make Earthlings non-people so they had no rights. It's like having a monkey as a pet." He raised his hands again. "Again, no offense; it's what they did."

"Monkeys!" Hinata scowled. "Oh!"

"I get it." Hugh said.

"The thing is they know what we're doing. They know we've set up this colony and have another coming together for us to put our excess population on. Except it's something they can't do. After all, Earth's gravity is way too high for them to live here long term. Venus' gravity is so close to Earth's that we get over it in a year. All of a sudden, we've got all the space we need to make lots of babies."

Hugh looked at Hinata, who was also listening to see if he understood. "Understand?"

Hinata gave a nod. "A wise plan."

"Then you come along and wander right into the mix of our quiet war and when we see you already fighting against the Martians, it's a really simple decision to bring you into our ranks and give you support." He shrugged. "I mean; why wouldn't we want a newfound asset getting the support he needs to help us with our plan." He looked at Hinata. "I can see how we look like the spider luring you in to get rid of you, but really, you are new spiders we are bringing into our larger web to join us; why would we kill you? Hell, if you'd be willing I'd give you a bunch of guns to just shoot those stupid Martians when they come back." He

shrugged. “You locals killing them doesn’t even raise eyebrows at the Senate.”

“You would give us weapons to fight them?” Hinata had been sitting on a bench on the far side of the galley. He got up and moved to the table. “Something we could use against their fire from the sky?”

“Well, anti-aircraft weapons would probably lead to an investigation.” Claude admitted. “But we could crash an old cargo ship near your town and then give you a dozen Kalitanyas.”

“What is that?” Hinata now leaned across the table. “And how many devil Martians can we kill with it?”

“Well, it’s a non-lethal weapon; it’s used mainly for…” He hesitated. They were designed specifically to be used in gathering Earthlings without killing them. “Crowd control. Instances where you don’t want to kill someone but you want to stop them.”

“What good is that?” Hinata sat back. “It will be like using harsh language.”

“No. It knocks people out. It hits them with…with…” He paused again not sure how much the man would understand.

“Just explain it and I can fill in the details.” Hugh suggested.

“It makes a ball of energy, like lightning that when you shoot them with it, it knocks them out. Then when they are unconscious; you can just drag them into their ships and tell them if they don’t leave, the next time they are knocked out, they will never wake up.”

“Ahh, that is a good plan. We knock them out, take their shoes, then send them on their way.”

“Take their shoes?” Claude asked.

“It is an insult. Send them away barefooted.”

Claude laughed. “Yeah, I can see how that would be embarrassing. Take their clothes too while you are at it.”

“Hah!” Hinata laughed. “Even better!”

"That sounds good and all, but how about maintaining the weapons, ammunition. All of that?" Hugh asked, having had a lot of experience with weapons through the ages.

"They're pretty solid state; linear accelerators grabbing protons from the environment. Hinata, do you live by the ocean, by any chance?"

"We do live on the coast. We fish for food."

Claude shrugged. "We'll send a tidal generator that will keep them charged up. Simple."

"And the Martians aren't going to think it's odd that suddenly a bunch of locals are armed to the teeth and running a generator?"

"Again, it's pretty simple tech. Drop it in six feet of water, the waves create electricity that runs to a power distributor on shore. Plug the Kalis in; they only fit one way. When the light is green, the gun is charged." He thought for a moment. "Yeah, we'll crash an old cargo ship a half mile from their village in case the Martians investigate. Then we'll give you ten of the rifles and a generator." He looked at Hinata again. "Really, just drop the big part in the water about as deep as you are tall. Unless you have very big tides, then it will need to go deeper so it's underwater the entire time. Take the cable and plug it into the big box with slots in it; it only fits on one way. Then the guns poke into the big box. When the lights go from red to green, they are ready for use and you'll get a hundred shots before it needs to be charged again."

Hugh smirked. "So simple even a primitive can figure it out."

"I would be offended but I am thinking too much of delivering justice to these Martians that I will let it pass. I wonder what other things we can take from their ships before they leave."

"You understand how AI works, right?"

Hinata shook his head at Claude. "That word is foreign to me."

Hugh chuckled. "The devil voice. Cynthia."

"Ahh, yes, the devil voice that can speak Japanese suddenly. Yes, we have spoken many times since then."

"If you find something on the ship you don't understand, just ask the ship. First tell it to speak Japanese."

"They are all called Cynthia?"

"No, but you can use the default name 'ship' to get it to talk to you. Just say 'ship switch to Japanese' and it will."

Hinata grinned at the man. "Ahhh, now I am beginning to like my alliance with the spider."

"The important part." Claude raised a finger. "Is that you don't keep this just to yourselves. Teach the other villages around you about this as well. If enough of the villages become such a problem, the Martians will go elsewhere. Just like those natives that eat people so no one goes there."

"Building your army, huh?" Hugh asked.

"Listen, once we can manage a majority vote, we can restore rights to Earthlings." Claude said. "Then it would be illegal to take any of them away."

"You sure talk a good game." Hugh said. "And I know the Japanese are intelligent, cunning people so I know they will be able to figure out the technology."

"Well, some of them won't be interested in it." Claude admitted.

"You mean the Amish?"

"I mean the Werewolf brothers. They're more hands-on type of people, I think." He gestured out of the ship. "That seem to have endless bellies. Apparently they are bringing our radishes to add to theirs."

"Yes; they were delicious." Hinata agreed. "We do need some of them to grow."

"Well, as long as your priorities are in order; radishes then guns." Hugh shook his head.

"One cannot fight on an empty belly."

"When I say things like that, you shake your head at me." Hugh pointed out.

Claude stood. "Okay then. The plan is set." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, can you send me the location of Hinata's village? We will circle the village three times before landing so you know it's us; I'd hate to have a misunderstanding with those three out there."

"There's more than three of them." Hugh said. "So yeah, definitely have a signal. Then maybe lean out and yell down before landing."

"Sounds like a plan. Speaking of werewolves, I'll send those three over. The eggs got here?"

"They are in the back staying warm." Hugh replied as he stood as well.

"Well, I hope this is the start of a long and beneficial friendship." Claude extended his hand.

Hugh shook it. "I hope so too." He still wasn't totally convinced in the sincerity of the Venusians, even though he understood their plight and plans.

Claude didn't release Hugh's hand and instead pulled him closer. "Just… just one more thing. If you can."

Hugh's eyebrows went up.

"Do the change thing."

Hugh's eyebrows went down.

"I just want to see it in person."

Hugh let go of Claude's hand then changed completely. It took all of three seconds which surprised Hugh; he hadn't changed since the ship's medical station had cured him of his diseases and it used to take closer to ten seconds for a full transformation. Now he felt a good six inches taller as well. He looked down- he was indeed taller beside the table.

"God in heaven!" Claude stumbled backward.

"You okay?" Hugh said around long fangs. He reached out with a clawed hand.

"The… the monitors don't do that justice." Claude said, visibly shaken. "Oh…"

"Hugh-san. The devil doctor's cure has indeed made a difference." Hinata said, also surprised at how Hugh looked now. "Odoroki, you look formidable. You were before of course, but now it is alarmingly more so."

Claude took another step back.

Hugh changed back to Human, shrinking the six inches. "You okay, Claude?"

"I mean… that's a hell of a thing. I never expected…" What Hinata said registered. "The devil doctor?"

"I had the ship's medical station generate up blood in case someone got hurt fighting those other guys. And the ship noticed I had a collected a bunch of diseases over the centuries. So it cured them." He stretched. "I do feel a lot better." He smirked. "It also took care of the cancer Ren was going to get in the near future."

"You are a much healthier color." Hinata said. "Ren looks the same."

"Well, his disease hadn't happened yet. Or had just started, I guess. Mine had been with me for a long time."

"Well, I have to say I'm glad you're on our side." Claude said as he regained his composure. "Man; I had heard about Benfleet but I had never seen him. Did…Was he like you?"

"Kind of, except he had Rabies." Hugh said. "So that made him hard to reason with."

"Huh." Claude decided he would pay more attention to locals when they discussed their folklore around their campfires. "Okay then." He rubbed his hands together instead of shaking Hugh's hand again. "I'll send Akira and the other two back to the ship so you can get on your way. Oh! Sidney never made it over, did he."

"No." Hugh said. "Now that you mention it."

"I'll have him give you a call after you take off and you can talk then." Claude said. "Get the inside story."

"That works."

Claude moved to Hinata and extended his hand. "So I will come to your village with two ships… say next month on the first day after the full moon. We'll circle three times so you know it's us and then we'll drop off the weapons. Give some quick instructions, then leave before anyone notices us. We'll crash the second ship nearby that evening."

"I look forward to it." Hinata shook the man's hand. "If for some reason I am not there, I will let Akira know and he will meet you. Hugh-san thinks he wants me to accompany him." He gestured at the new food dispenser. "I have to say, that makes the decision to return home more difficult."

"Okay, either way next month." Claude said, hoping no Martians visited before then. "See you later." He just waved to Hugh and left.

"Hugh-san, weapons of our own! Those dogs won't know what to think when they arrive expecting to find us unable to fight back." Hinata rubbed his hands together. "Ahh, vengeance is ours! We will send them away *naked*! The shame will be as bad as death. Although dead is also an option."

"Just put them back in their ships and send them home." Hugh suggested, even though he was sure that if Akira had his way, no Martian would ever leave once they landed; the numerous abandoned ships would be a warning to others. "If you kill them, then the Martians might send soldiers to fight you, or just send a warship. Sending them home in shame to never return would be safer for your village."

"They would send a large ship like the one that invited us here?"

"Exactly. You need to make sure the villagers don't get carried away." Hugh warned.

"I will do the best I can." Hinata promised.

Hugh pulled out his PAD, not wanting to wait for Claude. "Akira. Stop eating and get back here!" He said into it. "We've got places to go."

"We are at their farm getting radishes and corn. It is better corn than we have."

"I've already got a bunch of eggs in here." Hugh gestured at the back room even though the comms link was only audio. "Come on now!"

"Then some vegetable seeds will not be an issue." Akira pointed out. "They are quite small."

Hugh let out a long breath. "Now I'm a farm supply ship."

"Farming is a noble profession." Hinata couldn't keep a smile from his face. "Perhaps you could retire to a plot of land. A Kyūketsuki farmer. You do have a wonderful farmer's hat already."

Hugh got up without saying anything and went to the cockpit.

"Hah!" Hinata gave him before the door closed.

Thirty-One

Hugh flew over Anchorage a second time.

"What are you doing?"

"Deciding where to land." Hugh answered.

"Do you not want to land in the same place we left from?" Hinata asked, pointing at his monitor. "It was there."

"I was hoping for somewhere a little more hidden."

"Hugh-san, they saw the ship while we were deep in a cave." Hinata pointed out. "There is no hiding the ship unless you drop it into the sea. And even then, they might still see it." He shook his head. "No, you put it in the open for all to see. A symbol of your defiance."

Hugh looked at Hinata. "And if they just blow it up from the sky?"

"Do not sleep on the ship." Hinata said with a smile. "Then you call that new friend of yours and tell him what the Martians have done. He will send another ship, I am sure." He snapped his fingers. "That second ship you left there!"

"Still." Hugh said.

"It is far from the town so if it is destroyed, it will not put the town in danger." He gave a curt nod. "Yes; put it where it was before."

Hugh sighed. While he was a little concerned about the ship being blown up, he was also worried about the attention it might attract. He was also unsure of what the compressed Oganesson would do if it was hit with some sort of energy beam or even a projectile. He now wished the *Alba Mons* had been given a Venusian registry and name. It would be something he would ask about when he went back to Ayers Landing. "Okay, starting the landing sequence." He pressed several buttons. An icon flashed on his monitor letting him know that the landing assistance program was running.

Hinata grabbed both armrests.

Hugh glanced at him. He had not explained the new program to Hinata and now he just wanted him to think that he had just gotten better at landings. All three landing gear icons went from red to yellow to green as they extended fully. He swung around then tapped a spot in the middle of the clearing to indicate where he planned on landing. As he hovered above it and adjusted his controls, the landing program flashed several times as it kept him over the landing spot. The outputs also seemed to adjust themselves as he descended from higher than what he had originally chosen, to a much lower one as the ship dropped below twenty feet. "Huh." He said as he watched the numbers flash red to indicate the program's adjustments.

"What is wrong? We were lowering quickly for a moment. Is everything alright?"

"Yes." Hugh said. The ship touched down lightly and the outputs dropped to zero as the legs took the weight of the ship.

"That was considerably better." Hinata said. "Well done, Hugh-san; master of flight."

Hugh scowled. Before lying to people was something he did without even thinking about it. Now even this 'white lie' seemed to be a betrayal. "They put something on the ship to help me land it until I get better at it. That way the ship doesn't get damaged."

"Still an outstanding feat." Hinata pushed himself out of the seat using the armrests. "Let us go. I am ready to sleep on a normal bed."

Hugh smirked. The beds on the ship were very soft, almost like sleeping on a foot thick sponge; one sank into it until they were almost even with the top of it- probably to help the Martians deal with the gravity. "Yes, something a little firmer would be nice." He had decided that once he was back in Anchorage, he would swap out the Martian mattresses for Amish straw ones. At least until he could see what sort of mattresses the Venusians used.

Hinata moved to the door. "I may sleep on the ground just to not feel like I am in quicksand." He hovered his finger over the button. "You should be the one to introduce these others. And I think you should be the one to give them some rules to follow while in town."

"Rules?"

"Stay in town would be the most important one, I think." Hinata smirked. "Do not get drunk should be the second rule even though it is of equal importance."

Hugh stood as well. "Yeah, yeah; I'll talk to Akira while you go say hello. There's people waiting outside already." He gestured at the monitor. "Maybe I need to paint this thing red so they know it's me coming and not some Gatherers."

"A good plan, Hugh." Hinata pressed the button. "I would have your new friends do that; these Amish will paint it to look like a barn." He stepped through the hatch. "Welcome to Anchorage, brothers!"

Hugh shook his head and followed, hoping that bringing the three Samurai wasn't a mistake.

"We are here?" Akira asked. He was sitting at the table still. "I did not know we landed."

"I…" Hugh was at a loss for words. The three were in full Samurai armor.

"Hugh is becoming an expert on flying this craft." Hinata said with a short bow. "Let us go meet our hosts. Hugh?" He pressed the button and started down the ramp before it was even down entirely.

"We are not staying on the ship?" Teruki asked.

Hugh shook his head. "The Amish are very hospitable people." He held up a finger. "Why are you in full armor?"

"It is not because we fear an attack." Akira stood. "We are in formal armor to meet our gracious hosts. To meet them in our plain clothes would be an insult; we have taken the time to look as good as we can for them."

"Please make sure you mind your manners while you are here."

"Are you saying we will be ungracious guests?" Teruki stood. "That is insulting."

Hugh shook his head. "No, not at all." He paused for a moment. "The Amish are very simple people."

"Like children?" Akira asked.

"Sort of. Well, they are very trusting. They are also very religious and hardworking. So don't curse around them."

"That goes without saying." Ren said.

"Even the men."

"Oh." Ren smirked. "Then that is good advice."

"They are also very humble. If you compliment them, they get uncomfortable."

"We cannot say thank you?" Akira looked toward the door. "It would be rude to not thank our hosts."

"No, no; you can thank them but do not go overboard on the compliments. They are excellent cooks and carpenters but don't say more than 'this is an excellent meal' or 'that is nice woodwork' or they get embarrassed."

"We understand." Akira smiled as he looked at his two compatriots. "We will tread lightly then."

"Great. And don't get drunk."

"They do not drink?"

"Sure, they drink." Hugh said. "But they do not get drunk."

"No drunkenness, no cursing, limited compliments. I believe we have what we need to know about the Amish."

"Great, let's go say hello." Hugh turned toward the door. "Oh, also remember you look a lot like the Inuit that we are going to talk to set up a peace accord but right now they do not get along with each other."

"We look like their enemy?" Ren asked.

"Yes."

Akira laughed. "And no sudden movements. We have it all now."

"Oh boy." Hugh smiled. "Once they get to know you, they are very welcoming people."

"Well, they have accepted a Kyūketsuki, so that is not surprising." Akira said matter-of-factly.

"Oh, don't mention that either." Hugh said.

"They do not know what you are?" Ren's eyes got large.

"Well, a small number of them do. Several of the leaders know. We have an understanding, but I don't want the entire town to know."

"That is understandable." Ren said.

"And…" Hugh hesitated. "It's…better if…" His voice trailed off.

"They have not seen the likes of us." Akira offered.

"Yes." Hugh nodded. Then he considered it- the subject of werewolves had never come up. "As far as I know anyway."

"Then we will keep our true selves hidden from them." Akira said.

Ren winked at Hugh. "Our true selves. Unless there is some sort of danger, of course." He added. "Then we will defend ourselves and you and Hinata. That also goes without saying."

"Okay, fine." Hugh said. "Let's go." He gestured outside, where it was thankfully getting very dark. "We need to meet them quickly because they will all be going to bed very soon."

"Yes, to be up at dawn. We remember." Ren patted his stomach. "Do you think it is too late for dinner?"

Akira shook his head and stepped beside Hugh. "You should be the weight of two men with how you eat."

"It is chasing after you." Ren put his arm around Teruki and pulled him alongside as he crowded Hugh and Akira. "I am starving, let us go."

As they got to the bottom of the ramp, Eli was standing there with a lamp.

Thirty-Two

"Eli." Hugh embraced the man. "It is good to see you." He looked past him. "Hinata is already gone?"

"Issac has taken Hinata to his home for the night." Eli explained. "Those two seem to be very alike."

"Yeah; they're probably already eating by now." Hugh shook his head.

"Your home is not big enough for this many guests. For sleeping anyway. So we are making room in other places for you all."

"We can stay on the ship." Ren said.

Eli startled as Ren spoke in Japanese then his PAD in his pocket translated. "Oh! That is unusual."

"The device translates what they say and also what you say to them so you can speak to them." Hugh explained. "They only speak Japanese."

"Oh." Eli raised his voice. "No, you do not have to stay in there. We can make room." He looked at Hugh and returned his voice to a normal level. "We weren't expecting three others but we can definitely have them stay in Brother Benjamin's barn; there is plenty of room for you there."

"In a barn?" Akira said. "A drafty place for animals?"

Hugh patted him on the shoulder. "You will be impressed by what they call a barn."

Akira gave a short bow. "Then I appreciate your hospitality."

"I am Eli." Eli said again with a raised voice. He held out his hand.

"You don't need to shout, Eli." Hugh said with a chuckle. "Just speak normally."

"I am Akira." Akira pointed to his two comrades. "Teruki and Ren."

"Japanese?" Eli asked.

"We are not your enemy." Akira assured the man. "Even though I have been told we look similar."

"I am glad you aren't." Eli looked at their armor and swords. "You would be formidable, I am sure."

"We are mere farmers." Akira bowed slightly. "Simple farmers."

Eli tapped Akira's chest plate with his knuckles. "You must have vicious weeds where you farm, Akira."

"What?" Akira said with eyes wide. "I…I…"

Ren laughed. "Oh, Hinata told me the Amish shot their words as straight as arrows." He stepped between Hugh and Akira, putting his arms on their shoulders. "Congratulations for tongue-tying Akira, Eli-san!"

"Why don't we head toward the barn." Hugh said as he shrugged out from under Ren's arm. "And maybe get a bite to eat on the way. My friends said they were a little hungry."

Eli nodded. "Yes. I'll pass word on our way there." He looked behind the men. "You have things on the ship?"

"Things?" Teruki looked back at the ship.

"Yes, you know; a change of clothes." Eli rapped his knuckles on Akira's breastplate again. "I cannot imagine those are comfortable to sleep in."

"Teruki, grab our bags." Akira said flatly as he moved beside Eli. "I will walk here so this man stops playing me like a drum."

"Yes!" Teruki quickly moved into the ship to grab their three bags.

Hugh noticed that Eli's eyes went from Teruki to Akira, then he looked at Hugh as the man stepped beside him. Hugh gave him a short nod. *Eli already knows who is the leader.* Hugh smirked. "So how are things here, Eli? Calm and plain I hope?"

"Well." Eli looked away. "I was hesitant to tell you, but I suppose you should be warned."

Hugh's eyes got large. "What now?"

"Abigail wants to speak to you."

"Well, I'm sure she wants to know how the trip went." Hugh shrugged.

"No, it is not that. It is something far…"

"Hugh!" As if on cue, Abigail shouted as she was a mere twenty feet away. She was moving very quickly toward the group of men. "Oh, I wish you had a last name so I could use that too, HUGH!!"

"Oh… I…" Hugh looked at Eli for help. "What did I do?"

Suddenly Abigail was on Hugh- practically chest to chest with him. "Hugh! Oh, I am so very upset with you!"

"Hugh-san, you did not mention having a wife." Akira smiled. "But it seems you have a spirited one."

"Oh, she isn't my…" Hugh began.

"Sir, if you would let me have this conversation without interruptions." Now she was facing Akira. "It would be better for everyone."

Akira took a step back. "Woman, are you threatening me?"

"Abigail." Hugh put his hand on her shoulder. "What's the problem?"

She turned back toward him from Akira. "Oh, I can't describe how upset I am."

Hugh could see Akira smiling widely behind her. "If you just explain what is wrong, I'm sure I can fix the problem."

"You fix the problem!" She looked at Eli. "He says he will fix the problem."

"Abigail, please…" Eli began.

Abigail poked Hugh in the chest with a finger. "The problem is solved because I had to solve it. Me!"

"I am back. What did I miss?" Teruki said. He was carrying three small bags.

"It seems that this woman that is not Hugh's woman is upset with him at the level that a woman who was his woman would be." Akira said.

"I don't think that translated correctly." Hugh said. He looked at Akira. "What are you trying to say?" He hoped the break would help Abigail regain her composure.

"Hugh!" Abigail said. "While you were out riding around on that… thing." She pointed at the ship. "Doing whatever you were doing."

Hugh decided he definitely did not want to discuss killing the Martians, although meeting the Venusians seemed like something that might go over well. "I met some people who can help us. They are from Venus." Hugh began. "You see, they have…"

"I am not concerned with people from Venus." She hesitated. "Venusians, I would guess."

"That is right." Hugh said. "Nicely done. So I met these people…"

"Nicely done?" Abigail seemed to get even more upset. She went to poke Hugh again, then stopped herself. "What would have been nicely done would have been to not leave here and have me fight two." Now she held up two fingers and waved them in front of Hugh's face. "TWO vampires which could have easily become three!" Now she waved three fingers. "THREE!"

"Ohh." Ren said. "She is one that knows about you." He nodded. "Are you sure she is not your woman?"

"I am married, *Sir*." Abigail seethed. "To someone that is definitely not Hugh!"

"Abigail." Eli tried in vain. "Please…"

"In that case…" Ren stopped when Akira put his hand on his arm and shook his head. "Never mind."

"Abigail. What vampires? Vampires showed up here in Anchorage." He looked at Eli. "Two of them?"

"They were those gatherers." Eli said. "You remember the two men and the woman."

"Well, they weren't vampires." Hugh said. "They were most certainly dead when I left." As soon as he said it, he got flustered. "What I mean is…"

"What you mean is you *bit* that one woman on the neck, then you put them under the tarp, her head was close enough to her body that they reconnected, then after a week of eating one of the other men… making him a vampire as well… and then I had to fight her…she growled at me… there was a fire… I only had a stick because she had my staff… and then I…" She held up her hands and balled them into fists. "Fought for my life with her!" She punched Hugh in the chest. "For my very life!"

"Oh, Hugh-san."

Hugh looked at Akira. "I don't think I need your help on this."

"You will not get it." He stepped beside Abigail. "I think I may be on her side for this matter. You left two vampire behind for her to deal with?"

Hugh raised his hands plaintively. "She was dead!"

"Undead you mean!"

"Abigail, please. You're not making sense."

"She became a vampire, Hugh." Eli said. "She had to fight off the woman with a tree branch. She was trying to eat her. Abigail had to fight her off then burn the three of them into ashes." He pointed to the other side of the clearing. There was indeed a big black mark and ashes there. "Right over there, in fact."

"Which is what *you* should have done." Now Abgail was back to pointing at Hugh with one finger.

"I'm glad you're okay?" Hugh tried. He looked at Eli then back at Abigail. "Good job?"

"Good? … Oh!" Abgail turned and stormed off.

"And we thought we were formidable." Ren smiled wide. "She and a stick fought two vampires to the death." He looked toward the village. "The Amish are to be admired as fighters, I think."

"We do not believe in fighting, Ren." Eli said. "We will defend ourselves against attacking animals of course, but fighting other people?" He shook his head. "No." He looked over his shoulder. "They were already dead as far as she was concerned. And she was also worried that if they made it to the village, others would be infected."

"Oh." Ren shuddered. "Rampaging vampire."

Eli looked at Hugh. "You really should have made sure they were no longer a threat."

"I…" Hugh said. "I thought I had. Honestly." He let out a long breath. "Let's get to the barn."

"Yes. Follow me, gentlemen." Eli seemed unconvinced as he started walking.

Hugh fell behind the group that was now chatting casually as they walked. He was flabbergasted; he never expected the woman to survive having her head cut off. He had always assumed that dealing death blows to his victims was enough to keep them from transforming. A great many of his victims, he had just stabbed repeatedly- he thought of the last woman he killed before being frozen; Gina the young hooker. He had stabbed her after biting her. Did she become a vampire later? Now it seemed that it was very likely. It also seemed likely that after killing thousands of people in the past, a great many of them might have also become vampires because he was mistaken about how resilient the vampire virus was. Then, he thought of his fight with Benfleet.

The first thing the man had said was 'you!' as if he recognized Hugh. At the time, Hugh thought it might have been because Benfleet had seen him while he was transformed into a wolf and recognized him later in the woods. Now he wasn't as sure. Could Benfleet have been someone he had attacked centuries ago? The fact of the matter was that Hugh looked virtually the same as he did when he was frozen in ice thousands of years before. His face would be burned into the memory of the man that would become Benfleet. Then through the centuries and

eons, he lived and killed, then contracted rabies, but still retained his reasoning and memories. It would have been a shock to see a familiar face from long ago- the face that had made them a vampire as well. Hugh felt empty inside as he thought about it.

Thirty-Three

"Hugh?" Eli said. "You are very quiet back there. Are you alright?"

"I was just thinking about what Abigail said." Hugh replied. "It's a lot to take in. I mean… did I accidentally make other vampires through the years and not realize it? Did condemn people to live the life I've had to live?"

"That would be a terrible thing." Akira said. "Hugh, grandmaster of vampires."

"You can't second guess yourself, Hugh." Eli ignored the other man. "You need to put the past behind you and look to the future."

A future where my disease is curable. Hugh thought. Maybe I need to get rid of it and just live a normal life. "That's easy to say." Was all he could reply.

"Hugh," Akira said. "I apologize for making light of the situation."

"It's fine, Akira." Hugh said. "I just need some time to think."

"We are here." Eli pointed at the large barn. While it was only two stories, it towered over the house next to it- standing as tall as a three-story building. It was rough-hewn shiplap with a dozen windows on each side on the first floor and large double doors on rollers set in the front on both the top and bottom floors. "The barn."

"This is an impressive building." Ren said. "And yet you only keep animals in here?"

"The winters are brutal so we need to have room for many animals if there is a blizzard." Eli explained. He looked away from the group. "Elija approaches." He pointed.

"Elija." Hugh said. He knew the man well. "How are you this evening."

"I was told we had visitors that were hungry so Beth sent me here with a basket of things she threw together."

Hugh smirked. Beth was an accomplished cook and cheese maker; the Japanese men would be impressed with what she considered just 'thrown together'. "She is a wonderful hostess."

The man smiled at Hugh then looked at the men- they were not only dressed in gleaming -formidable looking- armor, but also looked very Inuit. "Oh!" He stopped approaching them.

"Send our regards to your wife, Sir." Akira said with a short bow. "I hope we did not inconvenience her too much having prepared a meal this late in the evening."

"Oh. No, it was no trouble." Elija said. He still hadn't approached them.

"These men are from a far-off land called Japan. They are not related to the Inuit." Eli explained.

"Oh." Elija didn't seem convinced. He looked at the three men. "How is it that I hear a strange language coming from you, then hear you in our tongue?"

"It is a device from the ship that translates for us. We are Japanese and speak that language." Teruki said. "And we are actually here to help in dealing with those Inuit people." He nodded at Akira. "To establish an accord where you can all live in peace."

"That is a large basket." Ren observed. "Is it full, per chance?"

Akira looked at Ren. "Stop thinking with your stomach; we are trying to establish good relations with this man."

Ren patted his belly. "Eating his wife's food would seem to be an excellent way to do that. Compliments would follow soon after, I am sure."

Elija laughed. "Yes, I admit my wife is an excellent cook." He approached the three. "Do you always dress like this?"

"It's ceremonial." Hugh offered. "They wanted to look their best when they arrived in town."

Eli raised an eyebrow at Hugh and cleared his throat; obviously not believing him. "Yes, well. Let us get inside." He gestured at a small door

built into the larger rolling one. “I will show you to your beds and you can eat and get settled for the night.”

“That’s a good idea, Eli.” Hugh said. “I’d like to set off for Fair Banks tomorrow.” He hesitated. “Later in the afternoon, that is.” He started toward the door. “Let’s see what Beth’s put together. She makes cheese, you know.”

“Then here is your basket. I will pick it up in the morning.” Elija held it out for Ren.

Ren took the basket then looked at it. “Oh; it is quite heavy. I believe I need to send a preemptive compliment to your wife.” He gave a short bow. “Thank your fine lady for us.”

Elija laughed again. “I shall.” He gave a wave. “See you tomorrow.” He nodded at Eli. “Good night, Brother Eli. Brother Hugh.”

“Good night.” Hugh said in return.

“A Kyūketsuki with brothers.” Akira said. “Does he know… of you?”

“He does.” Hugh said. After spending a month working alongside Elija building several canoes, he had confided his condition with the man. “But he has never seen me as one.”

“Huh.” Akira said. “That maybe wise. Your appearance is… surprising.”

“I was going to say something about that.” Eli spoke up, “But I wasn’t sure how to bring it up.”

“You have seen him as a vampire?”

“Me? Sure.” Eli shrugged. “No, I mean his… your appearance now. You seem much healthier.”

Hugh nodded. “Yes, while we were in their village, the mechanical doctor on the ship examined me. It seems I had been infected with several diseases over the years. But it cured me.” He didn’t want to even try to explain how he had acquired the plethora of sexual and blood diseases and was glad Eli didn’t ask what they were. “And it cured Ren’s

cancer that he didn't know he had yet." Hugh opened the door. "Come in." He beckoned.

"Thank you." Akira said as he marched to the door. He had to turn sideways to walk through it thanks to his armor and swords.

Ren and Teruki followed close behind.

Hugh just looked into the barn. While he had been invited in several times, it had been a while and it seemed that the invitation could grow 'stale' so stepping in would give him an uneasy feeling since he hadn't been there in a few days.

"I will get them settled, Hugh." Eli said as he moved to the door. "You should go to your home and get settled. Some food and drink was brought there as well."

"Thank you." Hugh said. Then without thinking he added: "It is good to be home." As soon as he said it, he regretted it; he was well aware that several of the town's council expected him to leave once the issue with the Inuit was taken care of. "I mean..."

"I know what you mean." Eli smiled. "And I am still working on them."

If I were cured, they would probably feel different about me. Hugh thought.

"That doctor did a fine job, I must say." Eli said. "Your appearance alone would sway another two or three of them, I'm sure." He put his hand on Hugh's shoulder. "Go home and relax. Tomorrow afternoon we will go to Fair Banks."

"Tomorrow afternoon. After dinner." Hugh said.

"I will bring everyone to your place." Eli patted Hugh's shoulder. "Go, Brother; I will host these armored fellows."

Hugh laughed then got serious. "There's something you should know about them." He stepped closer to Eli. "Before we leave together."

"Are they…" Eli looked into the barn. He could hear the trio talking as they put the different meats, cheeses, and breads on a table. "Are they… *vampires*?"

Hugh shook his head. "Honestly, I don't expect you to believe me but… they are werewolves."

Eli cocked his head to the side. "Like the Wildmen of the south?"

Hugh considered that. While he had heard stories about the ferocious people who lived farther south into what used to be America, he had never actually met one. If the stories could be believed, they were practically wild animals. No one had ever mentioned them changing their appearance so either they were always werewolves, or just extremely violent people. "I've never met a Wildman so I have no idea." He shrugged. "They are honorable men though and they've agreed to help me with talking to the Inuit because I helped them in their village. I will take them home the day after tomorrow, or the day after that at the latest. They change as well, but instead of looking like a vampire, they look like wolves. Standing upright wolves."

"Well, that is good that they are going home. I can't imagine the council being pleased with *that* situation."

"I have told them to be discrete." Hugh fought to keep a smile off his face. "And to keep their cursing and drinking to a minimum."

"That is very much appreciated."

"Eli-san!" Teruki called from inside the barn. "You must explain this cheese to us! We are having a disagreement."

"Butterkäse?" Hugh asked, referring to the soft butter cheese that many of the women in the town made. Beth's was especially good. "What's disagreeable about that?"

"It's probably the bleu cheese." Eli said matter-of-factly. "Too sophisticated for their taste."

"It's moldy and shouldn't be eaten." Hugh said flatly. "You know where I stand on that abomination."

"The other side of the room, apparently." Eli shoved Hugh away from the door. "Go home, you unsophisticated man."

Hugh turned the shove into a slow jog as he headed toward his home. "Good night, Brother." He called over his shoulder. And just because he had not yet, he moved to a full sprint, reaching his home two miles away in mere minutes. When he got there he was pleasantly surprised to discover he was wasn't even winded.

With a satisfied smile, Hugh pushed open the door to his house; Abigail and Gabriel were sitting at his table.

Abigail still seemed very upset.

"Oh boy." Hugh stepped in.

Thirty-Four

"Eli-san." Ren said. "It seems your cheese has gone bad."

The three of them were sitting around the table moving the food onto a platter, making an impromptu charcuterie board.

Eli smiled as he moved to the table. "It's called bleu cheese and it's supposed to look like that. It is aged cheese." He picked up a small square of it along with a slice of bread. "It is a sharp cheese."

"And the… color?" Ren asked as he picked up a piece and sniffed it.

"It has had mold cultures added to it while it was being made. It adds the sharp taste." He put the piece of cheese on the edge of the slice and bit it off. "It is an acquired taste. Not everyone likes it; it won't offend me if you don't try it."

"Ren will try anything once if it is called food first." Akira said. He picked up a square and smelled it. "It does smell sharp." He looked at Eli. "We have a cheese called Sakura which is made from pickled cherry blossoms. It is also an acquired taste." He nibbled on the cheese and made a face.

"It is better with bread or crackers to soften the bite." Eli suggested.

"It is not bad." Akira admitted. He picked up a piece of bread and ate the piece of cheese like Eli had. "No, that is not bad cheese at all."

Ren tried the same then fought to swallow it. "No. We will not agree on that." He stuck out his tongue. "Not at all."

Eli laughed. "Well, we are all indeed different." He pointed at the Butterkäse. "That is a soft, mild cheese. It's actually my favorite."

Teruki picked up that cheese and a slice of venison. He put both on a slice of bread, folded them over and took a large bite. He gave an approving nod.

"So Hugh tells me he helped you in your village."

Akira looked at his two friends. "Well, it was more us helping him, I think."

"That is accurate." Ren said while chewing.

"Well, I appreciate that you were willing to come here to help us with the Inuit." Eli let out a sigh. "I am hoping that we are able to establish a peace accord with them." Eli took a bite of the bread.

"I imagine Hugh will be very persuasive." Akira said. He picked up some of the venison.

"Well, he also speaks Inuit, so that is what is important." Eli said. "No one in town speaks it well enough to have a discussion about living in peace."

Akira tapped the PAD in his pocket. "These would allow you to speak to them easily."

"Until you landed, I did not know about those." Eli explained. "And I would not feel comfortable using it."

"Because of your religion." Teruki said. "Hugh explained that to us."

"Yes." Eli said simply. He wasn't sure how to broach the subject of them being werewolves and it didn't seem a way to do so would present itself.

"Between Hugh speaking their language and being a vampire, I'm sure they can be persuaded to settle their differences with your people." Akira smiled.

"I suppose so." Eli put the last of the bread in his mouth.

"Eli-san, you are a man in turmoil." Akira stood. "Just speak what is in your mind." He cocked his head to the side. "What is troubling you?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Since you call Hugh your brother, I am sure he has told you about us. What we are."

"He called you Samurai." Eli said. "Warriors."

"We are that." Akira changed into a werewolf. "And more."

Eli's eyes got large. "Oh my! Yes he mentioned that. Like the Wildmen of the south."

Akira cocked his head to the side and one ear drooped- it was a very doglike move. "What? There are others like us living here? Large numbers of our kind?" While there were a dozen werewolves living in and around the village in Japan, Akira had thought it was an isolated incident. Two of the werewolves had declined to join the Samurai and just lived on their own- one a hermit, the other with a wife and three children. There were of course stories about werewolves in other places, but none had seemed to be more than folklore. "Nearby even?"

"Well." Eli said as the shock of seeing Akira change wore off. "Whether they are actual werewolves or just violent men is not clear. They act like animals; attacking anyone that enters their territory." He held up a finger. "However they do not often roam out of their own territory so as long as we stay away we are not in danger."

"Ahh." Akira changed back. "Well Eli, if you decide you want to open negotiations with those people, have Hugh contact us. I would relish the opportunity to speak to others of our kind. If that is what they are."

"There are not many of you back home?"

"Twelve in our group as Samurai." Akira admitted. "And two others declined becoming Samurai. Besides that, we have not met others."

"I see." Eli was hesitant to ask how werewolves were made. "So there are only twelve?"

"Of course, when the children of werewolves turn twelve or thirteen, if they will become one, it is discovered at that point; when they reach a certain level of maturity."

Eli nodded. "Well, that makes sense." He glanced at the door.

"If we are keeping you, we will finish eating, then retire for the night." Akira gave another bow. "We thank you for your hospitality." He sat. "Now I think I will try to eat something before these youngsters eat even the plate."

Eli smiled. "I have had that same problem." Now he gave a short bow. "Good night to you Akira, Ren, and Teruki. I will see you in the morning." He gestured at the door. "We will have breakfast at my home, then go to Hugh's."

"Excellent." Ren said. After a look from Akira he added, "and thank you, Sir."

With another smile, Eli turned and left.

"Were we not supposed to show ourselves to them?" Teruki asked.

"He was obviously curious. And if he has seen a vampire, he would not be too surprised."

"He was a little." Ren said. "At the beginning. But he was not scared. That was interesting."

"Men with strong faith rarely are. These Amish are meek but also powerful." Akira observed. "It would be honorable to help them with their wild men of the south problem."

"I am also curious what they look like." Teruki said. "We should mention it to Hugh to make sure he invites us for the expedition."

Akira nodded. "Yes." He said simply. A battle against other werewolves sounded like something he really wanted to attempt.

Thirty-Five

"Gabriel. Abigail." Hugh said. "This is a surprise." He pulled the door shut behind him.

"I am sorry for the intrusion, but I… *we* had to speak with you." Gabriel said.

"Well, let's speak." Hugh said as he moved to the table and sat in a chair. "What's on your mind?"

"Abigail?" Gabriel coaxed.

Abigail let out a long breath. "Hugh, I apologize for accosting you as soon as you arrived. I should not have yelled at you in front of those other men, and I should definitely not have struck you."

"Struck?" Hugh sat back. He remembered her poking him in the chest. And the one punch. She had hit him harder in the past when he had teased her about her housekeeping. "Oh." Realizing it was a serious matter, he kept a smile from his face. "Abigail, it is okay. I'm sure…"

"It is *not* okay." Gabriel interrupted. "Not at all. It was…is very embarrassing."

"I'll get over it." Hugh tried to assure the man.

Gabriel stared at Hugh. "I was embarrassed that my wife spoke out like that in a gathering of men." He shook his head. "Elders were even present."

Hugh thought back to the highly-structured and male-driven Amish communities he had interacted with in the past. While this group was definitely more liberal in their ways, they were still Amish. Which meant that women had a subservient place in the community; there were in fact no women serving as elders or in any positions of authority. Now that he considered it, he couldn't imagine a woman in an Amish community in the 1700s speaking out the way Abigail had- even though they were

like brother and sister. At worst, it would have happened in private, at best never at all. "Abigail, I understand you were upset and I apologize for putting you in the position where you had to defend your life. But it bothers me that you think I did it on purpose. I would never have done that."

"I understand." Abigail said.

"You are like family to me. The sister I never had." Hugh continued. "And believe me that I would fight tooth and nail to keep you safe. What bothers me more than you being upset." He looked at Gabriel. "Is the fact that this might not have been the only time that someone came back as a vampire because of me."

"What?"

Hugh realized if he continued, he would have to describe murdering people over and over, or biting them then mutilating their bodies to where he thought they were dead. It was a road he did not want to go down with Abigail, Gabriel, or any of the Amish. "Let's just leave it at that. As Eli said; I can't change the past." He gave a firm nod. "But I can definitely make sure that in the future it does not happen." He put his hands on the table. "And if you have an issue with how I am acting, I have no problem with you discussing it *in private* with me. In an even-tempered way." He hoped that castigation would be enough to satisfy Gabriel.

"I understand." Abigail said again. She still wouldn't look at him.

"Gabriel, I appreciate you coming here to talk about this." He gave a shrug. "I feel very strongly about you as well you know. I consider you a true friend."

"I appreciate that, Brother Hugh."

Hugh was relieved that Gabriel had added 'brother' to his name. He let out a long breath. "What a day it has been."

Gabriel stood quickly. "Sorry; we don't mean to keep you."

"Oh!" Hugh startled. "No; I wasn't asking you to leave." He smiled. "I mean today has been a very, very strange day. Fighting Martians, pulling ships out of caves, meeting Venusians and werewolves."

"What?" Gabriel sat just as quickly. "You don't mean those three men… They are…" His voice trailed off.

"Oh man." Hugh kicked himself mentally for letting that fact slip. "Yes, they are. Honestly, I never thought they were real."

"Said the vampire." Gabriel said with a smirk.

"Yeah, I suppose so." Hugh admitted. "And between that, and flying here, I am exhausted." He purposefully left off 'hungry'.

Gabriel stood again and beckoned for Abigail to stand. "Then we will see you in the morning. Perhaps we can talk more then."

Hugh stood as well. "That would be good. Later in the afternoon, I will be going with Eli to speak to the Inuit about peace."

"Eli told me you two were going to do that." Gabriel said. "Will you bring those other three? Is that why they are here?"

"They said they would accompany me to help convince the Inuit. If things get difficult, they will be helpful in getting away. Otherwise, maybe we can use them as a bargaining chip."

"A what?"

"If the Inuit think the Amish have werewolves and vampires as allies, they might be more willing to talk about peaceful coexistence."

Abigail smiled. "Well, it seems we do in fact have werewolves and vampires as allies. Vampire at least."

Hugh smirked. "Yeah, I suppose you do." He yawned. "Oh, sorry."

"We will leave you until midday." Gabriel said, understanding Hugh's issue with the sun.

"That would be nice. I think I just want to get some sleep." *And something to eat.*

Gabriel put out his hand. "Good night, Brother Hugh."

"Good night, Brother Gabriel." Hugh shook the man's hand. He smiled at Abigail. "I hope we are okay now."

"Okay?"

"Back to how we were?"

Abigail nodded. "Yes; I think we are Brother Hugh."

"Excellent." Hugh moved to the door and opened it. "See you tomorrow."

The pair left and Hugh patted his stomach. He was quite hungry. "Great." He scowled, not looking forward to having to hunt an animal; he was actually also very tired. A knock on the door made him startle. "Gabriel can we…" His voice trailed off; Issac was standing there. "Oh, Issac. How are you?" He said, now worried that the young man would come in and spend the next hour or two talking.

"I am under strict orders from Brother Eli to drop this off and leave immediately." Issac brought up a wooden cage. "So… Here it is and good night." He put the cage on the doorstep and marched off.

"Huh." Hugh watched Issac leave- it was actually the least amount of time the young man had ever spent at his home. He looked down at the cage. There were two large rabbits in it. "Ahh, Brother Eli." He picked up the cage and looked into it. "Thanks for saving me a bunch of running. Between Inuit Grand Governors, werewolves, an angry Shensi, and an old Amish man, I'll need all the rest I can get for tomorrow."

With a relieved sigh, he closed the door. Within half an hour, he had eaten, disposed of the carcasses and was in bed. He was asleep ten minutes later, dreaming of the floating cities on Venus.

The End