

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rugulururu

“The exhibition is taking on a life of its own,” Maradei told David one evening. “We’ve had over three hundred thousand attendees, and the lines are only getting longer. I’ve never seen anything like it. Seventy-three museums and academies around the Second Federation are already inquiring about duplicating and possibly expanding the display and narrative, including making replicas of the *Lucky Lynn*, and I haven’t checked my messages in hours.”

David gulped. “Maradei, this is—”

“I never dreamed my career would take off this! I’ve heard from well over a thousand scientists, professors, and researchers across every imaginable discipline, all of them talking about conventions and symposia to share research and advocate for the Fleet to endorse a voyage to Earth and beyond.”

“That’s wonderful!”

She threw up her hands. “It’s wonderful, it’s more than I ever dreamed of, and I keep fearing that someone will see past my façade and discover I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“As in, who in the vast tracts of the Creator’s universe are you to be behind something this large?”

She exhaled sharply and sank into her seat. “Yes! Like I’m an impostor whose ruse is verging on exposure. I am so grateful for the support... but who am I to lead this movement?”

I have felt the same way ever since I discovered that Fleet Admiral Lupercus has been fast-tracking my Fleet career to the absurd degree of placing me in command of Dawnstar. “If these hundreds of thousands of Sentients and tens of thousands of experts judge you kindlier than you judge yourself, then your self-judgement may be wrong. And I cannot imagine anyone more qualified to tell this story!”

“I keep telling myself that and I love you for telling me, David.”

He smiled. “Can you hire Sentients or recruit volunteers to help?”

“David... I think I conceptualize and construct educational and impactful stories and know how to lead teams to breathe life into those stories. But this... it’s too big for me!”

“What if you asked the leading specialists in each field to coordinate and prioritize the symposia requests? You could support them with information from my old data cards.”

“You mean let my baby grow up and move beyond me?” She smiled. “That might work. Space, maybe I do need to let go and let others take the lead in their respective areas. Isn’t that what mothers do? Let go when the time comes? But how? I’ve never had to let go of a project before. It’s mine and letting go makes it not mine and not under my control, and that scares me. How can others care for this as much as I do?”

“Letting go doesn’t mean loving less. It means giving others the chance to step in and love it their own way. Look at it this way: I love you as my partner, which is not the same as your parents’ love, but which is just as deep.”

She gazed at him. “You’re right, even I’m still not sure how to do this. As for you, my love, you have the attention of both Fleet Supreme Command and the High Commission. Leverage it. Make your case to them. Tell them everything. Explain the importance.”

I am deathly afraid they may reject me and snuff out my best chance of returning to Earth, but if not now, then when? I cannot and will not squander the gift Maradei has given me, to say nothing of over three hundred thousand Sentients. “I will, thanks to your inspiration.”

“Some visitors walk out in tears. Some walk out silently. Others ask questions and discuss among themselves. We’re making a real impact, David. Sentients are reconnecting with our shared history and looking toward a richer future. And... most amazing of all... Sentients are sharing tales and even artifacts passed down across thousands of years. We’ve already added kiosks where they can add their stories and have them read by others. This prophecy is no longer the stuff of childhood bedtimes. It’s alive. I’m also receiving artifacts. One Sentient even gave me an ancient journal written in some unknown pictographic language.”

David bolted upright. *Amar-ussun. Arun-Cipactl'ii. How have I not seen this before?* “Maradei, search through my data cards for anything related to a place called Egypt and a language called hieroglyphics. If that doesn’t work, then search for other ancient Earth civilizations with pictographic alphabets.”

Maradei blinked. “Egypt? Hieroglyphics?”

“Egypt was an ancient Earth civilization. There were others. Azca? Meso... Mesopotamus? Space, if Aunt Gertrude would never let me live this down! And Maradei, if this journal is genuine, it might hold the key to learning how and why the prophecy originated.”

“I really don’t like the Independent Sector,” David grumbled as *Dawnstar* approached Rugulururu ten days later for a goodwill visit. “I know it contains ten thousand planets, but all I can think about are Barod and Genumose.”

Tamor smiled at him. “I hope this planet changes your understandable opinion, Sir.”

David led a contingent of space-weary officers to a settlement on a cliff high above an ocean, safe from massive unpredictable tides caused by the planet’s many moons and their eccentric orbits that played havoc with the oceans. Much of the plant life had red leaves. The architecture consisted of squat stone edifices that reminded David of Fleet architecture. He socialized for a while, and then wandered off to explore on his own.

He found himself in another bar built onto the edge of the cliff and sat watching the tumultuous waters below. Sunlight reflected off the waves in stark contrast to the dull red leaves. The air smelled of smoke from nearby chimneys and the sharp tang of salt water. The cliffside settlement seemed to teeter on the cliff’s edge. The pitted and scarred stone walls stood firm against the repeated battering of storms. The waves crashed and rumbled as they seemed to reach, clawlike, for the settlement.

Something caught his eye. He looked up to see a heavysset humanoid male staring at him. This Sentient bore a scar that obliterated half his facial features. Metal plates covered large areas

of his skin. The woman sitting next to the man looked as if her flesh had solidified in mid-boil. Both cast rancorous looks in his direction. David brushed it off and focused on the view until he leaned back in his seat and bumped into someone behind him.

“Pardon me,” he said. His smile faded as the disfigured male moved in toward him. He sat upright. “Sorry about the collision, Sir.”

The Sentient stepped closer. David’s hand strayed to his hip, but there was nothing there. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted that the cantina was suddenly deserted.

“I said I’m sorry,” he said firmly as he swiveled to face his Sentient, his calm voice belying his growing alarm.

“You!” A hairy finger jabbed his chest. “You’re Johnson, arntcha? My wife wants to know if you did this to us.”

“What?” David spat. “I’ve never seen either of you in my life!”

He grabbed David’s tunic and lifted him off the ground. “You attacked us on Barod!”

David’s face went white. *Dear Creator, these are the Sentients I didn’t kill!* A scowl beyond his worst nightmares twisted the man’s already mangled features.

“Ashrak,” the woman warned. He glanced at her. David seized his chance and shoved his foot into Ashrak’s groin, sending him backward onto the floor, then sprang to his feet. The tavern was no longer empty: A crowd of disfigured, maimed, and scarred Sentients packed the room and closed around him. David snatched a flute from a startled band member and thrust it into a Sentient’s face with all his strength. His target crumpled to the ground dead, the impact driving her nose into her brain. He lashed out with his makeshift weapon. Four more Sentients collapsed before the mob overwhelmed him. Something slammed into his head, and everything went black.

David opened his eyes with a groan. His head felt like it was in a vise. He looking around and found himself in a square cell of heavy stone blocks with bars for one wall and a tiny window. It was dark outside and cold; he huddled in a corner searching for his equipment, but the brigands had removed everything. The fetid air smelled of excrement and decay. *My luck picked a fine time to run out.*

Dawn found him searching for any weakness, however trifling, that could improve his odds. He found nothing useful and lay back on the hard wood bed. Presently, a door clanged open, and a squad of disheveled Sentients tromped down the hall to his cell.

“Look, he’s awake. We’re here to carry out your sentence, Captain Johnson.”

“Sentence?” David stood and flexed his sore muscles. “What sentence? I’ve been neither charged nor tried.”

Uproarious laughter exacerbated his already splitting headache. “You were tried and convicted on three thousand two hundred and five counts of capital murder and three hundred twelve counts of maiming and attempted murder. Your sentence is death. The sun is up, and the sky is clear. You’re lucky: Today is a good day to die.”

I beg to differ! Guards entered and marched David from the prison. The morning sun blinded him after his dank cell. The crowd’s jeers rang in his ears. His heart sank in despair and fright despite his surreal amusement. Lines of armed Sentients kept the avenue between prison and the killing ground open. David’s head swam and he stumbled, crying out. A guard prodded him upright.

“If you think this light is bright, then you should have seen the light on Barod!”

“Come on, Tamor,” David muttered, as his eyes searched the crowd. “Where are you? I hope you unleash antimatter ruin on this place once you learn of my demise.”

The execution ground was a square field of plasticrete surrounded by high stone walls. A crowd of onlookers stood in a circle around a platform rising a half metron from the ground. A gantry stood above this, with chains dangling from it. An executioner fastened the links around

his body and hoisted him above the platform. He looked down and noticed that the center was a deep well. The water beneath him churned with thousands of tiny fishes.

“Go ahead, take a good look,” someone said. “We’re going to lower you into that water nice and slow. Don’t worry, you’ll have lots of time to think things over as those little fishies eat you to the bone!”

David gasped for air. *I’m going to die. I am going to die! Creator damn it, perishing in the mushroom cloud over Barod would have been better than this!* He lifted his head to look over the throng. One Sentient resembling a cross between a human and a mongrel stood before him.

“Any last words, Johnson?”

Creator damn it, if this is my time to die, then I am not going to give these Sentients the satisfaction of begging or groveling! David held his head high. “Look at yourselves. Many of you are terribly wounded. Many more of your friends and family are dead. Some died immediately, but some took days, weeks, even months to die. I did this to you. My one regret is that some of you are still alive.”

Maradei, how I long to be in your arms and feel your soft femininity against me one last time. I wish I could tell you I love you one last time. No Sentient has ever believed in me more than you, who have given me the greatest gift of all: myself. So much left undone. I pray someone carries on when I’m gone.

The mob’s bewildered silence turned to apoplexy as it pressed forward. The guards were overpowered, and a mass of Sentients swarmed around David, reaching for him. Screams and splashes rose from Sentients pushed into the water by the surging rabble. David was thankful for the riot. *Please, dear Creator, if this is my time, then so be it, but if—.*

The air split with a roar like a god's shout and the ground shook as the scent of burning flesh filled the air. Hot liquid splattered David, who retched as he realized it was blood. Bits of flesh, dust, and other debris rained on him as more explosions turned Sentients into scraps of charred meat. Plaz cannon chattered as the crowd’s vengeful jeers became keens of terror and mortal agony. David craned his neck and saw *Dawnstar’s* six Expedition class dropships hurling

bombs and missiles into his general vicinity as they descended towards him. Each warhead spawned bursts of light and pools of fire and death. The dropships' chin-mounted quad turrets strafed the streets and raked the rooftops with withering fire.

Fangs and Strike Fangs appeared overhead. More fusion warheads spewed plumes of smoke into the sky. One dropship settled to earth, its tail ramp dropping open to disgorge Marines who fanned out, plaz rifles raised, and formed a line marching abreast and killing every adult Sentient who didn't flee their path. The execution yard cleared quickly. Explosions rattled buildings and teeth as the Strike Fangs swooped low to provide close ground support. Some Marines took up covering positions, others mopped up resistance, and a squad raced toward David, who laughed the insane laugh of the reprieved.

"Are you all right, Sir?" a Marine called.

"Doing much better now," David shouted back. "By the Creator, am I glad to see you!"

A fierce gun battle erupted nearby. Ignoring David's protests, a Marine fired several plaz bolts at a jammed overhead pulley, which gave way and dropped him toward the ravenous—and seemingly angry—fish. He opened his mouth to scream but the wind left his lungs as a strong shove to the small of his back swung him clear of the killing well. Another plaz gun fired. David's stomach fluttered as he fell freely until eight Marines caught him and carried him face down and still bound into the dropship. A few moments later, freed of his bonds, David slumped on the cool deck and kissed it as the dropship rose sharply, then rose to peer down at the destruction from the open tail ramp. Fighters crisscrossed the area strafing and bombing pockets of resistance as the remaining dropships recalled their Marines and lifted off. The execution ground was only recognizable by the surrounding streets. *Hundreds of Sentients killed in minutes. My survival carries a heavy price. I hope my life is worth all those lost today.*

"Sir," Major Maxqur squatted beside him, "I am glad to see you well."

"What happened?" David croaked. "How did you locate me?"

"The local authorities responded to our queries by claiming you wandered into the forest. We discovered your intact commlink and suspected foul play. Commander Tamor dispatched the

rescue package and authorized full use of defensive force the moment we intercepted communications that revealed the truth.” He shrugged. “They opened fire. We responded.”

David winced as a medic treated his injuries. “Major, I can never repay you.”

Maxqur smiled as he clapped David on the shoulder. “You know those rounds of drinks I owe you? We’re even.”

David laughed. “Done!”

David strode onto *Dawnstar*’s bridge less than two hours after his rude awakening. Tamor grinned and nodded as he rose to relinquish the command seat. “Captain! You had us worried, Sir.”

“You think you were worried? Commander, was that level of force necessary?”

Tamor’s expression darkened, his whiskers standing straight out. “Sir, No Sentient who abetted your execution and/or fired on our soldiers is innocent.”

“Can’t debate that.” David nodded. “What now?”

“Fleet Supreme Command ordered *Dawnstar* to remain in orbit until relieved by a multi-jurisdictional Second Federation and Independent task force. Any other arriving vessels will receive one warning to depart, and we may destroy departing vessels without further warning.”

David looked at his Executive Officer and friend. “You know what, Tamor? I will not feel guilty for the Sentients who died today. More importantly, did we sustain any casualties?”

“Not one, Sir.”

“Even better! Get off the bridge for a while, Tamor; I’ll take the rest of your watch.”

Crewmembers entered and departed the bridge as the watch changed. Lieutenant Commander Wurlz entered the bridge to relieve a Communications tech and sat at his station for a few moments before snapping his fingers and turning towards David.

“Sir, with my apologies, I almost forgot that several personal messages are waiting for you. Shall I forward them to your cabin holo?”

Well, dear Creator, it seems your scientists are about to pass judgement on me since you didn't jump at your chance! David stood, his heart pounding. “Yes. You have the conn.”

He dashed to his cabin and discovered dozens of messages. The scientists were unanimous: If Hanamur's findings were correct, then a voyage to Earth was both feasible and readily justifiable in light of the data to be obtained. Hundreds of holos poured in over the next five weeks; at one point, Wurlz jokingly asked if he could handle official traffic for a change.

“Tamor,” David said one evening, “it's time.”

“High time,” came the reply. *Enough destruction; it's time to focus on the living and those yet to live.*

David picked up his writeboard and took a deep breath as he crafted his dispatch. He tapped his writeboard one last time to forward his request for an audience with Fleet Supreme Command to Wurlz, who transmitted it with *Dawnstar's* daily reports. The answer arrived within two days: *Dawnstar* was ordered to Fleet Base One to allow her Captain to exercise his right to appear before his highest superiors.

“Your timing is providential,” Maradei said when David told her. “As of now, one hundred and seventeen museums want to duplicate the exhibit and forty-two of them are actively working on it. Fifteen hundred more scientists and academics are interested, and sixty-three are working to create symposia in their disciplines. David, my love, how can the Fleet deny you?”

“It's all thanks to you, Maradei,” David said as a lump welled in his throat. *Knowing I was losing you would have been the worst part of dying!* “I would not—could not—be here without you. I don't how to begin to repay you.”

Her eyes widened a little. “You trusted me to take on this project and continue to support and encourage me and still think you owe me something? But I won’t argue if you insist on wrapping me in your arms and letting me sleep next to you.”

David closed his eyes as he imagined Maradei’s warmth next to him, the softness of her skin, the way her curls tickled her nose, the faint scent of flower water, how she tasted when he—

“— the journal,” she was saying as David forced himself to be present. “David, it is made of fig-tree bark and is nearly ten thousand Standard years old and in astonishing condition. It is not Egyptian, but your guesses were close. The human tribe calls itself the Aztecs and lives in a place called Mesoamerica. I think your Aunt Gertrude would forgive you!”

“Azca, Aztec, Mesopotamus, Mesoamerica,” David said with a warm laugh. “But is it genuine? As in, did it really come from Earth? That’s... that’s...”

“David, we ran every test imaginable. If it’s a forgery, then it’s the best Creator-damned forgery I’ve ever seen.” Maradei replied, her voice trembling with emotion as she blinked away tears. “That’s not all. The journal speaks of Mygareans and humans existing in harmony and building massive structures. David, you validated my life’s work... my life itself.”

David’s vision blurred as he blinked back tears and tried to absorb the enormity of her words. “Maradei, you singlehandedly proved that the prophecy is true. Professor Hanamur proved that safe bidirectional travel is possible. Do you know what this means for the galaxy? For my family? For me?”

Maradei laughed and cried as she struggled for words. “This is... Exhilarating, humbling, fulfilling, terrifying, validating, challenging... If I was with you right now, I don’t know whether I’d thank you, or slap you, or hold you so tightly that nothing else exists. I mean, I would never hurt you... but do you understand? I want to scream, I want to laugh, I want to cry, I want to punch something, I want to be with you, I want to be with anyone but you, and I want to be left the fuck alone, all at once... and just what is so Creator-damned funny?”

“You are, you utterly beautiful Sentient,” David said, his laughter catching in his throat. “I’ve never loved you more than I do in this moment. You’re perfect in your imperfection. Revel in it, wallow in it!”

They each reached toward their holos, physical fingers touching their ghostly counterparts, as their emotions passed and they gazed at each other.

“There’s something else,” Maradei said. “I’ve been offered a position to found a museum on Danebara. There’s speculation it could be one of the first planets settled by the original Wanderers given its proximity to the anomaly. This could help us reconstruct the earliest history of the Wanderers and possibly trace their settlement of this galaxy and encountering the twelve other Sentient races.”

“That’s everything you’ve always wanted. Congratulations!”

She hung her head, then looked him in the eye. “Ask me to stay on Sarcha and I will give it up and never look back.”

“Absolutely not!” David beamed at her. “Maradei, I love you for who you are and who you are becoming. Whatever happens, we’ll figure this out... together. We always do.”

“True,” she said, “even if I have no idea yet how we’ll sort this one out.”