

# Memories Still Hurt

## Chapter 3 Interlude 1

### The Fulcrum in the Void

by Erin O'Brien

The moment the fight ended, I found myself powering down, throwing my gauntlets off, and clambering out of the pit. I wanted to be gone before anyone noticed. I was reeling. They hadn't killed me. More, they had defended me and turned on the Dominion themselves. I had done nothing to warrant such self-destructive loyalty. The grass screamed under my feet as I raced into the twisted trees. I pushed through the sucking bushes, ripping their adhesive tubes off my skin as I ran. I lost track of time and distance. I came to a small clearing with a shallow rocky ledge. I collapsed on the ledge and dropped my head to my hands.

It seemed only minutes, yet hours, that I sat there with my mind staggering. No two thoughts were congruent, no logic brought any order to the chaos. A thousand screams clawed for attention behind my eyes.

I couldn't cry. Or blink. I stared at the dirt through my fingers. The chill of full dark had sunk into my bones, and I shook uncontrollably. Distantly, I was aware that I was in shock. I could hear creatures moving in the forest around me, but I felt no fear, just emptiness.

Half light had begun to creep through the trees when I heard someone coming. The sound of two-legged beings. I lifted my head from my hands, aching from being in that strained position for so long.

"Who's there?" I called, my voice thin. I thought I had run too far to ever be found. I had tried to, at least.

"Just me," a woman's high voice called back, "Aeliana."

Elie? How the fuck had she found me?

"And me," another voice grumbled, a man's. He didn't offer a name. In another few moments, they stepped into the clearing. Elie's hair was a mess from the sucker bushes. My jaw dropped. To her right stood James Olivieri, shouldering a JM-4 rifle. The last person I would have expected to see. I couldn't believe he had come with the others on the hunt for me.

"You?" I stammered.

James snorted and dropped the rifle to hold it by the barrel, propped on his toe. "Why not me? It had to be somebody, and Aeliana doesn't know how to track," James' voice was dry, tired, and his Westdown accent was as strong as I'd ever heard it. "And she told that big sonovabitch who tried to come with her to look after the kids - children - whatever. What the fuck are you doing out here? Why did you run?"

I shrunk away from his interrogating glare.

“Calm, friend James,” Elie said soothingly. “Aki, what is wrong?” She came close and sat beside me on the ledge. James didn’t budge from the edge of the clearing. I glanced at him again. He scowled and shrugged as if to say, “Answer her, idiot.”

“Elie, I can’t face them,” I felt embarrassed to speak in front of James. He and I went way back, and not all of that history was rosy.

“Why not?” Elie searched my eyes, her strangely crystalline irises shimmering.

“There’s too much - too much has happened.” I dropped my head back to my hands.

“I’ll say,” James said and stepped closer. He clapped a hand on my shoulder. He squeezed painfully hard. I could feel my sharp bones under his fingers. “Listen, I’m personally invested in you being OK. And not for my sake. You’re not right - you’re not *you*. I’ve *never* seen you scared. What happened to that famous “Hero boy” confidence?” He referenced my high school nickname, a play on my first name and personality at the same time. He continued, “Burst the boil here, or back there, but you’re going back with us if I have to drag you.” I almost wanted to laugh. For the first time in our lives, I was so weak that James probably could physically force me back through the forest.

“Aki,” Elie said again, “Tell us why you ran.”

“It’s too much to tell, Elie,” I sighed. “It started almost twenty e-years ago.”

“Then can you show me?” She asked.

“Nani?” James and I said in unison. The Old Earth word was the only suitable expression for my surprise.

“Show me. Look at me,” she said. She cupped my cheeks in both hands. She stared intently into my eyes. “Show me what you want me to know. This will be easier. This is what we do in the Valley when words are not enough. Show me. Think of what you want me to know.” I watched her pupils slowly dilate. Then her irises began to shift and spike out like old clockwork gears. I felt a drifting sensation, then her eyes were all I saw, expanding into infinity. A sensation inside my head, like a balloon expanding to fill my skull, then growing beyond. “Show me,” her voice echoed through my head.

*Blackness, then the feeling of infinite expansion until it becomes so huge it arrives back at zero.*

He stood in the doorway of the classroom. He was dressed in very fine clothing, with a double collar only seen in the High Families. Some of the kids snickered at him. He hugged his

tablet to his chest. He seemed to take a deep breath, then he stepped into the classroom. He walked toward the back. Toward me. His chin was high, his eyes defiant. I sat in the back row, the seat closest to the windows. He paused at the desk next to me, and glanced at me. Our eyes met. I sensed wrongness behind his defiance. His huge brown eyes hid something much deeper than trepidation of the first day of school. Regardless, I smiled and stuck out my hand. I knew that once I introduced myself, I would make a friend.

"I'm Hiroaki," I said, and looked up into his eyes. "Are you new?"

"Liam. Yes, I just ... moved here," his voice was so quiet. He took my hand. His grip was stronger than his voice.

"I'm new too," I sighed. "We just got sent here. My dad was a pilot." I added, "Someday, I will be, too."

"I -" he stammered, "I don't know what I'll be, now." He looked down at the top of the tablet desk. We were silent for a moment. It seemed he was waiting for my input.

"So be a pilot with me!" I grinned. I reached over and rested a hand on Liam's arm. "Since we're both new, we should stick together."

"I -" His brows knit. He seemed to struggle with something in his mind. "OK," he agreed. My grin somehow grew even bigger. I was only seven, but I could feel my life shifting to make room for him.

*Blackness then expansion larger than comprehension, beyond the scope of my skull and consciousness until it surpasses infinity and comes back around to zero.*

Kiva and I sat in the KC High #4 courtyard at lunch. He wanted to be known as Kiva, now, and it was very hard not to think of him as Liam. We were fourteen. As usual, it was just us. Kiva was not very well liked, due to his own actions. And his family. I had friends outside of him, but I would always choose to sit with him no matter how they tried to take me from him. He was my best friend and always would be.

"What happened? Why won't you tell me the truth?" I glared at him, but he only stared at the tabletop.

"I told you, it's just some dumb shit, I got in too many fights, stuff like that. They don't want to deal with Uncle Rad's death and a troublemaker at the same time."

"So they're sending you to a boarding house?" I pulled the plastic straw out of my pop and chewed on it. Kiva's uncle Radgett's death had been very abrupt, an afternoon accident with the horses on their estate of Tawney Hills, just outside Kinnomori City. Kiva had told me the man's skull had been crushed.

“Seems so. I’ll still go to KC #4, the boarding house is in the same district as you, I just have to be back in before half-light,” he grumbled. It was odd that he was being sent to a house in my district. The Tawneys could afford much better. The best, even - like a boarding house on Palatine. My mother’s apartment was one spit away from being considered in the slums. I suspected Kiva had demanded to stay near me, in exchange for going peacefully.

“So no more futbol?”

“Yeah, and no more hanging out til dark behind the gym,” he sighed. He stretched, yawned, and then his face brightened. “At least I’ll be away from them.” Kiva loathed his family, the outrageously powerful Tawneys, owners of over fifty percent of livestock operations on Hertha. He had recently become anticarn, and that only exacerbated his resentment. He never said a word to me about what I ate, but he was very careful to avoid all flesh, now.

“That’s true, I guess that will be nice,” I agreed, but I was worried. Boarding houses were notorious, even the wealthy ones. They were called boarding houses, but in truth they were “corrective centers” for unruly youngsters. Kiva had never been one to follow rules, no matter how strict the consequences. I worried how he would be treated in a low-income boarding house. If the other kids knew who he was, if he showed any wealth or privilege, he would be in for a lot of trouble.

*Blackness then expansion, bigger and bigger until it popped outside of my head and became zero.*

Kiva walked in front of me with his hands in his pockets. He wore his usual vest and rolled up trousers, with brown boots and suspenders. His collar was single, though - he refused to wear double collars like his family traditionally did. Just as well, any sign of wealth probably would have antagonized his housemates. He held his head down, which was strange. He usually carried his chin high, at a jaunty angle, making challenging eye contact with anyone he passed. He didn’t know I was behind him - I had been sneaking up on him, to surprise him on his walk back to the boarding house, but his demeanor was so strange I wasn’t sure I should interrupt him.

He stopped. I almost ran into him. He turned to look at me over his shoulder.

“Yes, Aki?” He raised an eyebrow. His tone was dry.

“I uh - Hi?” I managed. “You alright?”

He sighed. He beckoned me up to walk next to him, then shoved his hands into his pockets..

“Not going so well, no,” he said. “The house is hell. Aki, it’s been almost two years of this shit.”

“Are they treating you bad? You never talk about it,” I asked, worried. He really never did talk about it, even when I asked. I thought for a moment, and became more worried the more I realized how little he had told me. I felt ashamed for not pulling it out of him.

“No, not *them*. Well, I guess they don’t stop it, but it’s the others, you know, the other kids.” It was then that I noticed the purple marks around his neck, almost completely hidden by his collar. Somehow I hadn’t noticed them in class, or at lunch. Then I realized his collar was unbuttoned, now. Had he been hiding bruises all this time? I grabbed his sleeve and pulled him to a stop.

“Did they do that?” Without thinking, I brushed the bruises with my fingertips, “Oh, no, that’s not happening.” I felt my anger rising, an inferno. “I’m not letting that happen.” I felt intensely protective of him. I always had. Deep down, I knew he was mine to look after.

“Gods of man, what are you gonna do about it, Aki?” He laughed bitterly, gently pushing my hand away. “Get my family to take me back in? I mean, they will, eventually, they need me to inherit. But maybe not if I keep beating the shit out of the other kids. And doing things like this.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a set of Old Earth style headphones. I had been pining for some for years, but my mother and I never had money for Old Earth trinkets. He shoved them at me with a smirk.

“You stole these, didn’t you?” Not an unreasonable accusation, if you knew Kiva. I took the headphones and turned them over, amazed. In my startlement, the words spilled out of me. “Why do you do this? *When* did you do this? You’re not allowed to go anywhere but school and back to the house. Did you skip class? How did I not notice that? You’re loaded, they left you access to your stipend, you could pay for anything you want. You shouldn’t steal. And thanks, I don’t know what to say.”

“Thanks is enough,” Kiva waved his hand, chuckling.

“And what I’m gonna do about it is have you move in with me,” I decided aloud. Perfect idea. The most perfect idea I’d ever had. My best friend was not going to have to worry about getting attacked while he slept. Absolutely not. I would convince my mother. I would.

I did.

His offering to pay the rent didn’t hurt his case.

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*Rushing infinity, a myriad of images, bits and pieces of the closeness of those two years of living together. I showed her. The unspoken longing, the ultimate culmination. The bond that would unite us for eternity - or so we thought. Even in this torment, even with what I had done to him, and him to me, Liam Tawney was the deepest love of my life. Expansion to zero.*

“How did you do?” Liam asked me, once we were in the privacy of our bedroom. I had been given permission to think of him as Liam again, instead of Kiva, by then. We had just taken our simulator assessment test for admission to Kinnomori Military Academy. I’d insisted on arriving separately for the tests, and got back to the flat almost an hour after him because I stopped to talk with the other candidates. I didn’t want the Army to associate me with Liam because of his family ties. I wanted to make my own way, and not reap any more benefit than I already was from the heir of the Tawney fortune.

“Alright, I guess,” I said, nonchalant, then grinned. I took his hand as I sat down on the edge of my bed. “I got Excellent on all marks. Aced it.” We had been graded on gunnery, tactics, and piloting. I was elated. My score was the holy grail, very rare - and the score I had expected to get, in my infinite youthful confidence. Liam and I had spent countless hours practicing on the holo at home, on accurate control sets, to perfect our understanding of golem piloting. The simulation in the test pods was very similar to the game we played at home - which was designed for recruitment, incidentally.

“Nice!” He congratulated me. He squeezed my hand. “Same for me.” He sounded sad. He moved away from me and sat on his bed. He did not look pleased.

“Well that’s great news! Your academic scores are even better than mine, we’re both sure to get in.” I smirked, “Even with your record.” Liam had a juvenile record of assault, assault, and assault. He fought. A lot. His family’s lawyers always kept him out of juvenile prison, but the stains on his chip were still there for anyone who scanned him to see. But the Army, even the Academy, didn’t mind juvenile infractions, so long as they were not too extreme. I was sure they wouldn’t mind a fighter.

“Yeah,” he agreed. But he left it unspoken. He knew I did not want to be associated with him openly at Academy. I was serious about making my own way, without benefiting from Tawney connections. I needed to clear my family’s name, after my father’s desertion over a decade prior. I was not even sure the Yeo name might not doom my entry into the Army. But I absolutely did not want to be seen as a Tawney cronie. Liam had agreed to go to Academy with me, simply so we could be together. He knew I could not be turned aside from becoming a pilot like my father. I told him we only needed to be apart for the first year, just so that everyone thought we became friends at Academy. It was uncharacteristic of him to give in so easily, but he agreed to keep our relationship secret. It took years for me to understand the sacrifice he made, and the depth of his loneliness in that first year at KMA. Liam did not want to be a soldier. He did it for me. Everything that happened to him, and to us, was my fault for selfishly dragging him with me into my vendetta against my father.

I defused the situation by crossing the room to sit next to him and leaned my shoulder against his.

“We’ll be alright,” I said. “It won’t be forever. We’ll still be us. We’ll have our comms, we can talk.” He leaned back on me but didn’t answer. If I had only known what my selfishness would bring down on him.

*Expansion into blackness like a balloon swelling to the boundaries of the skull then popping through to surpass infinity, becoming infinitely large until it became infinitely small, then zero.*

“Good morning, Cadets,” I said, greeting the two sharply dressed young men before me. I was First Cadet, in our first year at KMA. My job was to perform morning inspections and ensure all of the Cadets in my class were fit to be seen about campus. The two cadets stood with their hands clasped in front of them, and stood feet slightly apart.

“Good morning, First Cadet,” the two barked obediently. They tapped their chests with a fist, giving a thump in salute. Their backs were straight, chins high. I proceeded to walk around their room, eyeing the bunks, the stowed bags, and the general state of cleanliness. Then I turned my eye on them, checking their uniforms’ neatness, their precision of dress, and the state of their boots. I stood before them again, hands clasped behind my back.

“At ease,” I told them. They relaxed their shoulders but kept their stance. “Pass. Excellent bunks and demeanor.”

“Thank you, First Cadet,” they acknowledged my compliment. I turned and strode out the door, to head to the next room in the hallway. I would repeat this ritual for twenty rooms every morning. In one of those rooms, I would get to see Liam for a brief moment. I looked forward to it, but dreaded it. I would get to see him, but I would have to leave him. Every morning. It was my own doing.

*Spinning, expanding beyond the limits of the confines. Beyond, into infinity. We surged years into the future. Active duty. Expanding so large it becomes zero again.*

*Whirling, an expanding abyss.*

It was the middle of third year. I sat on the sofa in the apartment three of us shared. Liam, James and I each had one of the four bedrooms. The room was dark. The only light came from the holoprojector, barely illuminating the room enough to see the two with me. Liam sat at the end of the sofa, and I was stretched out with my back against the arm, feet covered in mismatched socks in his lap. A bag of crisps sat balanced on my belly. Dia was with us for the evening. She sat on the floor in front of the sofa, leaning back on it. James was in his room doing gods-of-man-knows-what. It was our weekly ancient movie night. I was focused on the movie, but Dia and Liam were bickering.

“What I’m saying is I think you tried to make me look bad on purpose,” Liam groused at Dia, glaring down at her.

“Why? *Why* would I do that, Kiva?” Dia snapped over her shoulder.

“Because you’re trying so hard to hang on to your top six that you don’t care who you show up to do it!”

“That’s ridiculous! It’s not *my* fault you felt stupid. I’m no threat to you, you’re #2!”

“That’s it,” I stood up abruptly and turned around. I held the bag of crisps in one hand. I pointed at Kiva and Dia in turn, with a handful of chips. “You both need to go. Now.”

“What the fuck, Aki? Go where?” Liam frowned up at me. Dia’s jaw was hanging open.

“To the bedroom. To the coffee shop. Fight it out, fuck it out, or talk it out, *I don’t care*. It’s ancient movie night, and *I love ancient movie night*. You two are ruining Predator.”

“Jesus, Aki, come on,” Dia grumbled.

“No, go. Bedroom, or out the door. And don’t come back until you’ve sorted it out,” I repeated.

“Ugh,” Liam stood up. “Fine, whatever. But what about you? You’re really cool with -”

I raised my eyebrows and stared. I gestured at the holo-screen with my handful of chips. “*Predator*,” I whispered, as if Liam was a moron. I shoved the handful of chips in my mouth and sat back down on the sofa.

Liam gathered his coat from the back of the dining room chair, and shot me a glare. Dia had already slunk out the front door. I pointed at Liam, and growled threateningly.

“Be nice to her,” I warned.

“Sure,” Liam snorted, and started to walk away.

“Wait, come here.” My voice brooked no argument. Liam turned, to see my hand outstretched toward him. He obediently walked back to the sofa, and took my hand. I caressed the back of his knuckles with my thumb.

“What?” He asked in a dry, patient tone.

“Just wanted to feel you,” I confessed. “Go on, I need to watch Arnie fuck up some aliens.”

Liam smiled faintly, I could just see it in the darkness. He bent and kissed me firmly on the lips, as if to remind me he could resist if he wanted to. He released his hand and headed for the door, coat slung over his shoulder.

The door had barely clicked shut behind him when I heard James step out of his bedroom.

“Thank the gods of man for that, what took you so long?” James strode over to the sofa and flopped on the opposite end. He leaned over and grabbed the crisps off my lap.

“I thought you hated it when I tell him what to do?” I raised an eyebrow. James made no secret that he thought I was a control freak.

“They’ve been driving me nuts with that shit for weeks, and you know he won’t listen to *me*,” James rolled his eyes.

“Fair enough. You seen this one?” I asked him, pointing at the frozen holo-screen. James and I were not especially close, but we shared a connection through Liam. I didn’t mind him too much, even with our history.

“Nah,” James said around a mouthful. “Didn’t have a holo like you rich kids, growing up.” The fact that James could call me a rich kid said a lot about the living conditions in Westdown.

“It’s barely begun, I’ll start it over,” I told him, then announced to the holo-projector, “Nexus, begin again.” I snagged the crisps back and dropped the bag on the seat between us. I considered for a moment that I had just bullied the two people I loved most into having a confrontation with each other that neither of them wanted. Sometimes, leaders had to make hard decisions.

### *Infinity. Zero.*

We sat at our favorite booth in Temple, on leave after a grueling campaign in Pyrgos. The multicolored holoprojector light played like a prism off Liam’s face; everything else was dim. Dia was sampling her bourbon while twirling a cigar in her fingers. They both sat across from me. James was to my left, twiddling on his comm and ignoring the rest of us. His beer sat untouched next to a glass of ice water. Liam rambled, waving his cigarette - the bar was dark enough that the ember left a red trail with his movement.

“I’m just saying, if AI wasn’t anathema, life would be so much easier. Our golems could be automated, hell, vacuum cleaners could be automated. Soldiers wouldn’t have to die,” he complained. I shuddered.

“Dammit, Liam - don’t talk about that where people can hear you!” I protested. He gave me a haughty stare. James glanced up from his comm, eyebrows raised.

“Please. I’m a Tawney - *the* Tawney. I can say whatever the fuck I want. I could talk about plans to build an airplane and no one would turn me in,” Liam bragged. I winced. He was not as safe as he thought, not if he talked about flight seriously. He puffed his cig, then grinned malevolently. “Automation scares you, doesn’t it?” He teased me. James grimaced, and set his comm down. He sensed the same thing I did.

I spun my beer glass around with my fingertips. “We shouldn’t talk about it here, Liam.” Automation and AI were forbidden, had been forbidden ever since the Torch left the Milky Way. All machines must have a human operator, for our safety - and to ensure that the human race never lacked for purpose. Imagine a population that had no reason to get up in the morning. Meaningful work was vital to our health. Protesting this rule was cause for scrutiny and even incarceration.

Liam rolled his eyes. With his cig lodged between his lips, he muttered, “You are way too comfortable with authority.”

“Leave it alone, contrarian, you’re not impressing anybody,” James said and threw an ice cube at Liam. He flicked it onto the floor.

“You two are so boring,” Dia growled. Her dark, slanted eyes were narrowed at Liam. She turned her glare to me next. “We’re on leave. Lighten the fuck up.”

“Dia, dear, there’s no light to be found. Not with where we’ve been,” Liam’s lips curved up in a crooked smile. A storm blazed in his mahogany eyes. James looked like he was about to fling the entire glass of ice water into Liam’s face. I cast around in my mind to find a way to salvage the conversation before Liam’s mood took over. He was getting worse. Hell, we all were.

“Did you hear Kalliavas is getting married?” I asked. I knew Dia had already heard, Kal was her close friend in KMA, but it was all I could think of. I trusted her to know what I was trying to do.

“Really? I didn’t know he was a monog,” Liam mused.

“You didn’t? You bunked with him one half! He was never quiet about it,” James said, picking up where I left off.

“Yeah, he comes from a family of Believers,” Dia added, playing along.

“Shit, I guess I never really talked to him,” Liam exhaled. He took one last drag on his cig, then put it out in the metal ashtray on the table. “Fucking monogs. Now that’s something that makes no sense at all.”

“I’ll drink to that,” I said with relief. The dark cloud lifted from Liam’s face and he was himself again. James released the edge of the table, which he had been gripping so hard his knuckles were white. Whatever our differences, James and I shared that pain. The pain of seeing Liam descend into a pit down which we could never follow. The war. The Army. I had made him do this. He’d done it for me. It was all my fault.

*Expansion. Collapse. Shinchaw. Fight it, don’t let her see it all. Only a little bit.*

I decided to explore one of the bunkers built into the ridges after we had neutralized it. Shinchaw City’s skyscrapers shimmered above me untouched despite the fires in the streets. But it was these countless complexes built into the rocky ridges on the east side of the city that had been today’s objective. We knew they had been businesses, offices and homes, but the surges were holing up in them because they were so defensible. Breaking into them had proven to be extremely costly for our infantry. Our fulcrum was called off the main golem line to annihilate these pockets of resistance in the rocks. Our golems would be almost impervious to the crossfire of heavy automatics from the myriad windows in the ridges, and we would be able to safely batter the steel doors open and blast our flamethrowers inside until nothing was left.

I stepped into the door of the bunker, and my foot crunched on rubble left from when one of us had wrenched the door out of the rock with a Grendel hand. We had neutralized so many complexes that we didn’t even know which of us had wrecked which one. I stepped further into the cavernous den. I saw a dozen charred corpses near the door, their blackened rifles and laser pistols fallen beside them, atop them, and beneath them. Their skin was blistered and dark, with red cracks showing cooked meat beneath. I exhaled through my nose to briefly expel the annoying stench of burnt flesh mixed with the telltale stink of flamethrowers. Inevitably, I had to inhale the revolting odor again anyway.

As I made my way deeper into the complex, I began to guess that it had been an office of some sort before the surges fortified it. There were many walls separating burned tablet desks. Chairs were overturned, and more charred bodies littered the ground. One clutched its rifle stock tightly. The fire had burned deep enough to reveal fingerbones. This was all expected. The surges had no escape from our napalm gushing straight into the only entrance. Wandering deeper, I was not sure what I was looking for.

It became dark as I continued. All the overhead lights had burst when the hole was torched. I flicked my flashlight on, and spotted more armed bodies as I went. Definitely a significant surge presence in this one. I walked through a doorway into a larger room, perhaps a conference hall. Against the back wall was a long heap, from corner to corner. When I came closer, I realized it was dozens of bodies, covered up by blankets. I pulled a blanket away, to see a dead woman with bulging eyes who was not burned. Even though they were too deep

inside for the fire to reach them, it seemed they had tried to cover themselves with wet blankets against the flames. They must not have realized that our massive flamethrowers would suck all the oxygen out of their hiding place. No guns in sight. Civilians. The surges had tried to protect civilians in here. They had suffocated. A pity, really, but it couldn't be helped. I dropped the blanket and moved my flashlight along the floor. It found a slim leg, sticking out of a blanket. I followed the contour up and saw a little girl's braided hair. I scraped the blanket back with my toe. She looked to be peacefully asleep. Her eyes were not bulging, mouth not open like the other suffocated corpses. She lay with her hand outstretched, reaching, almost touching a brown and white speckled puppy. My mind slipped sideways, wrenching away. All I could think was, *better not tell Liam, he would be upset*. Reflexively, I twisted away, reaching for my sidearm. I aimed back toward the light of the entrance. I had heard rubble being kicked behind me.

"Password?" I called.

"Nebraska. Centurion Eglan," I saw a stationary figure, the bright light forming a sunburst around her. I lowered my gun. As she came closer, she started berating me.

"Aki! Aki, there you are. What the fuck are you doing in here? You can't be in here, there are still occupied holes in the rock, we don't know whether they're connected by tunnels. The surges would banzai at a chance to take you out," Dia scolded me. She grabbed my elbow and started dragging me. "We need to get out of here. This isn't for us to deal with." *Not for us to deal with*, I mused. *Not us. We just make the mess*. I stood with my feet planted. This seemed very important to me. My mind still felt shifty.

"Don't tell Liam," I said. "He would be upset." She stopped and turned to look at me searchingly. Worry was etched in the lines of her brow.

"Don't tell him what?"

"About the puppy," I said. My voice sounded hollow, echoing inside my skull.

"What fucking puppy?" Dia demanded. I flashed my light onto the small spotted corpse and the little girl next to it. Dia looked at them, then back up at me. Her face was drawn. After a long moment, she said, "Get it together. This godsforsaken city is eating your mind, and you're only getting worse. Job's done for today. You need sleep. Let's go."

*Excruciating expansion, incomprehensible enormity passing the boundaries of infinity and starting again at zero.*

I lay on my stomach with my head on my arms. Dia ran her fingers up and down my bare back. I was preoccupied, worried about Liam. He was always welcome with Dia and me when we were together, but he hadn't chosen to show up for weeks. I was having a hard enough time pinning him down for just us. He was becoming more and more unhinged, unpredictable. As a

leader, I wasn't sure I could even trust him in the field anymore. As a partner, I despaired of how to help him. Dia felt my mood.

"He'll be alright, Aki," she assured me. "It's not long before his time is up, and he can resign honorably."

"I want to get him out now. I never thought war would affect someone like him so badly - not with - you know, those diagnoses," I murmured. Her fingers did feel nice, and some of my tension melted away.

"He's not the only one being affected badly," Dia said, her voice firm. "You're having episodes, too. This campaign - this fucking city - it's the worst thing Hertha's ever seen. This might as well be Old Earth."

"He's my responsibility," I insisted.

"No. He made his own decisions," Dia said, and her fingers stopped moving. "Nothing he does is your fault. You've never held him at gunpoint."

I held my tongue, wanting to tell her for the millionth time how I was all he had, and that he would have done anything for me and I took advantage of it when I was too young to know better. But I knew she would refute it all.

"Let's not talk about him," I said, and rolled over onto my back. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her down close to me. "It's you and me right now. He's James' problem tonight." At least, I hoped he was with James.

Dia's lips met mine, and I forced Liam to the back of my mind.

*Infinite expansion. Pop.*

The fire raged around me as I struggled across the rubble to reach Liam's crushed cockpit. I scrambled over concrete and torn metal. I pulled myself up onto the cockpit ledge and peered inside, holding onto the broken pit glass without caring if it cut my hands. I saw him fumbling with his restraint strap, one-handed. His right arm was shattered, with a bone spear showing just below his shoulder. He cursed and struggled. He noticed me.

"Help me, will you? I can't fucking get it with one hand," he growled. I started to lean forward to reach for him, but something stopped me. I felt as if I lost all control of my body. I stood frozen. He looked at me, and his brow knitted.

"What the fuck are you doing? We need to get out of here," he told me.

I straightened, and stepped backward. It was beyond my control. The decision was taken away from me, and I simply acted.

"Aki?" Liam started to look worried. I stepped down from the ledge, and he could just see my eyes over the broken glass.

"What are you doing? Don't leave me here. Aki! Not you, don't leave me. Not you!" Liam pleaded.

I backed up again, then turned and walked, then ran, back to my Grendel. I could hear his voice calling after me, but I could not comprehend the words. Whatever drove me was irresistible. I had to obey.

*Soft spinning, no expansion. A gentle settling. Zero. Zero. Zero. One.*

Aeliana stood before me, close. Her eyes were their normal rosy gemstone. Not a hint of gears or electronics now. She looked concerned.

"Ah," she said. "You were running from them, all along. Not Kinnomori."

"I - well - sort of," I admitted. "I was also being shot at a lot." I heard James' snort.

"Do you not know they came here for you?" Aeliana asked.

"Of course, Elie. That's what I'm afraid of," I said, not understanding her meaning.

"No, Aki. They came *for* you," she said, and touched my cheek.

"The woman's right, Aki. I got dragged on this chase because those two wanted you back. I never believed for a second they were going to kill you or bring you in to be killed," James said. "And I didn't want to bring you in either, you stupid, stupid bastard." His Westdown was so strong now that I almost had trouble understanding him. He continued in typical pushy James fashion. "Now let's go back and start sorting this out. We are in a hell of a mess, and you have the best mind of all of us for figuring out messes."

"I'm sorry. It's all my fault - that woman -" I began, but James cut me off.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, I'm already sick of it. That woman doesn't matter. She was an enemy combatant, she shot at you first. I don't care how she died. She had to die. What the hell difference does it make whether it was by blade or by bullet, or even throttled to death? It was war. She is not why the Dominion is chasing you, she's the excuse they're using to drum up public outrage. No, they want you because you destroyed their best PR puppet; Team Cerberus are pariahs now. Also, you stole a fucking Grendel. So, you did what you did, we did

what we did. Everybody needs to own it. Now get your stupid ass up and let's go," James shouldered his rifle and wrenched me to my feet by my elbow.

Elie shrugged, "I am not sure what friend James is saying exactly, but yes, we must go back to the Children."

I let them guide me back into the woods, back toward the reckoning I had fled from.