

## Sisyphus Rising

*Earth-That-Was could no longer sustain our numbers, we were so many.  
We found a new solar system – dozens of planets, and hundreds of moons.  
Each one terraformed, a process taking decades, to support human life.  
To be new Earths.*

Professor Rao, *Serenity*

### Prologue

*...just like every other morning before*

*Los Angeles, California, United States*

*January 19 2012*

*7:35am Pacific Standard Time*

Taylor Hanson's Thursday morning started just like any other.

"Daddy...Daddy..."

He cracked one eye open to see his daughter peering at him from her perch on his stomach, one little finger touching the tip of his nose. "Ree?" he asked, his tone concerned. He raised himself up on his elbows so that he could see her better. "What's wrong baby?"

"My ear hurts," she said. She pulled down on her right earlobe and let out a quiet, pained whimper.

"I know, baby. I know." He reached up and twisted one of Rhiannon's blonde curls around a finger. "Did you have your medicine yet?"

Rhiannon nodded. "Uh-huh. Mommy gaved it to me."

"*Rhiannon!* Where are you, you little monster?"

Father and daughter looked at each other, and Taylor raised an eyebrow at her. "What did you do this time?" he asked.

In response, Rhiannon pressed a finger to her lips. "I'm hiding," she whispered from behind it.

"Rhiannon May Hanson, what did you do?" he asked sternly.

"Taylor, is Rhiannon in there with you?"

Through the partly-opened doorway poked a head topped with a shock of wild auburn curls, and Taylor lifted a hand and waved. "Here's the monster," he said unnecessarily.

Caroline let out an exasperated sigh and stepped further into the room. "I left her alone in the kitchen for one minute," she said as she picked Rhiannon up and settled the three-year-old on her left hip. "*One minute*, Taylor. And when I came back into the kitchen she was about to bring the frying pan down on top of her head."

"What were you doing leaving her by herself?" Taylor asked as he sat up and pushed the bedcovers back.

"Lucas was screaming. I think he's got another tooth coming in."

"And you couldn't take her with you?"

She gave him one of those 'I haven't slept in three days, I haven't showered in weeks, there's a horrible monster waiting behind that door to scatter my intestines around the room, and all I've got to fight it with is this cheap plastic lightsaber. I need chocolate' sort of looks. Taylor raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay, don't bite my head off. I'll go look after Lucas. You finish up breakfast."

Lucas was standing up in his cot, tiny hands gripping the bars, when Taylor stepped into the nursery. He was crying loudly, face screwed up and tears leaking from his eyes. "Hey Lukie," Taylor said over his son's wailing. In one hand he held a teething ring he had swiped from the refrigerator. "Hey, shh..." He stepped up to the side of the cot and picked Lucas up with one arm. "I know it hurts, kid." Lucas' wails only increased in intensity and volume, and Taylor closed his eyes. "Lucas, *c'mon...*"

He put the teething ring down on the top of Lucas' dresser and started rubbing Lucas' back in small circles to soothe him. With his free hand he gently poked a finger into Lucas' mouth and started to probe carefully for new teeth, finding one beginning to break through his son's upper gums. "Lukie it's okay, you've just got another tooth coming through." He picked the teething ring back up again and handed it to Lucas, who grabbed for it and shoved it in his mouth. "There we go," Taylor said, laughter in his voice. "That feels better, doesn't it?"

Caroline was dishing out the pancakes from the frying pan onto a plate when Taylor brought Lucas into the kitchen. He sat his son down in the highchair and walked up behind Caroline,

quickly kissing her cheek. "Thank you," Caroline said gratefully when she realised that Lucas had stopped crying. "He was driving me crazy, I swear. Rhiannon was never like this."

"I think we'll have to get used to it, unfortunately," Taylor said. Caroline placed the plate holding the pancakes in the middle of the table, and he speared two pancakes onto a separate plate. "And we still have one more round of it at least," he added as he started to cut them up into bite-sized pieces for Rhiannon. His gaze drifted quite pointedly toward Caroline's midsection.

"Don't remind me, *please*," Caroline groaned. She placed one hand over her stomach and closed her eyes. "How did your mother *stand* it?"

"I still haven't worked that out, to be honest. But I figure she got used to it pretty damn quick after Zac came along." He glanced at his watch and quickly speared three pancakes onto his own plate, drowning them in maple syrup before starting to eat.

"When do you think you'll be home?" Caroline asked after breakfast. The breakfast dishes were rinsed and in the sink, Lucas had been settled in his playpen, and Rhiannon was happily watching cartoons on TV. Taylor, meanwhile, was dashing around the apartment like a man possessed, tossing all manner of bits and pieces into his messenger bag.

"I honestly couldn't tell you, CJ – Ryan might need me to work back later than usual tonight. I'll probably text you when I know how late he needs me to stay."

Taylor saw her bite her bottom lip in response to this. "Oh, hey, c'mere," he said, and put his messenger bag down on the couch so he could embrace her. "You know I love you, right?" he asked, and Caroline nodded against his shoulder. "And you know I absolutely adore Ree and Lukie, yeah?"

"Yeah, I know," Caroline whispered. "I just...I have a feeling something's going to happen today. And it's not a good one."

"I'll come home CJ, just like I always do." He pulled back from the embrace a little and pressed his forehead to Caroline's. "I promise."

\* \* \*

*Firefly-class transport ship 'Sisyphus'*

*Kitchener Docks, Sandford Downs, Greenleaf, Red Sun System*

*January 19 2512*

7:35am Border Standard Time

A discordant clanging not unlike that of a gong reverberated around the bridge of the *Sisyphus*, startling pilot Jared Leto out of a very sound sleep. “*Aīyā tiān a,*” he mumbled, and started fumbling around blindly for something to shut off the noise. The third switch he flipped replaced the clanging with silence, and he breathed a long sigh of relief.

He opened his eyes a few moments later, blinking against the winter sunlight that streamed in through the bridge windows as he tried to focus. A glance downwards at the Cortex console, and he saw just why the alarm had gone off.

*CORTEX ALERT: ALL HUNTER SHIPS IN BORDER TERRITORY*

*SMUGGLER LEOPOLD ROXBURGH AND ACCOMPLICES HAVE SKIPPED OUT ON BAIL*

*LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS SHANXI LOCKUP, JIANGYIN, RED SUN SYSTEM*

*REWARD FOR CAPTURE AND RETURN 5000 PLATINUM*

*FOR FURTHER INFORMATION RESPOND WITH NAME/S, SHIP TITLE AND CURRENT LOCATION*

As was normal for all waves, the message was repeated in Mandarin underneath the English text.

“What the *diyù* was that noise?”

Jared spun around in his seat to see the other two crew members of the *Sisyphus* standing behind him. Closest was Shannon, his older brother and co-pilot, while peering over Shannon’s shoulder was the ship’s cook, part-time medic and token female, Sarika Corbeau. Both Shannon and Sarika looked more than just a touch annoyed at having been roused from their sleep.

“Language, Shannon,” Jared scolded mildly as he turned back to face the front of the ship, his tone almost absentminded. “Rika doesn’t need to hear what comes out of your mouth.”

“I’ve heard worse,” Sarika said. “Hell, I *hear* worse whenever I have to patch up either of you two idiots after a job.” She stepped out from behind Shannon, walking up to stand directly behind Jared. “So what is it this time?”

“Work, possibly, if we take it up. Good payoff for this one – few thousand platinum.” He leaned back in his seat and tilted his head back far enough that he could see Sarika and Shannon upside down. “*Nǐ rèn wéi zěn yàng?* Want to do it?”

Shannon stepped up beside Jared and bent down to read the Cortex screen. He let out a soft whistle when he spotted the figure being offered as payment. "That's good," he commented. "That's *really* good."

"Stating the obvious, as per usual," Sarika muttered. Here she raised the volume of her voice a couple of notches. "So are we doing this or not? Because I'm in if you two are."

"We're doing it," Shannon decided.

Jared slid a keyboard out from beneath the dashboard and started typing a response.

*Jared and Shannon Leto of Sisyphus, at Sandford Downs, Greenleaf. Awaiting further instructions.*

He hit the SEND key, sat back and waited. Bare moments later a new wave flashed up on the screen.

*SISYPHUS, PROCEED TO TAIYUAN DOCKS IN SHANXI, JIANGYIN  
DERRICK WILDER WILL MEET YOU AT THE FOUR WINDS CAFÉ  
RESPOND WHEN RECEIVED*

Beneath the wave was a photograph of their contact, along with his contact details. Jared tapped an icon on the screen, transferring the photograph and details into the ship's database. "How far are we from Jiangyin, do you think?" he asked, turning back to look at Shannon. Sarika was nowhere in sight, and Jared could only assume she had wandered off down to the kitchen.

Shannon frowned, and Jared swore he could see the cogs, gears and wheels turning in his head. "About half a day at full burn, I should think."

"Think we'll need to refuel before we head off?" Jared asked. He leaned forward to peer at the fuel gauge and answered his own question. "Yeah, we need to refuel. Probably a whole lot of other things we need to get as well."

"I'll get Rika to make a list," Shannon volunteered. He snagged his datapad and its accompanying stylus off the dashboard and hurried off the bridge. Jared watched him go before typing out a new response.

*Wave received. We will be at Taiyuan Docks in approximately fifteen hours. Please inform Derrick that we will wave him upon our arrival. Sisyphus out.*

He sent the message, slid the keyboard back out of the way, and got up out of his seat. "That's the last time I fall asleep at the bridge," he mumbled as he stretched, his joints groaning in

protest at being forced into use. He ran a hand through his messy hair and glanced down at the Cortex screen one final time before going in search of breakfast.

After breakfast, a shower and changing into clean clothes, he felt considerably more human. "I've informed Central that we'll be in Shanxi in around fifteen hours – well, it's fourteen now," he amended. He, Shannon and Sarika had gathered in the kitchen for their usual pre-flight meeting. "Gives us two hours to get the ship refuelled and stocked up. Shannon, I'll leave the refuelling in your capable hands. Rika, you stock up the kitchen. We'll leave at ten."

"Aye-aye, cap'n," Sarika replied, snapping off a mock salute. Both she and Shannon left the kitchen, heading for the cargo bay.

Half an hour later, Jared had set himself up on the loading ramp of the ship with an old lawn chair and his datapad. Loaded onto it was an episode of an old Earth-That-Was television program, one that went by the name of *Supernatural*. Earth-That-Was had always interested him – its long history and its myriad cultures were truly fascinating, especially to someone who had spent all their life flitting from planet to moon and back again. Someone like Jared, for instance.

A loud *bang* startled him just as he was beginning to enjoy the episode, filling the square in the middle of the docks with a dusty haze, and he dropped his datapad in shock. It hit the loading ramp with a muffled *thud*. "Gorram it," he muttered, bending forward in his seat to pick it back up. As he straightened up the haze cleared, and he could see something lying on the dusty ground not far from another Firefly.

Or rather, *someone*. And they weren't moving.

He switched off his datapad, shoved it in a pocket and got up from his seat, taking off down the ramp at a run. "Someone fetch a medic!" he yelled as he bolted.

He had no idea right at that moment, but his life was just about to get a little more interesting.

## Chapter 1

*...can't be the real world...*

When the haze had cleared, and darkness had given way to light, the first sensation that Taylor was aware of was a searing pain all over his body. He could feel dust and dirt under his fingers and his forehead, and whenever he drew in a breath there was a spike of intense pain in his side. He let out a quiet moan of pain, one that was barely audible over the hum and din of noise all around him, and squeezed his eyes closed.

*"Ni méi shì bà?"*

A hand on his back, just between his shoulder blades, and he raised his head gingerly. He opened his eyes to find crouched before him a lanky man with dark and messy hair, peering down at him with concerned bright blue eyes. "Wh-where am I?" Taylor asked hazily, not quite completely aware just yet. "What the *fuck* happened to me?"

"Careful," the man cautioned as Taylor tried to lever himself upright. "You're at Kitchener Docks in Sandford Downs. And as for what happened to you..." His voice trailed off as he helped Taylor to sit up. "Well, that's something I just don't know. You popped straight outta nowhere."

"I feel like I've been hit by a truck," Taylor mumbled. "And a fucking massive truck at that." He leaned forward and drew his knees up to his chest, resting his forehead on them and letting his eyes drift closed.

"What's your name?"

The question was asked almost cautiously, and Taylor swallowed hard before he answered. "T-Taylor," he replied, silently cursing his voice for shaking so much. "Taylor H-Hanson."

"Well then, my name's Jared," the man told him.

"Medic coming through!"

Taylor looked up just in time to see a young woman dressed in a light blue uniform come running through the milling crowd. She carried a black case by its handle in one hand. "What happened here?" she asked when she had stopped running, her tone brisk and no-nonsense.

"I honestly don't know," Jared replied, and Taylor could tell right away that he was lying. "I think he must have tripped and fallen over, or maybe he fell off a ship. I was over there at my

ship when I heard him call out." He pointed in a direction off behind Taylor's head as he spoke these last words.

"Is your ship fairly close?"

When Jared nodded, the young woman bent down and helped Taylor to his feet. Here Taylor could see that on her uniform was an insignia of a serpent entwined around a staff, embroidered in dark blue – and just from that, Taylor knew she was a doctor. "Easy does it," she warned as Taylor stumbled slightly. "Don't want you tripping over again."

The next words that Taylor spoke were somewhat panicked.

"Did anyone see where my bag got to?" he asked, his tone almost frantic. "It's black canvas, it's got brass buckles and a really long strap."

Jared spotted the wayward bag almost immediately, lying a few feet away, and he darted over to pick it up. "Is this it?" he asked, holding it up, and Taylor nodded in response.

The three made their way slowly back to what Taylor had to assume was Jared's ship, Jared with the strap of Taylor's bag slung over a shoulder. Assumption was the order of the day, because never in his life had Taylor ever seen anything like it.

It looked for all the world like an oversized insect. Painted a dull gunmetal grey, it was easily as tall as a house, if not taller, and in place of wings it had one rocket either side of its body. A wide ramp in the craft's underside had been lowered to rest on the ground, creating a sort of entrance into the ship.

"*Zěnme le?*"

Jared looked back over his shoulder and stopped walking. After a couple of seconds so did Taylor and the doctor. Standing behind then was a petite-looking young woman with long and messy red hair, one eyebrow raised in question. Behind her sat a low wooden wagon piled with food, bottles of water and various other supplies, all secured tightly in place with netting. Over one of her shoulders was the strap of a large canvas bag.

"We've had a bit of an injury, Rika," Jared explained. "Is Shannon far away?"

"Not too far, I shouldn't think." Rika shifted her bag just slightly. "Do you need any help?"

Jared's response was to nod toward the ship. "Take all that into the cargo bay, then go and prep the infirmary."

Rika nodded, grasped the handle of the wagon tighter and headed through into the ship, the wagon trundling along behind her as she went.

"Okay, watch your step," Jared cautioned as he, the doctor and Taylor started to head into the cargo bay. They stepped onto the ramp and walked slowly up it, Jared bending down to pick up a ratty-looking faded lawn chair as they went. "We'll have to climb a couple steps to get to the infirmary – reckon you can manage it?"

"I can try," Taylor replied.

"Good enough," Jared decided. "Come on, then."

As they passed through the entrance a brass plate on the interior wall caught Taylor's eye, and he stopped to have a closer look. What he read there shook his entire world down to its foundations.

*03-K64-Firefly – Class B Transport – 79 Mark IV*

*"SISYPHUS"*

*Allied Spacecraft Corp., Osiris*

*Firefly Ship Works, Ltd., Hera*

*Mandel & Earls, Ltd., Londinium*

*September 2459*

"Oh *hell* no," he whispered. "No no *no...*" *This can't be real*, he thought frantically. *What the fuck happened to me?*

It was impossible. How he could have travelled more than four centuries into the future, he didn't know. Nobody had invented time travel yet, so far as he knew anyhow, and he was fairly sure such an invention was quite a ways off. The last thing he remembered before arriving was driving his car up the Santa Monica Freeway on his way to work – and after that, nothing but black and emptiness.

"I am definitely *not* in Kansas anymore," he murmured.

Rika was waiting for them in the infirmary. It was a stark, white room just off the kitchen that looked very much like a doctor's examination room – which, Taylor supposed, it really was. It was just a little more futuristic than he was used to. She had tied her hair back off her face into a low ponytail at the back of her neck.

"Take your shirt off, please," the doctor requested as she popped the latches on what Taylor had now realised was nothing more than a doctor's kitbag, much like the one that his mother used for work. He did as he was asked, wincing in pain as he lifted the hem of his T-shirt over his head. The necklaces he wore nearly went with it – his ankh, his father's dog tag from his stint in the Persian Gulf, and his wedding band. He folded his shirt hurriedly and tossed it carefully onto a nearby examination table.

"Let's see now," the doctor said as she took an instrument that looked like a handheld image scanner from her kitbag. She swiped and prodded a finger across its LCD display, before holding the scanner up in front of Taylor. A frown briefly creased her brow. "Does it hurt to breathe?" she asked, her tone almost conversational.

"Yeah, it does. It hurts a lot, actually."

"Not entirely surprising. You've fractured a couple of ribs on your left side." She swiped a finger again across the scanner's display. "Aside from that, though, you have a badly sprained left wrist."

"Nothing else?"

The doctor shook her head. "Nothing else. I believe you may just have a very good guardian angel watching over you." She turned her scanner off and stowed it back in her kit bag, taking out a wrist brace. "Wear this brace for the next week, unless you're bathing or swimming," she instructed as she handed it to Taylor. "The rib fractures I unfortunately can't do much about – ice your ribs, take some painkillers, and rest up as much as possible. They should be healed in approximately three weeks." The kitbag was latched once more, and the doctor turned to Jared. "May I speak with you in private?" she asked him.

"So what's your name?"

Taylor looked over from picking his shirt back up and unfolding it. Rika stood behind him with her hands clasped in front of her and head tilted slightly toward her left shoulder. "Taylor," he responded as he tried to put his shirt back on one-handed.

"Oh, let me help you with that." Rika stepped forward and helped Taylor pull his shirt back on. She pulled the chains of Taylor's necklaces out of the shirt's collar and let the ankh and ring fall back to rest against his chest. "What's this from?" she asked as she studied the dog tag closely.

"It was my dad's," Taylor explained. "He was a soldier – killed in action when I was seven." He took the tag in his fingers and ran the pad of his thumb over the lettering embossed into the steel.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Taylor nodded quickly. "What's your name?" he asked, steering the conversation in a different direction.

"Sarika. Rika's just one of my nicknames here on the ship. Everyone else, they call me Sari or just 'hey you'." Taylor laughed softly at this, and Sarika cracked a smile. She picked up the wrist brace. "I'll brace up your wrist for you if you like."

Out in the corridor, Jared and the medic were deep in discussion about Taylor.

"Do you know anything about him or how he arrived in Sandford Downs?" the medic asked.

"Not a thing," Jared replied. "He just appeared right out of nowhere – I heard an explosion when I was outside on the loading ramp, and once the dust had cleared I saw him lying in the square. Never even met or seen him before today."

"I see," the medic mused. "He's been hit by something with quite a bit of weight behind it. That he wasn't killed or injured more severely is a blessing – he got off relatively lightly. I'd advise you to allow him to rest up on your ship for a few weeks, so that his injuries can heal."

She unlatched her kitbag again and took out her scanner. "When I scanned him for injuries, I noted something out of the ordinary. I would put his age at twenty-eight, nearly twenty-nine, and aside from a few respiratory issues he's in excellent health." Her fingertips danced across the scanner's display, bringing up her patient's vitals. "What I'm somewhat concerned about is that he has a number of toxins and pollutants in his system that haven't been in the atmosphere in, well, more than four hundred years."

"Since Earth-That-Was," Jared realised, and the medic nodded. "He's a Traveller, then."

"It would seem that way, yes," the medic agreed. "He likely doesn't realise this is what has happened to him. I would guess that it was a highly traumatic event that brought him here from his home time and world, as it has been with other Travellers. What that event was, I can't say for sure, but he will probably remember for himself given enough time."

Jared nodded to show he understood. "*Xièxie nǐ, Doc.*"

Shannon arrived back at the ship not much later, tossing an apple from hand to hand as he walked up the loading ramp into the cargo bay. Jared was sitting on a catwalk above the deck, feet swinging slightly back and forth. "Ship fuelled up?" he asked his brother.

"All fuelled up and ready to go," Shannon confirmed. "Kitchen stocked?"

Jared nodded. "Rika went to the markets, wandered around a bit and got us some supplies. Should keep us going for this job, maybe the next as well."

"Shiny," Shannon said, sounding content. "I'll get us up in the air."

"Before you do, we've picked up a passenger. He's resting up at the moment, but he should be up and about by dinner."

Less than ten minutes later the *Sisyphus* had lifted off from Kitchener Docks, headed toward the planet Jiangyin and the crew's next assignment. Shannon, Jared and Sarika were off on their jobs around the ship – Shannon on the bridge steering their course, Sarika in the kitchen sorting out the rest of the day's meals, and Jared in engineering ensuring all was running smoothly.

Meanwhile, Taylor was stretched out on a bed in one of the passenger dorms, shirtless and with an icepack strapped to his left side, staring up at the ceiling. Scattered around him on the bed and the floor were all of his worldly possessions.

It had taken him until the *Sisyphus* had departed Greenleaf to realise that he was now homeless. His entire life, what was left of it anyhow, was spelled out in the contents of his messenger bag and the pockets of his jacket and jeans – his wallet, his iPod, his laptop, his phone, a couple of books, a notebook and pens, and all manner of knick-knacks belonging to Rhiannon and Lucas. He had no money, no way of contacting home (or of even *getting* home that he could tell), and no clothes or shoes save those that had been on his back and feet when he had arrived in the future. And he was acutely aware that once he had healed up, there was absolutely no guarantee that he would be welcome aboard the ship any longer.

"Taylor?"

He looked over at the doorway to see Sarika standing there with a tray in her hands, one laden down with a bowl, a plate and a mug.

"I thought you might be hungry," she explained. "May I come in?"

"Oh, yeah, of course," Taylor consented, and slowly sat himself up. "Sorry about the mess."

"*Fàngxīn*," Sarika said almost dismissively, her tone cheerful. "I got myself a brother and a little sister, so I'm used to a bit of untidiness." She set the tray down on the floor and cleared herself a spot on the bed before sitting down. "So I know your name," she said as she bent down for the tray, "but not where you're from or anything else. Feel like spilling the beans?"

Taylor was silent for a few moments as he studied the contents of the tray. The bowl had noodles and vegetables in it with a pair of chopsticks alongside, while the plate held what looked suspiciously like dumplings. A quick sip from the mug revealed its contents as green tea.

"It isn't much," Sarika confessed quietly.

"It's great," Taylor assured her. "And I'm absolutely *starving*. Thank you." He gave Sarika a smile, and was rewarded in kind. "I was born in Los Angeles," he said to begin with, not even thinking about his words – at that moment, he was more concerned with sating his hunger.

"Oh, Angel City?" Sarika asked. Taylor noted that she sounded excited about this. "I've always wanted to go there – I've heard it's a beautiful place."

Taylor shrugged. "It's okay, I suppose. I don't mind it – it's busy, sure, but I think it will always be home, no matter where it is that I find myself."

"Do you have family?" was Sarika's next question. "I mean, aside from your father."

Taylor nodded, swallowing his mouthful of noodles and vegetables before replying. "My mom's a doctor, and I've got two brothers and a sister – their names are Isaac, Zac and Jessica. Isaac's in the military like our dad was, Zac teaches Chemistry at a high school in L.A., and my sister's in college." He put the bowl down and took up the plate of dumplings. "I'm married as well – got two kids with another on the way." With one hand he touched his wedding band – in that moment he missed Caroline and the kids more than ever, and he knew that there was a chance he would never see them again. "What about you?"

"Oldest of three," Sarika replied. "Brother's name is Zacharias, and my sister's Jesinta. My ma 'n' pa're horse breeders and wranglers over on Paquin. I'm the first of my family to go travelling the 'Verse." This last sentence was said in a proud tone of voice.

*Well, I'm completely lost*, Taylor thought as he sipped his tea. *She could be speaking Greek for all that I can understand her.* "How long have you been travelling?"

"Almost three-and-a-half years. I left home a week after my eighteenth birthday – Jared and Shannon were on the hunt for a cook, and Ma made sure I started learning the ins and outs of a

kitchen soon as I could hold a stylus. She also taught me a bit of basic first aid. I keep those two fed and patched up, and in return they make sure I get somewhere to sleep and a cut of their take from a job."

"Do you miss home?"

Sarika shrugged. "Sometimes. Jared and Shannon understand how important home and family are, though, and they miss theirs sometimes too. Whenever we don't have jobs lined up, if we're not too far out of the way they drop me off on Paquin for a week or two on their way back home. Rest of the time, I'm usually able to wave my family if I'm in need of a familiar face or two. We try and keep within Cortex range as much as we can, but if not then I can always write 'em a letter." She smiled a little mysteriously. "As you can likely tell, I have my ways."

Taylor barked out a quiet laugh. "Oh yes, I think I can tell."

A chime sounded from a speaker mounted high on a wall of the dorm as Taylor finished eating, followed by Jared's voice. "Sarika, could you and Taylor come up to the kitchen please?"

Sarika stood and picked up the tray again, now piled with empty dishes. "He probably just wants to tell you the ship rules," she said as Taylor unstrapped the icepack from his side and shrugged his shirt back on. "You'll be able to come back here if you want to when he's done."

She was right, as it turned out. Both Jared and Shannon stood in the kitchen area, with Sarika joining them upon entering. Taylor took a seat at the scrubbed wooden table and prepared himself to listen.

"We don't have very many rules on the ship," Jared said to begin, "but what rules we do have, we ask that you follow them to the best of your ability. Cargo bay, engineering, the armoury, the infirmary, crew bunks and the bridge are all off-limits unless you're escorted by a crew member. Kitchen's open around the clock – main meal's at five-thirty every evening, but you should feel free to grab a bite to eat at any other time if you're hungry. Keep your showers short when we're flying, as we don't carry much water while we're in the air – save the long soaks for when we're in port. And no walking around barefoot and half-naked – clothing and shoes are to be worn at all times."

Taylor couldn't help but note that Jared looked directly at Sarika when he said this last part.

"Basically, don't be a rutting idiot and we'll get along just fine. I believe that about covers it – oh yeah, that's right," he amended hurriedly when Shannon gave him a poke in the side. "Whenever we're in port for a job, no leaving the ship without an escort. That escort will

normally be Sarika unless she's tagging along with us, in which case you'll need to stay on the ship."

"Got it," Taylor said with a nod.

"We'll be at Jiangyin in around thirteen-and-a-half hours," Shannon said, taking up his brother's thread. "Until then, do as you wish provided it's within regulations. Dinner will be in around four or five hours." He gave Taylor a smile before turning tail and heading back through to the bridge.

"As you wish," Taylor murmured, before rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his right hand. All the fuss and excitement of the day was beginning to catch up with him, and the adrenaline he had been running on for the last couple of hours had very nearly worn off. With more than half a day of travel before him, his bed and a good healing sleep were calling his name.

## Chapter 2

*...more than just a memory...*

It was late at night when the *Sisyphus* landed on Jiangyin, at the Taiyuan Docks just outside the town of Shanxi. The planet's three moons – Tongyi, Dangun and Rhilidore – were high and bright in the starry sky overhead as the ship came to rest in port. Shannon stretched in his seat, coaxing cramped joints and muscles back into use, and Jared bit back a wide yawn. It had been a long day, both in time and excitement, and the brothers were both looking forward to taking to their bunks.

"*Wǎn ān*, Jared," Shannon said as he rose to his feet. "I need my bed."

"Night, Shannon," Jared responded as he hooked into the local Cortex network. "Sleep well."

Bare moments after Shannon had departed the bridge in search of sleep, Jared had found their contact's name in the database and had opened a wave. "Jared Leto of *Sisyphus*, waving Derrick Wilder," he said into the microphone embedded into the dashboard's Cortex panel.

"Wilder here."

On the Cortex screen was the face of a man nearing middle age. His hair was thinning slightly atop his head, crow's feet were present at the outer corners of his eyes, and a thick moustache hid a good deal of his mouth. Perched at the very end of his long nose was a pair of round rimless spectacles. "What can I do you for?"

"I believe you're having issues with fugitives here in Shanxi," Jared replied.

"Yes, that we are. And your team is here to solve those issues for us, correct?"

"*Shì*. I apologise for waving so late, but it was a long flight from Greenleaf and we've only just arrived."

"Think nothing of it," Wilder said. "Shall we meet at the Four Winds in the morning, then?"

"That sounds best. At what hour do you want to meet?"

"Let's say..." Wilder trailed off, and Jared figured he was consulting a clock. "How does nine sound to you?"

"That works for me," Jared said. "Nine it is, then."

"Do you require directions to the Four Winds?"

At this Jared shook his head. "I'm familiar with Shanxi. I don't believe it will be difficult to find."

"All right then. Wilder out."

The connection was severed, and the familiar flag of the Union of Allied Planets appeared on the screen. He knew from his history lessons in school that it was a combination of the old flags for the Earth-That-Was nations of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China, a reflection of the two cultures that had come together to become the 'Verse. He rolled his eyes at it slightly before rising from his own seat and leaving the bridge.

On his way through to his bunk, he came across Taylor. The ship's lone passenger had fallen asleep at the kitchen table, sprawled forward in his seat across the worn surface. His head rested on the pages of an open book, and his back and shoulders rose and fell in time with his breathing. Across the tabletop stretched his left arm, bent slightly at the elbow, his fingertips falling just short of touching the opposite edge of the table.

Biting his bottom lip hard, and hating what he was about to do, he stepped forward and touched Taylor on his shoulder. To Jared's surprise Taylor's eyes popped open straight away.

"What time is it?" he asked as he sat up straight and rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his right hand. "And how long have I been asleep anyway?"

"It's a quarter to midnight," Jared replied as Taylor closed his book. "You've been asleep for around four or five hours."

"Jesus *Christ*," Taylor mumbled. "I had no idea I was *that* tired." He braced himself against the table with his right hand as he stood, and looked quickly around the kitchen once he had straightened. "Oh, please don't tell me I fell asleep at the *table*," he groaned. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Jared caught Taylor by the elbow as he stumbled slightly. "You needed to sleep – and you still do, otherwise it will take you even longer to heal. So do I, for that matter. It's been a very long day for all of us."

They parted ways at the door of Taylor's room. "Can I ask you a question?" Taylor asked before he stepped through the doorway, and Jared nodded. "This is probably going to make me sound like the universe's biggest idiot, but..." He looked briefly at his shoes. "What year is this? Because even I can tell that it's not 2012. It's not even Earth."

*That must be his home year and planet, Jared realised. And it truly must have been something violent for him to have been flung so far forward in time.* "It's 2512," he replied. "January nineteenth, to be exact."

As he spoke the date, Jared could have sworn he saw Taylor's eyes widen just a little in what could only be shock. Taylor nodded once and turned to go into his room, sliding the door closed behind him.

"Sleep well, Taylor," Jared said to the closed door before turning around to head through to the crew corridor and his bunk.

In the privacy of his own room, only then did Taylor finally show any sort of emotion – even if it was just to the floor, ceiling and walls. He collapsed against the wall just inside the doorway and slid down to the floor, closed his eyes tightly and drew in a harsh, hitching breath.

Five hundred years. He had been catapulted five full centuries into the future, into a world, a *universe* that he knew he had no hope of understanding on his own. The world he knew and his family were long gone, and for all he knew he was the very last member of his line still left alive – the last Hanson.

He knew he had missed out on so much. The birth of his third child, his son's first birthday, Rhiannon and Lucas' first days of school, their high school graduations...he bit back a quiet, grief-stricken sob. One of his biggest regrets in all of this was that he had not said a proper goodbye before he had left the house – and if he'd been able to live this day over again, he knew he would have.

"I miss you guys," he whispered miserably.

He let out a shaky breath and swiped the back of his right hand across his eyes. There was nothing to be done for it now. Staying up all night wouldn't help his wrist or his ribs to heal, he knew that much. And sitting on his backside on the floor wouldn't get him out of the mess he was in. Jared was right – he did need to sleep.

He pulled himself to his feet, using the wall to steady himself, and winced against a spike of pain in his side as he straightened. "Ow," he whispered. He pressed his hand gingerly to his left side, feeling his fractured ribs move under his palm as he breathed, and waited for the pain to die away before moving toward his bed.

So profound was his exhaustion that he was asleep almost before his head landed on his pillow.

\* \* \*

“Derrick Wilder?”

The man sitting at a table in the corner of the Four Winds looked up from his tea. “Jared and Shannon Leto,” he replied in recognition when he saw Jared and Shannon standing in front of him. “Sit down, please – would either of you like something to eat or drink?”

“Tea, please,” Shannon replied as he and his brother seated themselves. Derrick caught the attention of a passing waitress and held up two fingers, to which the waitress nodded and hurried off. She returned quickly with a ceramic teapot, two cups and two saucers, setting them in the centre of the table.

“To business, then,” Derrick said as the brothers poured tea for themselves. He reached into a pocket and drew out a handheld, placing it in the middle of the table. “What I desire from you is simple – capture Leopold Roxburgh and his accomplices, alive if at all possible, and return them to custody.”

“Are either of them a flight risk?” Shannon asked as Jared leaned forward to study the handheld.

Derrick nodded. “All four fugitives are, and they’ve had monitoring chips implanted beneath the skin of each of their right wrists. They haven’t attempted to leave Jiangyin just yet, but once they even make an attempt at breaking atmo you’ll know straight away.”

While Shannon and Derrick negotiated the terms of the job, Jared spent his time committing the appearances and personal details of their quarry to memory.

They were chasing three men and one woman. The leader of the gang was a fierce-looking character with a shaved and tattooed head and cold grey eyes, almost akin to an old Earth-That-Was skinhead. Both of the other men definitely looked like people Jared wouldn’t want to meet late at night in a dark alley – one was blonde with brown eyes, the other had black hair and green eyes. All three men had very sour looks on their faces.

The lone woman of the group looked strangely familiar. She wore her light brown hair cropped close to her head, and Jared thought she might have been pretty – or even beautiful – if not for the scowl that twisted her face. A long, jagged scar ran along the left side of her jaw, marring her pale skin.

But it was her eyes that stood out. A clear, bright blue, they were strikingly similar to the pair possessed by the *Sisyphus*' resident Traveller. But where Taylor's eyes were warm and friendly – or at least Jared believed they *might* be were they not shadowed, as they currently were – these eyes were much akin to two small chips of ice, cold, cruel and uninviting.

"Jared."

He tore his focus away from the handheld to find Shannon and Derrick watching him. "Sorry," he apologised, and indicated the handheld. "May we borrow this?"

"*Dāngrán*," Derrick consented. "I will need it back at the conclusion of the job, but I'm quite happy to leave it temporarily in your capable hands."

"So it's agreed, then?" Shannon said as they concluded the meeting. "The two of us, along with other parties if we require assistance, will track down the fugitives and return them to custody. And in return, you will pay us five thousand platinum – two-five now, and the balance when the job is completed."

"That's correct," Derrick confirmed. "I'll have the coin transferred into your account by the afternoon." The three stood up, all having finished their tea, and Derrick shook hands with the brothers. "A pleasure doing business with you both."

Their business concluded, Jared and Shannon left the Four Winds and started to head back through Shanxi to the ship. As they walked Jared studied the handheld again, slowly paging through the law enforcement files on their quarry. It was going to be an interesting job, and already he was beginning to make a mental list of what they would need to complete it.

Sarika and Taylor were sitting in the entryway of the ship when Jared and Shannon arrived back at the *Sisyphus*, both of them bent over a pile of coloured cards. "What exactly are you two doing?" Shannon asked as he stepped onto the loading ramp.

"Taylor's teaching me to play UNO," Sarika replied without looking up. "And I'm beating him." She pulled a card out of her hand and dropped it on the untidy pile between them. "Draw four blue," she said, eliciting a groan from Taylor. "And UNO."

"That's not fair," Taylor grumbled. "I should never have taught you how to play this game." He reached across to a much neater pile of cards and slipped four off the top, adding them to the many cards already in his hand.

"And I win!" Sarika said triumphantly as she dropped her final card – a blue 7 – onto the discard pile. "That was fun Taylor, thank you."

"You're welcome," Taylor replied. He started to gather up the cards into a neat stack, combining them with the draw pile and those in his hand. "I'm not going to go so easy on you next time, just be warned."

"Thanks for the warning," Sarika said cheerfully. She hopped to her feet, dusting off the back of her skirt as she moved. "So is the job worked out?"

"It is," Shannon replied. "You can go wander around the docks and markets now if you like. Jared and I are going to wave a few people to see if we can get a Tracer on crew for the job."

"Shiny," Sarika said happily. "You want to come, Taylor?"

Taylor didn't answer at first, instead focusing on packing his playing cards away and then getting to his feet without falling over and breaking more ribs. "You don't mind me tagging along?" he asked as he stowed the pack of cards away in a pocket.

"No, of course I don't mind," Sarika assured him.

"If you're sure, then okay." He glanced down at himself, wishing not for the first time that some clothes other than what he'd been wearing since the morning before had come to the future with him. That would be his first port of call, providing he could borrow a little bit of money.

"And before you ask, Rika, you can have some money to go shopping," Shannon told Sarika. "Get Taylor here some clothes while you're at it, I suspect most of his are drifting halfway across the galaxy."

Taylor could have sworn that Sarika's eyes lit up when Shannon spoke the word 'money', and he suppressed a chuckle. Every time he looked at Sarika or heard her speak he was reminded time and again of Caroline, but in a good way – she embodied all of Caroline's positive qualities.

"How much?" Sarika asked immediately.

Jared and Shannon looked at each other. "I think we still have half a thousand platinum left over from the last job," Jared replied. "The money's in one of the coffee cans in the kitchen, it'll be the one that rattles. Take it, and do what you like with it."

"Yes, sir!" Sarika said happily. She ran up the landing ramp and into the ship, returning around five minutes later with a leather satchel. "Come on Taylor. This money ain't gonna spend itself."

*Save me, please,* Taylor mouthed at Jared and Shannon as Sarika latched onto his right wrist and started to drag him down the loading ramp. Shannon shook his head and chuckled as he started walking up into the ship, Jared following his lead not long afterward.

"First things first," Sarika said as she and Taylor entered the docks' markets. She cast an eye around at all of the nearby stalls, presumably hunting for one in particular. "There!" she said happily and grabbed Taylor's wrist again, pulling him across to a tent-like enclosure. Hung on wires strung across the tent's ceiling and on racks lining the walls were a wide array of clothing. Taylor bit back a groan, knowing that Sarika was only trying to help him out but hating it anyway.

"*Zǎo shang hǎo,*" the stall's proprietor greeted them.

"*Zǎo shang hǎo,*" Sarika replied. "What would you have in the way of men's clothing?"

While Sarika and the stallkeeper talked, their speech shifting seamlessly and effortlessly between English and Chinese, Taylor did a little exploring of the stall. Even if he hadn't known he was in the future, he definitely did now – and he finally understood why he had been on the receiving end of so many strange looks. Just from a cursory glance he could see clothing from Asia (or what had *been* Asia), army gear, the old American West, and even a few pieces styled to look like they had come from the Victorian era. Not any of the clothes he could see were anywhere close to what could be considered the style of the twenty-first century.

But a long coat hanging in a dark corner caught his eye, and he walked across to have another look. He wasn't about to reach up and take it down, not knowing if the stallkeeper had a 'you touch it, you bought it' policy in place, but it was brown leather and looked to be long enough that on him, it would just about reach his knees.

"You don't want that one."

He looked back over his shoulder to see Sarika coming up behind him. "Why don't I want it?" he asked. "I've always wanted a leather jacket."

"Taylor, for the love of Buddha, you need to trust me on this. *You don't want it.*"

Taylor was about to ask why he wouldn't want it when the stallkeeper joined them. "You are Browncoat, yes?" she asked upon seeing what her customers were looking at.

"No," Sarika replied vehemently. "Neither of us are. And I'll thank you *not* to make that sort of insinuation."

The stallkeeper bowed her head. “*Wǒ bú shì gù yì de,*” she said, her tone deferential.

Sarika shook her head and waved off what Taylor could only assume was an apology. “*Suàn le,*” she replied dismissively. “Come on Taylor, I found a few things you might like.”

They left the stall about ten minutes later, Sarika stowing her purchases in her satchel as they walked, and Taylor took the opportunity to ask his interrupted question.

“So *why* exactly wouldn’t I have wanted that jacket? And what’s a Browncoat anyway?”

Sarika stopped walking abruptly and stared at Taylor for close to a minute. “You’re kidding me, right?” she asked, incredulous.

“I’m not kidding.”

“*Wǒ de mā hé tā de fēngkuáng de wàisheng dōu,*” she muttered.

“Can you speak English, please? I don’t understand Chinese.”

As soon as those words left Taylor’s mouth, he found himself on the receiving end of a very intense stare. “It’s *Mandarin,*” Sarika corrected. “And how the *diyù* can you not know Mandarin? Didn’t you go to school?”

“Of course I went to school,” Taylor replied, feeling somewhat insulted. “I went to college too. Doesn’t mean I had the chance to learn Mandarin. I learned Spanish instead.”

Sarika dropped her bag on the ground and covered her face with her hands. “*Jīngcǎi,*” she groaned. “Come on, back to the ship. I think it’s time I had a word with Jared and Shannon.”

She picked up her bag and led the way back to the ship, weaving and wending her way between stalls as she went. Taylor followed as closely as he could, which wasn’t easy considering how fast Sarika was moving. “Can you slow down a bit, please?” he called out as he tried to match her pace.

“*Wǒ duì nǐ bù wén bù jiàn,*” Sarika called back, not even bothering to slow down.

The morning before, when she had first met Taylor, there had been something about him that she hadn’t been *quite* able to put a finger on. Now, though, after finding out that he not only had no idea what a Browncoat was, but that he didn’t know Mandarin, she was pretty sure she had a reasonable idea of what exactly was going on with him. Not only that, she was almost certain that Jared knew the whole story. Now it was only a matter of getting him to admit it.

## Chapter 3

*...left them all behind*

Luckily for Sarika, Jared and Shannon were taking a break from the preparations for their job when she and Taylor arrived back at the ship. They both looked up from their datapads as Sarika stormed into the kitchen, with Taylor following close behind. Jared noted that Taylor was looking very confused.

"He is *not* from this universe," Sarika ranted, jerking her right thumb over her shoulder at Taylor as she spoke. "He doesn't know what a Browncoat is, he doesn't know Mandarin-"

"Sarika, *calm down*," Jared interrupted her.

"I will not *calm down*!" Sarika yelled. "There is something very ruttin' strange going on here, and I want to know what it is!"

"Sarika, *bizui* or I'm dropping you off on Paquin the next time we're across that way and leaving you there for good. I'm not going to tell you again."

"I'm going to my room," Taylor volunteered, wandering away through the kitchen when Jared waved him off. He was smart enough to know that while this particular conversation would have him as its primary topic, it wasn't for his ears. Shannon got up and closed off the kitchen once the corridor was clear.

"I know you know what's going on with him," Sarika said, her tone accusatory.

Jared was silent for a moment as he considered how to answer her. "You're right," he said finally. "I do know what's going on with Taylor. But unless you calm down, I won't tell you a thing."

Sarika glared at him, but sat herself down at the table and took a few deep breaths. "Okay, I'm calm," she said at last.

"This does not leave this room," Jared said to begin. "Taylor does not know about this, and I'm going to wait until after this job to tell him. And believe me, I *will* know if he finds out before I have a chance to explain it to him."

Sarika nodded furiously, not trusting herself to speak in case what words left her mouth would give her cause for regret.

"You've heard of the Travellers, I take it?"

"Yeah, my ma told me about them," Sarika replied. "Said they're folks from the past that get slingshot from their own time and place to here."

"That's what Taylor is. Something happened to him, I don't know what and I'm guessing he doesn't either, but it was violent enough to send him five hundred years into the future – from Earth-That-Was."

Sarika just stared at Jared, mouth open slightly in surprise. "How is that *possible?*" she whispered. "That would make him..." She quickly counted off on her fingers. "He's almost *prehistoric...*"

"Not really, no," Shannon said. He knew as much as Jared knew, which admittedly wasn't a lot. "How old did that medic guess he was?"

"I think she said he was about twenty-eight."

"Sounds about right to me. He was born in our prehistory, for this 'Verse anyhow, but he's still only in his twenties."

"I had no idea," Sarika said quietly after a short silence. "I really didn't." She rubbed a finger over a scorch mark on the tabletop. "Though I should have picked up on it when he said he was from Los Angeles – I thought he meant Angel City, over on Valentine. He must feel so lost – his whole *world's* gone. I can't imagine that happening to me."

"I daresay none of us can, Rika," Shannon said. "It's up to us now to help him to learn how to live in this one."

As Shannon spoke those words, a tiny spark ignited in Sarika's mind. "Are we going to help him get home?" she asked.

"Rika, even if he *could* go home, Earth-That-Was is a dead world – you know that," Jared said patiently. "And it would take years to get there. Decades, even."

Sarika waved him off. "That's not what I meant. I swear I heard somewhere about this new tech someplace called Leviathan is trying to invent, to make travel between sun systems faster than it is at the moment. I think it was called a wormhole."

"I don't think something like that would let him travel back through time."

"But can we try anyway? I mean, after this job is finished of course."

Jared and Shannon looked at each other. The *Sisyphus* being both their ship and their home away from home, what either of them decided was final – and if they considered Sarika's latest request to be a fool's errand and not worth spending any time on, then it wouldn't be granted.

"To be completely honest, I think it's a suicidal idea," Jared started. "And there is absolutely no guarantee a wormhole would do what you're thinking it could."

"Not to mention that time travel is a tricky business," Shannon added. "It's been done, yes, but only in controlled trials and studies. And it's only been to a set point in the near future, not to half a millennia in the past. Plus you saw the mess he was in when he arrived here."

"I know all that," Sarika said, her tone turning heated. She dragged her hands through her messy hair, fingers snagging on tangles. "Mostly I want to do this for him because, well...he has family back home. He's married, and he's got two kids. Plus I think he said his wife is expecting another baby – or she was when he left. And I'm thinking he probably misses them a lot." She shrugged. "That's all. I don't have any other reason."

"After the job is done, then," Jared agreed. "But *only* until we get another job – and if that means we only spend a couple of weeks on this, then that's the end of it. *Dǒng ma?*"

Sarika nodded. "*Hǎo.*" She pushed her chair back and stood up. "I'm going to go talk to him. Might even start to teach him a bit of Mandarin. If this doesn't work and he ends up stuck here for good, then he's going to need it."

Taylor looked up from reading one of his books upon hearing a chime at his door. "Come in," he called out.

Somewhat to his surprise, the door slid open to admit Sarika. She carried a book under one arm, and in both her hands was a tea tray holding a teapot and two cups. "Truce?" she asked. She sounded a little sheepish.

"If that's tea you've got there," Taylor replied. He found a bookmark and placed it in his book, reaching across to put it on his night table.

"It's tea. And I know you like it, so..." She gave him a tiny smile.

"Well, come on and sit down then." He sat up so that Sarika could put her tray down on the bed and sit down next to it. "What's the book?"

"You said you didn't know Mandarin. So I went through my books and dug this out for you." She handed the book to him, and he fought back a smile at its title – *The Idiot's Guide to Mandarin*.

"Implying something, are we?" he asked lightly as he leafed through the book. Somewhat to his dismay Sarika's face fell, and she bowed her head. "Oh, hey, I was kidding – I didn't mean that you're an idiot, or even that I'm an idiot. It's just...where I'm from, there's a whole series of books with *The Idiot's Guide* title. That's all. I've even got a few of them at home." He set the book in his lap and poured tea for them both, and held one of the cups out to Sarika as a peace offering. She took it with a small smile and sipped her tea carefully.

"Can you tell me about your family?" Sarika asked as Taylor idly flicked through the book.

"What do you want to know?"

"Their names would be a good start."

Taylor raised an eyebrow at Sarika. "Well, my wife's name is Caroline. We met in college – she was studying to become a librarian, and I was studying architecture. The first time I saw her..." He trailed off, not even bothering to fight back a grin. "I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I thought she was gorgeous. She didn't exactly feel the same way about me to begin with, sad to say – she was quiet and very bookish, and I was pretty loud and liked going to off-campus parties a lot. So she didn't like me very much. A mutual friend set us up during our second year, and once we actually started spending some time together, well..."

"So she liked you after that?"

Taylor shook his head. "No, not right away. She wouldn't go on a date with me for at least three months."

Sarika seemed to find this amusing, and she let out a snicker. Taylor gave her a sour look. "Once we did start to date, we found out that we actually had quite a bit in common. We both loved to read, and we were both military brats – her dad was in the Navy, and mine had been in the Marines. I asked her to marry me during the summer between her senior year and my fourth year."

"When did you get married?"

"Right after my graduation. We were both twenty-three at the time. Our daughter Rhiannon was born four years later, and our son Lucas came along about ten months ago."

He fell silent and sipped his tea, holding the cup in both of his hands. Sarika studied him briefly before asking him another question.

"Do you have any pictures of your family?"

"I do, yeah." He set his cup down on the tray and slipped off his bed, wincing as he straightened up, and went across to where his laptop was stowed on a shelf. "You don't suppose there's somewhere I can plug this in, do you?" he asked as he carried it over to the bed. "The battery isn't going to last forever, and I'm not sure how much power it's got left in it."

"You'd probably need to ask Jared or Shannon," Sarika replied. "They might even know someone who can fit a perpetual power supply to it." She watched as Taylor set the computer down on the bed and pressed a button, turning it on. "It wouldn't be cheap by any means, but at least it'd save you the trouble of having to hook it up to the power all the time."

"I'll think about it." The computer's desktop loaded, and Taylor started tapping away at its keyboard. A few practiced swipes and clicks across the track pad had his Pictures folder loaded. "I'll show you my parents and my siblings first."

The first photograph he loaded was of his parents on their wedding day in 1976. His father wore his Marines dress blues, and his mother wore her wedding dress. "My dad's name was William, and my mom's name is Georgina. That photo was taken about six-and-a-half years before I was born."

"Your mother is beautiful," Sarika commented. "You take after her quite a bit."

Taylor gave Sarika a smile. "I hear that a lot, and I'll have to tell her that when I see her next. I think she'll be pleased to hear it." Here he gestured to his eyes. "I got my eyes from my dad, though. Only one of my parents' kids who did."

"Do you miss him? Your father, I mean."

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. I miss him a lot. Especially around my birthday each year." He lifted his father's dog tag away from his chest. "That's why I keep this with me. My mom always said I was his favourite, even though parents aren't really supposed to have favourite children. So she made sure I got his dog tag after the funeral, and I started to wear it when I turned thirteen." He skipped to the next photograph, one of the last taken of his father before he had died. "I've always tried my best to make him proud of me, but I drew the line at military service. I couldn't do it – I was always very conscious of what war was like, and I knew that people could be killed

in action. And I didn't want that to happen to me. Not to mention that I didn't want to put my mother through that sort of hell twice. My older brother took up that responsibility instead."

"Can I see your siblings?"

"Yeah, sure." He closed the folder he had been going through and opened another. The first photograph he opened was of his older brother. "That's Isaac. He's in the Air Force – joined straight out of high school, about fourteen years ago now. He's married with kids as well, so I'm an uncle as well as being a dad – I've got twin nephews and a niece."

Next he skipped to a photograph of his younger brother, dressed in a white lab coat and holding a Bunsen burner, hair teased out in all directions and face blackened by charcoal. "And this is Zac. He's always liked blowing things up and playing with chemicals, so I think it was only natural that he ended up teaching Chemistry."

"Why is he dressed like that?" Sarika asked. She leaned closer, peering at the photograph.

"That was just for Halloween one year. He dressed up as a mad scientist." He let out a chuckle. "Perfect costume for someone like him."

The last photograph he clicked through to was of his sister. "This is Jessica, I take it?" Sarika asked.

"That's Jess, yeah," Taylor confirmed, secretly pleased that Sarika had remembered his sister's name. "She's in college, studying archaeology."

"How old is she?"

"She's twenty-three. Isaac's just turned thirty-one, a couple of months ago, I'm twenty-eight, and Zac's twenty-six. I'll be twenty-nine in two months, though."

The two of them continued looking through Taylor's photographs until the battery in his laptop had completely worn down, and he was forced to turn it off and stow it back on its shelf. "How are you in the kitchen?" Sarika asked as they walked out into the corridor.

"I'm not bad. Why do you ask?"

"I figure you'll want something to keep your mind busy while you're healing up. So how would you like to give me a hand in cooking? You help me out and maybe teach me a few recipes I don't know, and in return I'll split my earnings with you. It'll give you a bit of coin to spend on sundries and essentials." She extended a hand. "Do we have a deal?"

Taylor took Sarika's hand in his, and they shook on it. "It's a deal."

Sarika grinned. "Shiny. First order of business, though, is getting you wearing something different." She looked him up and down with a critical eye. "Come on. We'll have a look at what we bought today, see what will be most comfortable for you while your ribs are healing."

Taylor couldn't help but smile as he followed Sarika through to her bunk. He was quite sure that he had made his first friend in this new world – and much to his surprise, that she reminded him of Caroline didn't hurt as much as he thought it would. Quite suddenly, he didn't feel so alone anymore.

\* \* \*

The Jade Serpent in Shanxi was just like any other tavern on Jiangyin. Constructed out of wood, terracotta tile and stone, it had a number of horses tethered up in front of its doors. Colourful pennants proclaiming the tavern's name in Mandarin hung from the balcony that shielded its weather-beaten front porch.

What made it different from the rest, though, was at that very instant inside it were the members of the Tangye Tigers – and none of them knew that their time on the run was about to come to an abrupt end.

"Right, what's the situation here?"

The Tracer that Jared and Shannon had hired pulled up a file on his datapad, brushing his black dreadlocks out of his face as he scanned the onscreen text. "The four of them will do just about anything not to be bound by law again," he said. "And all four are armed and very dangerous. From what I have been able to gather during my traces, Leopold favours an old-fashioned Springfield Model 1861 Minié rifle, Chester carries your average Remington 1100 12-gauge semi-automatic shotgun, Branston has been known to use a .36 calibre LeMat revolver, and Cerise keeps a number of very sharp and extremely lethal throwing knives about her person." He looked up at the brothers. "Were my opinion to be asked, you're both insane."

"Not the first time we've been called that," Jared replied. He propped himself up on his elbows and peered down over the side of the building that he, Shannon and the Tracer had set themselves up on, across the way from the Jade Serpent. "And before you ask, yes it's worth the payoff. It'll keep us up in the air for a few more weeks."

The Tracer shrugged. "Never said it *wasn't* worth the payoff. It's just *bùtài zhèngcháng* de, is all."

Shannon was the first to spot movement down on the street. He was straight up on his feet, taking a quick moment to make sure his pistols were still in their holsters and his boots were buckled before racing across to the fire escape on the outside of the building. Jared followed close behind, gathering his knives as he ran, skidding a little on the roof before reaching the fire escape. He doubted very much that he would need to use his weapons, but it never hurt to be prepared.

The gang was saddling up their horses when Jared and Shannon jumped down to the street. "Leopold Roxburgh, you and your gang are bound by law to stand down," Shannon called out.

"*Jiàn tā de guǐ!*" the gang leader shouted. He unholstered his rifle and raised it to his shoulder. Behind him, his accomplices readied their own weapons.

"Jared, what's our authority?" Shannon asked in a low voice.

"Fire at will," Jared replied.

"Thought so." And with those words, Shannon unholstered his pistols and Jared unsheathed two of his knives. "We are just as armed as you are," Shannon informed the gang. "The only difference being that if *you* fire, you'll have a further charge of resisting arrest added to your warrants." He slowly raised his pistols, keeping his eye on Leopold and mentally calculating the best place to incapacitate him should it become necessary. "My partner and I, on the other hand, are quite within our rights and our job description to shoot you should we feel it's warranted." Out of the corner of his eye he watched Jared tracing the blade of one of his knives along his jaw. "We'll still get paid if you kick it in the process, but it won't be as much and I'd rather not waste my bullets on you unless it's strictly necessary. And I know Jared *hates* to have his knives bled on. So if you all know what's best for you, you'll drop those weapons of yours and come along quietly."

"Or what?" one of the other two males called out.

"Or you'll find yourself on the pointy end of my blade," Jared replied.

The gang leader said nothing in reply, merely cocked his weapon. Jared acted on nothing more than instinct and hurled one of his knives at the ground, stopping short of piercing the leader's right boot with it. "That's your first and your last warning right there," Shannon said almost conversationally, watching Jared unsheathe a third knife to replace the one he had thrown. "Next time he *won't* miss."

"You're all talk," the sole female of the gang taunted.

Shannon cocked his pistols. "Am I?" he asked almost conversationally. "I'm thinking, *xiǎo jiě*, that *nǐ yào wǒ kāiqiāng*." He gestured with the barrel of the pistol in his left hand at the gang leader. "Now why don't you tell your boyfriend here that it's time to give it up?"

Much to both Jared and Shannon's surprise, she sheathed her knives and stepped forward, speaking softly into the leader's ear. He nodded and held up a hand. "We surrender," he said, dropping his rifle on the dusty ground. The other three members of the gang followed suit with their own weapons.

Twenty minutes later the gang was in custody, held in separate sturdy cells, Derrick had his handheld back, and their Tracer had been paid his fee. "Well, that was interesting," Shannon commented as they left the lockup, heading back to the *Sisyphus*.

"Interesting *and* profitable," Jared agreed. "What d'you say to blocking off our schedule for a few weeks? That payoff should keep us flying for about that long if we're careful with it."

"No complaints here," Shannon replied. "And how about we have a chat with our Traveller when we get back? You did promise Rika, after all." In a low voice, he added, "Maybe start thinking about training him, as well? He looks like he could handle a staff."

"I'll clear my calendar," Jared said, completely deadpan.

Sarika and Taylor were in the kitchen when Jared and Shannon arrived back at the ship. "They're getting along well," Shannon commented as he watched the two new friends cooking up a storm.

"Let's hope they still get along when we've had our chat," Jared said, before letting out a loud whistle. Both Taylor and Sarika paused in their cooking and looked up. "Leave that for a little bit, you two. It's time we talked."

## Chapter 4

*...world's been turned and overthrown*

The four of them gathered around the kitchen table, Sarika and Taylor having left the stove on at a simmer. "I'm just going to come right out with it," Jared said to begin. "Taylor, you are what we in this 'Verse call a Traveller. You've been catapulted forward through the years from your own time and world. For that to happen a violent force is always involved, usually a terraquake or a tremor of some description."

"What makes you particularly unusual, though," Shannon continued, "is that Travellers don't normally come forward more than about ten or twenty years, and ordinarily they come from within the 'Verse. You, on the other hand..."

"Five hundred years," Taylor finished quietly, his voice barely audible over the sound of soup simmering away on the stove. He looked at his hands briefly. "How did you know?"

"After you were patched up the morning you arrived, the medic took me aside," Jared explained. "You were lucky to be alive, she told me – seems you were hit by something that had a lot of force behind it, enough to catapult you forward half a millennium. Getting shot forward probably saved your life." He scratched at a patch of table with a thumbnail. "The only way she was able to tell that your home time is so far back in the past is because her med-scanner picked up a whole lot of contaminants in your system that haven't been in the atmosphere in around four hundred years."

"And when I asked what year it was..."

Jared nodded. "That's when I knew for sure. You aren't the first Traveller, as you can probably guess, but you are the first that's ever come from twenty-first century Earth-That-Was."

Taylor then asked the question both Jared and Shannon had been dreading.

"Am I ever going to get home again?"

The brothers looked at each other. "If you'd only come forward from, say, 2490, then yeah, most likely you'd be able to get home," Shannon replied. "But because you've not only come from 2012, but also from the planet Earth, it may not be so easy." He raked a hand back through his hair. "I think it might be time for a bit of a history lesson, if you're open to one?"

Taylor shrugged. "I've got nothing else to do."

"Enthusiastic much?" Sarika murmured, earning herself an elbow in the ribs courtesy of Taylor.

"About four hundred and ninety years ago," Jared started, "a group of stars was discovered in the constellation of Taurus, made up of five stars and fourteen or so gas giants. Later on a number of Earth-like planets were also discovered. The rate of global warming on Earth-That-Was increased about twelve months afterward.

"Around ten years after global warming increased, it was confirmed that within around a century the planet Earth would no longer be able to support human life. Various theories for evacuating the planet were presented, and terraforming was attempted on Venus, Mars and Earth's moon, but eventually it was decided that if the human race wanted to survive, they would have to leave the solar system.

"Terraforming of the planets that were discovered began in 2072, and around twenty-five years after that the first fleet of ark ships left Earth. Six years later all but those unable to make the journey for whatever reason had left Earth behind, and in around 2110 no more data was received from Earth. It was assumed by that point that anyone left on the planet had died. In 2220 the ark ships reached this 'Verse and began colonising the planets of Londinium and Sihnon, before spreading out to other terraformed planets over the next couple hundred years and colonising those."

"And then about six years ago, the Rim and Border planets decided to secede from the rest of the 'Verse and form their own government without Core interference," Shannon continued. "The Core worlds were basically keeping all the technology and resources for their own, and leaving the rest of the 'Verse to fend for themselves. The Core didn't like that anyone wanted out, so not long afterward war broke out between the Core and the Independent planets, the latter also being known as Browncoats. That war ended a few months ago – the Independents lost, and all the planets were brought together as the Union of Allied Planets. Which brings us to where we are today."

"So *that's* why you said I didn't want that jacket!" Taylor realised.

"That's why," Sarika confirmed. "So soon after the war, it's a bit unadvisable to go wandering around the 'Verse wearing something like that. You don't want people getting the wrong idea."

"I think I understand now." He gave Sarika a smile. "I suppose you want to know my story now?" he asked, to which Jared and Shannon both nodded, and he ran his right hand back over his head. "Well, my name's Taylor Hanson," he said as a beginning. "I was born almost five hundred and twenty-nine years ago in the city of Los Angeles, in I guess what used to be the United

States of America. I'd lived almost all over the States by the time I was six years old – my dad was in the United States Marine Corps, so we got moved around a lot. He died a month or so before my eighth birthday, during a tour of duty in the Persian Gulf."

Here he held up his father's dog tag so that it could be seen. "This was his. It was given to me by my mother, who got it from the Marines. I still miss him a lot." He paused briefly. "I'm the second of four kids – or I suppose I *used* to be by this point – and the dad of two, though when I got shot through time my wife was six months pregnant with our third child. I'm an architect by trade, but I'm also a musician and an inventor – just as a hobby, I'm nowhere near the level of expertise or talent needed to make a career of them."

"What instruments do you play?" Sarika asked.

"I sing, mostly. Though sometimes back on Earth I'd go into music shops and pick up a guitar, work the strings for a little bit. I never really had the time to do more than that.

"I don't remember what happened to me before I got here. The last thing I remember doing is driving up the freeway from my house to where I worked at the time. Between that and waking up in the future..." He shook his head. "Nothing. All I can figure out is that I was hit by something hard enough to break my ribs and sprain my wrist – it's the only explanation I can think of." He ran his right hand over the brace on his left hand and wrist. "So what happens to me now?"

"Jared and I are going to block off our schedule for the next few weeks," Shannon replied. "Between the three of us" he gestured around to Jared, Sarika and himself "we can teach you just about everything you'll need to know to survive in the 'Verse."

"And once you're healed up, if you like, we can teach you how to fight," Jared added. "There is no telling how long it'll take to find a way to get you home, if one exists, and I think we'd all feel a lot more secure if you knew how to defend yourself in the meantime."

"If you're *quite* done," Sarika said, sounding supremely bored, "Taylor and I need to get back to our cooking. That soup isn't going to cook itself, though it would be very nice if it did."

Jared waved her off with an amused shake of his head, and both Sarika and Taylor got up from their seats at the table. "So you really don't remember anything about what brought you here?" Sarika asked as they resumed their places at the stove.

Taylor shook his head as he sorted one-handed through the small canisters of spices that were stacked against the half-wall of the kitchen bench. "I don't remember a thing. I wish I did. It'd make adjusting a whole lot easier if I did, I think."

"It probably would, yeah." Sarika quickly tasted the soup and frowned. "Hmm. Needs some chilli." She held her hand out for the canister of chilli flakes, and Taylor handed it over. "You can't train yet because of your busted ribs," she continued as she added chilli flakes to the pot, "but I can start to teach you Mandarin. Everyone in the 'Verse is bilingual, and you'll need to know the lingo if you want to look like you actually belong here. Even if it's only for a little while."

By the time dinner time rolled around Sarika's special twist on chicken laksa was cooked and on the table, and she and Taylor were conversing back and forth in very basic and (on Taylor's part) halting Mandarin. As Sarika saw Jared and Shannon stepping into the kitchen area, she touched Taylor on the shoulder and whispered something in his ear that made him laugh softly.

"And what sweet nothings are you whispering to our Traveller, Rika?" Shannon joked as he took his usual seat at the table.

"That's none of your business, *ài rén*," Sarika replied sweetly. "Just something between two friends."

"I think it *is* our business," Jared said, his tone somewhat stern. "You're in a public area. Now spill."

"She said you were *dāi ruò mù jī*," Taylor replied, not looking up from ladling the laksa into each of their bowls from the pot in the middle of the table.

"That...that's Mandarin," Shannon said in what was definitely surprise. "You're speaking Mandarin."

"I've been teaching him," Sarika said. "Just a few things while we were cooking, but mostly insults and how to cuss. He's a pretty quick study."

"You'll have to teach him proper speech as well," Jared cautioned as they began their meal. "Insults and cussing, that's fine between friends, sure, but otherwise..."

"Yes, yes, I know," Sarika waved him off. "He's got a book that I loaned him a few days ago for that."

"And *he* is sitting right here," Taylor said pointedly, voice raised. He fished a snow pea out of his laksa and popped it into his mouth. "Now come on, it's gonna get cold."

\* \* \*

Half a week later, in the dead of night, Taylor woke with a start.

His memory had been returning in fits and starts since a day or so after his sudden and abrupt arrival in the future. Until now, though, he hadn't seen those shards for what he now knew them to be. He had been completely disconnected from them, almost as if they belonged to someone else or were scenes in a movie. But now he could remember what had happened to him – and his memories were painful.

Now fully awake, and acutely aware of a renewed pain in his left side, he scrambled out of bed and hunted around for the clothes he had changed out of not a few hours before, mindful of the shipboard rules – loose cargo pants, and a hooded pullover he shrugged on over the T-shirt he still wore. He shoved his feet into his sneakers and quickly did up the laces before leaving his room.

Sarika's bunk wasn't difficult to find. It was in the same corridor as those belonging to Jared and Shannon, and had her name painted in colourful curly lettering above its ladder. It being so late, its entry was closed off, but he didn't think she would mind him paying a visit.

When Sarika heard a hollow sound coming from somewhere above her head, almost as if someone were knocking on the entryway of her bunk, she thought nothing of it at first. She kept her attention on the letter she was writing to her parents, almost completely dismissing the noise. Only when it grew more insistent, almost desperate, did she put her writing desk aside and get up from her bed.

"I'm coming!" she called out as she walked across to her ladder and started to climb up it. What she saw in the corridor when she was up out of her bunk and had turned around surprised her a little.

Standing there looking wild-haired and almost terrified was Taylor. "Hey, *zěnme le?*" she asked as she stepped fully into the corridor. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I remember what happened to me," he said quietly, his voice barely audible over the distant hum of the engine. "I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"Oh, no, I was still up," Sarika assured him. "Just writing a letter to my folks – Jared said we're making a stop on Three Hills in a day or two, so I want to be able to send 'em something when we make port." She studied him briefly. "Do you want to talk it out? I think it might help. Besides, my ma said you should never bottle up all your feelings, 'cause one day you'll just *zhàmiào*."

When Taylor nodded, Sarika smiled slightly and took his right hand, and led him through to the kitchen. "Now you sit," she said as she guided Taylor to the table. "I'll make you some tea."

Around five minutes later she placed a mug of chamomile tea in front of Taylor and seated herself adjacent to him. She had decided while the tea was steeping that she wouldn't press him to talk – he would talk when he was ready to. It took a further five minutes for him to open his mouth for anything other than sipping his tea.

"I was in a car accident," he started. "Back on Earth, I mean. I wasn't even halfway to work when this massive truck came straight out of nowhere and hit my car head-on." He tapped the sides of his mug with his fingertips. "I-I think I died in the crash," he continued, his voice even quieter than it had been, so much so that Sarika had to concentrate just to be able to hear him. "It hurt so much, Rika. I could hardly breathe, and I felt like I was burning all over."

"*Lǎotiānyé*," Sarika breathed. He really had been through hell just to get here. "That's horrible." Taylor's only response to this was a nod as he drank his tea. "I didn't want to spring this on you so late at night, because it might give you the mother of all nightmares..."

"Can't be any worse than the nightmare that woke me up," he mumbled.

*Yeah, we'll see*, Sarika thought, deciding it was better for her and Taylor's friendship to keep it to herself. "When Shannon said it might be difficult for you to get back to your own time and world, he wasn't telling you the whole story."

Taylor looked at her, one eyebrow raised in question, and Sarika swallowed hard before continuing. "There's a planet over in the Georgia System, where we're headed to next. It's called Shadow. It was bombed so hard, harder than any other by the Alliance forces during the war all because its people *dared* to stand up to them, that it's now a ghost planet – a dead world. Nobody lives there anymore because, well...nobody *can*. Four hundred years after we all left, that's basically what Earth-That-Was is now. That's why he said it could be difficult to get you home – it's more than pinpointing the right location. A lot more than that."

She twisted around in her chair to face him as best she could and gently took the mug from his hands, setting it down on the table. "We're going to try and find you a way home. That much I can promise you. I've heard about this new tech that's aimed at making travel between sun systems a lot faster than it is right now, called a wormhole. Figure that with a bit of tweaking it could be used for travel of an even longer range." Here she shrugged a little. "S'just speculation a'course, because I never went to school past what was strictly necessary, but it never hurts to guess."

They fell into a slightly tense silence, one broken only by their breathing – hers soft, slow and steady, his ragged, fast and a tiny bit shallow. She noted that he didn't look so terrified now that he'd had a chance to talk things over.

"My world's gone, Rika," he said quietly, and Sarika swore she could hear the barest tremble to his voice. "It's *gone*, and I might not ever get home. And one of these days I'll forget where I came from." He swiped at his eyes, and Sarika was surprised to see tears there. "Everything's turned upside down on me."

"Hey, hey, shh," Sarika said in a calming voice. "*Yīqǐ shēnhūxī*, all right?" She covered Taylor's hands with her own, much smaller pair. "Don't *ever* forget where you came from. Yes, it's horrible that you lost your world, and I truly wish that hadn't happened to you, but something good did come of it – you survived, and it brought you here. You should *yǒngbù wàng jì*, no matter what else happens. *Dǒng ma?*"

Taylor nodded. "Okay."

Sarika smiled. "Good." She got up from her chair and took Taylor's mug through to the kitchen sink, giving it a quick rinse under the tap before setting it down next to the drain. "We should both get to bed. Morning will be here before we both know it, and there'll be quite a bit of work to be done. Usually is." She walked back to the table and helped Taylor to his feet. "Do you think you'll be all right?"

"I should be."

They parted ways at the start of the corridor housing the passenger dorms. As Sarika went to head upstairs to the crew bunks, Taylor called her back. Half a heartbeat later she found herself on the receiving end of a very tight hug.

"*Xièxie nǐ*, Rika," he whispered. "*Xièxie nǐ*."

"*Nǐ tài kè qī le*, Taylor," Sarika replied as she returned the hug in kind.

Back in her bunk, she took up her writing desk once again and studied the last lines she had written before Taylor had interrupted her. Until he had come to talk to her, she had been stuck on how to finish the letter, but now she finally knew what to say. She clicked the top of her pen to bring the tip down out of the barrel and started to write.

*Before I go, Jared and Shannon have taken on a passenger – a real, honest-to-God Traveller. His name is Taylor, and he joined us about a week and a half ago. He was in a bad way when he came to us, but he’s healing well. I’m hoping he stays around.*

*We’ll be arriving on Three Hills in a couple of days, and I’ll be sending this after we arrive, so I had best finish this now. Please give my love to Zach and Jes.*

Sari

## Chapter 5

*Slow motion sparks...*

“Do you like ice cream?”

Taylor paused in sifting through a pile of very tangled necklaces and bracelets, and he looked back over his shoulder at Sarika. The *Sisyphus* had docked at a waystation just past Aphrodite to refuel and pick up supplies that had been running low since leaving Greenleaf. With the refuel and restock all finished, Jared and Shannon had retreated to the ship to work on their newest problem – how to get Taylor home to his own time and planet. It was proving to be a lot more work than any of them had anticipated.

Taylor and Sarika, on the other hand, had been set loose to explore the waystation, and had spent the last few hours wandering around the bazaar that took up a decent amount of the third level’s floor space.

“Of course I like ice cream,” Taylor replied. He set to untangling a necklace he liked the look of from its fellows, placing it with a pile of others he was considering once it was separated. “Why?”

Sarika’s response was to hand over money, in the form of a number of folded-over brightly-coloured paper notes. “There’s about one hundred credits there,” she told him. “You buy whatever you want from this stall and bring back the change when you’re done, and I’ll show

you something special." She gave him a wide grin, blew him a kiss, and headed off to another stall that sold colourful scarves and shawls.

"*Tāmā de,*" he mumbled. He had decided not long after arriving that no matter what happened or who he met, he was sticking by the vows he had made one Saturday in September many hundreds of years earlier. It didn't matter to him that Caroline was long gone. For all he knew, more than a few of the people in the 'Verse could well be his descendants, something he wasn't about to risk finding out the hard way. Being around Sarika so much was making keeping to his vows *very* difficult – he'd always had a thing for redheads.

He paid for his new jewellery and pocketed the change, slipping the little paper bag holding the four necklaces and two bracelets he had bought into his messenger bag, and headed off to find Sarika. She had finished perusing the stall and was stowing her own purchases into her satchel. "We good?" she asked as she took the money Taylor handed her and quickly counted it. It went into a separate pocket of her satchel as soon as she was satisfied.

"So long as you tell me why you asked if I like ice cream," Taylor replied.

Sarika gave him a very mysterious smile and led him through the bazaar to a café area, weaving her way through the tables and chairs to what looked to him like an old-fashioned ice cream stand. An LCD screen above the stand displayed all of the flavours that were on offer.

"It's my treat," Sarika told him. "Pick your favourite flavour, and I'll show you why I asked you about the ice cream."

"I don't *have* a favourite flavour, really," Taylor said as he studied the screen. "Rocky road," he decided.

"You got it," Sarika said with a smile. She stepped up to the stand and spoke to the vendor. "*Nĩ hǎo,*" she said.

"*Nĩ hǎo,*" the vendor replied with a smile. "What'll it be?"

"One rocky road, and one strawberries and cream, please," Sarika replied.

The vendor opened what Taylor had to assume was a below-counter freezer and took out two balls wrapped in aluminium foil. Each of the balls had a long piece of string dangling from it, to which the vendor tied a long stick that had a notch cut into one end.

"One rocky road, and one strawberries and cream," the vendor said as she handed the sticks to Sarika. "That will be four credits, please."

Once Sarika had paid for their ice cream, she led Taylor back out into the bazaar. "Unwrap it," she directed, and began to tear the foil off of her treat. Underneath the foil was a ball of ice cream, presumably strawberries and cream flavoured.

"What is that?" Taylor asked. He still hadn't unwrapped his ice cream.

"This is an ice-planet. You've had ice cream cones, right?" Sarika asked, and Taylor nodded slowly. "It's just a variation on that. Only difference is that ice-planets don't melt so quickly. Come on, try yours."

"Okay," Taylor said unsurely, and began to carefully unwrap his ice cream. Soon he had a ball of rocky road ice cream hanging by its string from the stick. "Now how do you eat it?"

Sarika grinned somewhat ferally. "That's the fun part," she replied, and started licking at hers like it was ice cream in a cone, dangling it over her mouth and tipping her head back to catch any drips. Taylor watched her for a little while before following her lead.

The two of them arrived back at the *Sisyphus* a couple of hours later, both of them having finished their ice-planets at last. "We're back," Sarika said unnecessarily as they wandered into the kitchen.

"We can see that," Jared said. "Have fun, did you?"

"Yep," Sarika said happily. "Any luck on the time travel thing?"

"Some," Shannon replied as he stretched. "Someone we know back on Athens works for Leviathan, and we're hoping to see if she will talk with us about the possibility of making any modifications to the tech you mentioned." He looked over at Taylor. "It would mean telling her that you're a Traveller."

Taylor waved Shannon's warning off. "I don't mind. If it means I can find a way home, then it's fine by me. I mean" he sat down at the table across from Shannon "I've started to feel at home here in the future, as much as I still feel like an outsider, but I do miss my proper home."

"He didn't even know what an ice-planet was until I bought him one," Sarika added helpfully.

"Yeah, okay, thank you Sarika," Taylor said. "How far from Athens are we?"

"Not too far, but we'll be making our stop in Three Hills before heading that way," Jared answered. "Rika, you're okay with tagging along?"

Sarika shrugged. "Not much choice is there? Seeing as we're halfway across the 'Verse from Paquin an' all." At Jared's raised eyebrow, she dropped her gaze. "*Duibùqi*. Yes, I'm okay with tagging along."

"It's settled then," Shannon said, sounding quite pleased with himself. "We'll set down on Three Hills for a day, let Rika post her letter and see if there's anything we need, then we'll head through to Athens."

"What's so special about Athens?" Taylor asked in a low voice as Jared and Shannon left the kitchen.

"That's their home planet," Sarika replied. "Their ma still lives there."

"How many planets *are* there?" Taylor asked. "I arrived when you guys were on Greenleaf, and while I've been here we've been to Jiangyin, passed by Aphrodite, and next we're headed to Three Hills and Athens. And I heard you mention sun *systems*, as in there's more than one. My home solar system, we've got one sun, eight planets and a bunch of dwarf planets. And even then only one of those planets at any point has been capable of supporting life." He shook his head. "This is a lot to take in, that's all."

"That's totally understandable," Sarika said. "So I take it you want a bit of an astronomy lecture then?"

"If you absolutely must," Taylor said.

"Oh yes, I must." Sarika stood up and straightened her skirt. "I need to grab my tablet for this one, so I'll be right back." She dashed off through to, Taylor assumed, her bunk, returning with what looked like a futuristic tablet computer. She set it down on the table and sat down next to Taylor, and started her fingers to dancing across its display. Within moments a hologram had popped up.

"This is the 'Verse," Sarika said, beginning her lecture. "At its heart it consists of five sun systems." She touched the middle of the hologram to magnify it at its centre. "This is the White Sun System, or *Bái Hǔ*, and is essentially the Core. It's orbited by two protostars, or artificial suns, called Qin Shi Huang and Lux. Planets are Bernadette, Londinium, Sihnon, Lian Jiun, Gonghe, Rubicon, Osiris, Santo, Valentine, Bellerophon, Ariel, Albion, Persephone, and Pelorum."

She touched White Sun again, removing the magnification. "Moving on now to the Border worlds..." She magnified one of the suns that sat a little way out from White Sun. "This is the Georgia System, one of the two Border systems. Mandarin name is *Huáng Lóng*, and it's orbited by the protostar Murphy. Planets are Ezra, Regina, Boros, Kerry, the twin planets of Ithaca and Priam, Prophet, Elphame, Di Yu, Athens, Daedelus, Newhope, Three Hills, Meadow, Hera, Aphrodite, and Shadow.

"Second Border system is the Red Sun System, or *Zhū Què*, orbited by the protostars Himinbjorg and Heinlein." She magnified the second Border system. "Planets are Jiangyin, New Melbourne, Greenleaf where we found you, Harvest, St. Albans, Anson's World, Jubilee, Aesir, Moab, Brisingamen, Anvil, Triumph, my homeworld of Paquin, Lazarus, and Silverhold."

Lastly she moved on to the two sun systems out on the furthest edge of the hologram. "And lastly we have the Rim. Two sun systems, just like the Border. Closest in is the Kalidasa System, or *Xuán Wǔ*, with the protostar Penglai. Worlds are Sho-Je Downs, Verbena, Constance, Glacier, Vishnu, Heaven, another set of twin planets called Angel and Zephyr, Delphi, New Kasmir, Whittier, Beylix, Newhall, Oberon, Ghost, Aberdeen, Zeus, Beaumonde, Djinn's Bane, and Salisbury.

"The final Rim system is the Blue Sun System, or *Qīng Lóng*. That system has the protostar Burnham. It's suicide to go out any further than the moons of the planet Deadwood, New Omaha in particular, because of the Reavers. Worlds are Meridian, New Canaan, Muir, Fury, Highgate, Dragon's Egg and Deadwood."

Taylor let out a low whistle of awe. "Damn..."

Sarika nodded. "Daunting, I know. And that's just the planets. There's more than double that when you start looking at all the moons as well." She tapped away at the display again, turning off the hologram. "All told, the 'Verse is made up of five suns, seven protostars, seventy-one planets, and one hundred and fifty moons. Mind you, not all of those planets and moons are settled – a fair few are still being terraformed, and one of Hera's moons is so small that it's never been terraformed or inhabited."

"How many people live in the 'Verse?" Taylor asked.

"Billions. I'm not sure of the exact number. Excluding terraforming crews, at the last census two years ago I think there were almost fifty billion people living in the 'Verse. Almost eighty percent of the people in the 'Verse live in the Core Worlds." She gave Taylor a smile. "Impressive, yeah?"

"I'll say..."

"How many people were living on Earth-That-Was when you left?" Sarika asked.

"Nobody knew for sure, because a lot of countries were extremely secretive about that sort of thing. But the world's population was estimated to be just over seven billion at the beginning of 2012."

"I can't imagine living on just the one world and never leaving," Sarika said. "Most people here have gone off-world at least once by their mid-teens. And a lot of people never set foot on a planet or a moon – they spend their entire lives in space."

"Now *that* is something I can't imagine," Taylor said as Sarika turned off her tablet. "Before coming here I'd never even flown before – we always drove everywhere. I suppose that's one good reason for staying here if it turns out I *can't* go home."

"I'm sure that there are other reasons as well."

Taylor grinned and stood up from the table. He bent down to whisper in Sarika's ear, "I can probably think of a few more good ones."

And with those words, and an even wider grin in Sarika's direction, he headed off to his room.

\* \* \*

From the air, the city of Five Points definitely lived up to its name. It was laid out in the shape of a pentagon, with houses and other buildings settled on each of the shape's five sides, and crisscrossed by five major streets that formed a straight-sided, five-pointed star. In the very middle of the city, inside the pentagon formed by the star itself, was a park was divided by pathways that formed another star. The airspace above the city was thick with various types of craft – sleek-looking hovercars, a couple of shiny new Dragonfly-class pleasure crafts, a number of dangerous-looking Hornets, and even a few newer-model Fireflies.

The *Sisyphus'* destination was an estate on the north-eastern side of the city, set a little way back from the makeshift border of houses and backyards, with a front yard large enough to land a Firefly in. Which was quite lucky, for that was where the ship set down.

As Taylor followed Jared, Shannon and Sarika down the loading ramp into the yard, he could see someone standing on the mansion's front porch, one hand shading their eyes against the bright winter sunlight. The moment his feet hit grass he fished around in his pockets for his

sunglasses, unfolding and sliding them onto his face once he had drawn them out of the pocket against his left leg. The world went darker than it had been, much to his relief, and he quickened his pace.

The person standing on the front porch turned out to be a woman with long, light brown hair who looked strikingly similar to Jared and Shannon. Just from that Taylor knew she had to be their mother – and was proved right when she hurried down off the porch and into the yard.

“Oh my boys,” she said as she hugged first Shannon and then Jared. “It is so good to see you both.”

“It’s good to see you too Ma,” Jared said. “We missed you.” He nodded over to Sarika. “You know our little Rika?”

“It has been some time but yes, I daresay I do.” Sarika went in for a hug of her own, and then the woman’s gaze about skewered Taylor. “Now this is a face I don’t recognise or remember...”

“This is Taylor Hanson, Ma,” Shannon said in introduction. “Taylor, this is our mother.”

“It’s nice to meet you Mrs. Leto,” Taylor said, his voice sounding unsure even to his own ears.

“Please, no need to stand on ceremony – it’s Constance,” she said. “Come on, inside with you all. I’m sure you’re all hungry after your journey.”

“*Starving*,” Sarika said as she followed Constance into the house. “Shannon decided he was going to cook last night, and he near burned out one of the pots.” As Shannon fell into step behind Sarika, he swatted the back of her head. “*Ow! Wō de mā* Shannon, that hurt!”

“Well if you would stop insulting my cooking I wouldn’t have to-”

“*Hǎo le*,” Constance said sharply, and both Shannon and Sarika fell silent.

The long front hallway opened out onto a large kitchen and dining area. Its ceiling was at least two stories above the ground floor, and a series of glass globes on long chains hung from the ceiling far overhead. A long table paired with mismatched chairs took up a good amount of floor space in the dining area.

“Sit, all of you,” Constance instructed as she headed into the kitchen, flicking switches and turning dials on the complicated-looking stove. Jared, Shannon and Sarika did as they were told, but Taylor followed Constance.

"Can I help with anything?" he asked.

"No, no, I got a good handle on things," Constance replied as she stirred the largest pot on the stove with a long-handled wooden spoon. "Guests don't cook in this house, you go and sit."

"If you're sure," Taylor said, and Constance nodded before waving him off.

"I always forget how big this place is," Sarika was saying as Taylor took a seat next to her. She was looking every which way, craning her neck to see as far up as she could. "Why is it so big anyway, if your ma's the only one who lives here?"

"It's a school, remember?" Shannon told her. "Class won't be in session until after Chinese New Year, so until the teachers come back next week it's just her and us."

"How long are we going to be here for, anyway?"

"As long as we need to be," Jared replied, not looking up from the tablet he was working from. "I'll be waving Sia after we eat to see when we'll be able to meet with her." Now he glanced up and down the table at Taylor. "And I think we should drop by the clinic at some point soon, see if you're healed up enough to start weapons training."

"I probably am," Taylor replied. He lifted his shirt on his left side and prodded experimentally at his ribs. "I'm not hurting anymore anyway."

unch was soon on the table – a large pot of stew, with thick buttered slices of wheat bread to go with. It reminded Taylor of his grandmother's cooking, and he felt a small sharp stab of memory go through him.

"*Ni meí shì bà?*" Sarika asked in a low voice when she noticed that Taylor hadn't touched his meal.

"Yeah," Taylor replied quietly. "I'm fine. Just remembering."

"Well you'd best get to eating, else Constance will wonder what's up."

Sarika's words dislodged something deep inside, and Taylor gave himself a mental shake before beginning to eat. Around him Jared and Shannon were talking in low voices with their mother, their speech shifting so fluidly between English and Mandarin that Taylor knew it couldn't be anything more than second nature to them. Only having been in the 'Verse for three weeks now, he was beginning to get a grasp on the Mandarin part, but it would take him a long while to be

fluent – and even longer to be able to shift back and forth between Mandarin and his native English as effortlessly as those who had been born to both languages.

Taylor and Sarika insisted on cleaning up after the meal, neither of them taking no for an answer. While they did so Jared slipped through a door in the right-hand wall, heading through to his mother's office. He closed the door behind and seated himself at the large cherrywood desk, directly before the desktop Cortex screen. Unlike the shipboard Cortex screen, which transmitted waves in monochrome, his mother's Cortex was a much newer colour-screen model. The difference mattered none – a Cortex screen was the same no matter which way you looked at it.

"Jared Leto at Merewether Academy Five Points, waving Sia Blackburn at Leviathan Technologies Cobbham," he said into the microphone, and waited for a pickup on the other end of the line.

## Chapter 6

*...gaps have a way of catching up*

"Jared Leto, you are a sight for sore eyes."

After the wave connected, a face popped up in full colour on the screen. It belonged to a family friend, Sia Blackburn. Bright green eyes peered at him from behind a pair of oval half-rim spectacles, and her thick and curly red hair was pulled back off her face in what was most probably a ponytail.

"Just the person I wanted to chat to," Jared said. "*Nǐ hái hǎo ma*, Sia?"

"I'm well," Sia replied. "And you?"

"Fine, just fine." He shifted slightly in his seat. "So I heard about the new wormhole tech," he said, deciding it was time to get straight down to business. "Or rather my cook did – seems she hears a lot of things these days."

"That's meant to be classified information," Sia said sharply. "How did she find out about it?"

"Sounds to me as if she moonlights as a hacker. Wouldn't be surprised with that shiny new tablet she's been toting around, which I don't know where she got it."

"That's neither here nor there. So you know about the tech – you do realise it's still being tested?"

"I figured as much. Look, Sia, the thing is that I've picked up a Traveller. And, uh..."

Sia's face took on a scowl. "I'm kind of busy here Jared, could you hurry it up a bit?"

"The Traveller in question is from twenty-first century Earth-That-Was."

"*Tiān xiǎodé*," Sia breathed. "How did they even *get* here?"

"The way Rika tells it, he was hit by a great big truck. He was killed back home and somehow wound up here."

"I can assume you're looking to get him home again?" Sia asked, and Jared nodded. "That might be a tall order, sending someone back a full half-millennia."

"Well, slightly *more* than half a millennia – he arrived here on January nineteenth."

Sia seemed to be working this over in her head. "I'll need to meet him," she said finally.

"I thought as much. I have his permission to tell you that he's a Traveller, and he's aware that an in-person meeting might be imminent. When did you want to meet up?"

"How about this coming Saturday? I'll wave you when I'm on my way."

"That works fine for me. So I'll see you then?"

Sia nodded. "See you then."

The link was broken, and Jared rose from his seat and left the office.

Sarika, Shannon and Taylor were still seated at the long table in the dining area when Jared emerged from the office. "We have a meeting with Sia set for this Saturday," he announced. "No time set in stone, but she'll send through a wave when she's on her way from Cobbham." His gaze turned onto Taylor. "We do have quite a bit to be done before then, though – not least of which is getting you an ident card. You should have gotten one not long after you arrived, but we haven't had the time or the means."

"We should get that done today," Shannon said. "It'll make dealing with the clinic a lot easier." He frowned. "I think we might have to fudge a few details though."

"On it," Sarika volunteered. She reached down to her satchel, unlatched it and drew out her tablet, setting it down on the table. Looking up from firing it up, she saw Jared was looking at her with one eyebrow raised. "What?"

"I *knew* you were a hacker."

Sarika let out a quiet snicker. "And it took you *this* long to work that out?" She shook her head in amusement. "Horse breedin' 'n' wranglin' ain't the only pie my ma and pa have a thumb in. They're also some of the finest hackers in the Border. Taught me an' Zach all we know." Her fingertips danced across the tablet's screen. "Fudging details, now that's the easy part," she said as she swiped two fingers across the screen from top to bottom. "The trick is slipping those details in and making it look like they've always been there."

Here she looked up briefly at Taylor. "I'm going to need a few basic details from you. Birthdate is the most important, just about everything is anchored to that one itty bitty little piece of info."

Taylor ran a hand back through his hair, messing it up even more than it was already. "March fourteenth, nineteen eighty-three," he replied.

"Damn," Sarika said in quiet awe. She let out a low whistle. "Okay, we change two digits...and *voilà!*"

Taylor looked to his right over at the tablet and saw the most basic part of his existence change before his eyes. There were now just four people in all the 'Verse who knew his true birth date, including himself – to all who mattered, he had been born on March fourteenth, 2483. That it could be changed so easily rattled him just a bit.

Sarika spent the next couple of hours working up a fake record for their Traveller. She sent tendrils of information out into the electronic ether, setting up new records in some places and tweaking old records in others. By mid-afternoon she had a full record worked up, one that any hacker worth their tech could be very proud of.

"And we are *done*," she said in triumph. "Londinium's Central Hall of Citizen Records now has a new file." She cleared her throat and read off the most pertinent details. "Jordan Taylor Hanson, born March fourteenth 2483 in New Harrowgate, Londinium – only child of William and Georgina Hanson, both deceased in 2502."

"Sounds good Rika," Shannon said in approval. "Now how about getting that ident card sent for?"

"Give me a minute Shannon, I'm doing my best here." She tapped away at an on-screen keyboard, scribing a request for a new ident card.

"They won't think this is strange, will they?" Taylor asked, now slightly worried.

"Oh no, they get these kinds of requests all the time," Sarika assured him. "It's pretty routine. Someone might *accidentally* drop theirs into an engine intake, others could inadvertently or otherwise drop theirs on the floor or ground somewhere and get it trodden on. They're not exactly indestructible."

"And you would know this *how* exactly?" Jared asked. Taylor noted that he sounded a little amused. "Drop yours in an engine intake one day, did you?"

"I was *ten*, okay?" Sarika protested, amidst a gale of laughter from Jared, Shannon and Taylor. "And I wanted to see what would happen! Don't tell me that neither of you two experimented on yours!" Jared and Shannon both laughed even harder at this, and Sarika rolled her eyes. "*Bizuĩ*

*nín hěn bùtítiē de nánshēng,*" she mumbled, and set about completing the ident card request. "Taylor, when you're *quite* finished laughing I'll need a photograph of you. One that's relatively recent."

In response, Taylor held up one of his index fingers and got up from his seat. He went to his messenger bag, which was stowed in a corner near the kitchen bench, and he knelt down to rifle through it. From its depths he produced his phone and a mini-USB cable.

"You can use my phone's camera," he said as he rezzipped his bag. "That tablet's got a USB port or two on it, yeah?"

"Should do," Sarika replied, and she began running her fingers along the tablet's edges. "Found one."

Still knelt on the floor, Taylor very quickly fussed with his hair, making it feel somewhat respectable. When he could no longer feel any bits of hair sticking up every which way, he rose to his feet and took his phone and cable across to the table. A few key presses later he had the camera activated. "You press this key to take the photo," he instructed, pointing to a round silver key on the keypad, "and this one to save it." He touched a key on the leftmost side of the phone, right under the hinge that connected the screen to the keypad.

Sarika took a photo quickly, and let Taylor have a look before she saved it. This photo would be the one that went on his permanent record, both of them knew that, and so it needed to look halfway decent. Taylor nodded his approval, and Sarika saved it before hooking up the phone to her tablet. The photograph was soon uploaded to the tablet, and a few taps and swipes at the screen later the request was submitted.

"We should get a response soonish," Sarika informed them, and checked her waves while she was waiting.

'Soonish' turned out to be less than five minutes. A chime sounded from the speakers embedded on the short sides of the tablet, and Sarika pulled up the new wave from her inbox.

*SARIKA CORBEAU, ON BEHALF OF JORDAN HANSON*

*REPLACEMENT IDENT CARD REQUEST APPROVED AND PROCESSED*

*YOUR NEW IDENT CARD MAY BE COLLECTED FROM FIVE POINTS CITY PLAZA IN TWO DAYS*

*MISS CORBEAU, PLEASE PRESENT YOUR CURRENT IDENT CARD UPON COLLECTION*

"Two days?" Taylor asked in slight disbelief. "It's going to take *that* long?"

"One thing you have to remember, Taylor, is that the bureaucracy is still the bureaucracy no matter what century or universe you find yourself in," Sarika said as she marked the message as received. "But there's a very shiny silver lining to this, don't you see?"

"Not really, no."

Sarika grinned now, displaying two rows of straight white teeth. "It means that nobody in Londinium central command picked up that you weren't actually born there, or anywhere else in the 'Verse for that matter. As far as they're concerned, you are just another fine and upstanding citizen of the Core who accidentally mislaid their ident card somewhere."

\* \* \*

"How did you say you were injured?"

"He was hit by a truck," Sarika replied.

From the outside, the main clinic in Five Points looked to be well-cared-for, but at the same time a little rundown. Creeping ivy covered the redbrick walls, softening rough edges. A rack that had bicycles of varying ages and states of repair chained to it was bolted to the front wall at the right of the door. Each of the concrete steps at the front had a shallow dip in it, the result of more than a hundred years of feet traipsing in and out of the clinic. A sign above the door read *Five Points City Clinic* in both English and in Mandarin.

On the inside, however, as would be expected from a clinic it was clean and well-kept, but lacked the clinical feel of the hospitals that as a child Taylor had spent far too much time in during his breaks from school. His mother often couldn't find a babysitter for him and his siblings, and so until Isaac was old enough to take on that role they had tagged along with her to work. Instead it felt warm and inviting, with walls painted a bright sunshine yellow and soft carpet on the floor.

The doctor frowned and made note of Sarika's response on the datapad she was working from. Unbeknownst to anyone in the system, the medical record she had open hadn't even existed prior to the Tuesday just past. Sarika's hacking into Londinium's records had included the creation of a complete medical record based on Taylor's own real life records (or as much of them as he could remember, anyhow) from Earth-That-Was. To Sarika at least, it was fairly evident that it was this record the doctor was looking at. Embroidery on her uniform shirt gave her name as *Dr. Mairen Hampstead*.

"And where did this happen?" Dr. Hampstead asked, now having set the datapad down on her desk. She motioned for Taylor to take his shirt off and unhooked her stethoscope from around her neck.

"Over on Greenleaf, at the Kitchener Docks in Sandford Downs," Taylor answered, his voice muffled by his T-shirt, being as he was in the process of pulling it over his head. "Hurt like hell, I'll tell you that much."

Dr. Hampstead smiled slightly. "I imagine it would."

The physical examination was over fairly quickly, with Dr. Hampstead scribing even more notes onto her datapad when she was done. "You seem to have healed fairly well," she said, "but being as you've said you intend to recommence weapons training very soon" Taylor nodded at this, as much as it was a half-truth "I believe it would be best if you had a scan or two done to make sure – one of your wrist, and another of your ribs."

"There's also something else we'd like you to do," Sarika said. She leaned forward in her seat almost conspiratorially. "I understand that you are able to trace a person's genetic history from nothing more than a blood sample." When Dr. Hampstead nodded, Taylor noted that Sarika smiled slightly. "How far back are you able to trace it?"

"Up to thirty generations. The overall cost depends entirely on how many generations are being traced, but it's fixed at one credit per generation."

"What about tracing forward?" Taylor asked.

"It's possible," Dr. Hampstead replied, "but I unfortunately don't have the technology available for that sort of genetic tracing. You would need to visit a Core clinic or hospital to investigate that possibility."

Taylor and Sarika looked at one another. They had worked out that there were twenty generations between Taylor and Sarika – and Taylor knew very well that there was a chance, however small, that he and Sarika could be related to some degree. And there really was only one way to find out if that was the case.

"How long would the trace take?" Sarika asked. Her hand was inching ever closer to the pocket that held her wallet as she spoke.

"No longer than a couple of hours."

Two hours. Sarika knew they could find a lot to do in two hours. She bent down to her right side and unbuttoned a pocket on the leg of her pants, drawing out her wallet and flipping it open, and thumbed out her Paquin Mutual bank access card. "Twenty-one generations should about do it," she said.

"You'll need to speak with the receptionist at the front desk," Dr. Hampstead told her. "She'll get the process started."

After scans of Taylor's ribs and wrist had confirmed that he was completely healed, and once Sarika had had a blood sample drawn, they left the clinic and unchained the bicycles that Constance had loaned to them from the bicycle rack. "Constance downloaded a tourist map of Five Points into my datapad," she said as she crammed her helmet onto her head over her hair and buckled it under her chin. "What do you feel like for lunch?"

"Honestly?" Taylor replied, and Sarika nodded. "Italian. Haven't had it in a while now."

Sarika gave him a smile. "I'll see what I can find."

It didn't take Sarika long to locate the nearest Italian restaurant, located just a short bicycle ride away on Winchester Drive. After she had wirelessly downloaded the directions to her wrist computer, they hopped on their bicycles and headed over to the restaurant. Around halfway into the ride, Sarika looked across at Taylor and saw something that made her smile.

He was laughing.

"What's so funny?" she called out over the hum of traffic around and above them.

"I'm just remembering something from back home," he called back. "There's this band I like a lot, and the music video for a song they released in 2009 is them and a bunch of their fans riding bikes around Los Angeles. Got to see them live a few times as well." He grinned and eased back on his pedalling somewhat, and belted out the chorus of the song in question at the very top of his voice. "We were the kings and queens of promise...we were the victims of ourselves...maybe the children of a lesser god...between Heaven and hell, Heaven and hell..."

"I'm going to want to hear some of this music of yours when we get back to Merewether," Sarika said as Taylor stepped up the pedalling. Her wrist computer beeped shrilly, and she banked left into the adjoining street, Taylor following her lead a moment later. "I mean it. It has to be better than what's around at the moment. I stopped listening to the radio years ago, and not just because I live on a spaceship either."

"My iPod should still have a decent amount of juice left on the battery. I'll need to find a way of charging it before it dies completely though."

"Talk to Jared about it," Sarika advised.

The GPS in Sarika's wrist computer led them to a very cosy Italian restaurant halfway along Winchester Avenue, tucked away between an electronics store and a women's clothing boutique. To Taylor's mind it was a very strange place to build a restaurant, but it seemed to work – there were a number of bicycles chained up out the front, and through the window could be seen tables that were full of the restaurant's patrons. It was evidently very popular with the residents of Five Points.

"I hope we can get a table," Sarika said as they chained up their bicycles and ventured inside. "It looks pretty packed." Out of the corner of her eye she spotted two young women standing up from a table against the right wall of the restaurant. "Looks like we might be in luck after all."

They were seated quickly and handed menus by one of the waitresses. While Sarika went through her menu, Taylor studied the screen that had been built into the tabletop, protected by a thin sheet of what looked like glass. It almost looked like a flat-screen computer monitor, the images and text on the screen constantly shifting and changing. When Sarika started tapping away at it, its function was revealed.

"What're you having?" she asked as she tapped the name of her chosen meal into a space on the screen. "My treat, so anything you like."

"Within reason, though?"

"Within reason," Sarika confirmed. "I ain't made of money."

Once Taylor had decided on his lunch, Sarika tapped his order into the screen and pressed the image of a round green button set in one corner. "And now we wait," Sarika said as she sat back in her seat. "Won't be long."

Their meals arrived not even ten minutes later, something that greatly impressed Taylor. He was less impressed when Sarika's pocket started ringing. She swore softly and put her knife and fork down. "I'm sorry about this," she apologised as she stood up and worked her hand into her pocket. "I'll be back in a couple minutes."

True to her word, she returned not two minutes later and resumed her seat. "That was the receptionist at the clinic," she said as she dug into her tortellini boscaiola. "Dr. Hampstead's

finished the trace, so whenever we're ready to head back she'll talk with me about what came up. Or us, I guess, seeing as it potentially concerns you as well." She shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

They returned to the clinic after lunch, with Sarika disappearing back into Dr. Hampstead's office with the doctor for the first ten minutes after their arrival. She returned to the waiting room with her datapad in both hands and a somewhat shocked look on her face.

"I think you need to see this," she said as she sat down next to Taylor. "I honestly never expected it." She handed Taylor her datapad and gave him a quick crash course in using it, and he loaded up the results file. The first result was Sarika's own, followed by her parents'.

*CORBEAU, Sarika Aurelia – born July 19 2490*

*LEE (CORBEAU), Illyria Margretha – born August 7 2466*

*CORBEAU, Angus Vincent – born May 18 2465*

"You'll need to go right to the end," she said quietly. Taylor frowned briefly, but did as she said. The five records he saw there gave him one of the biggest shocks of his life.

*HANSON (BELMONT), Jordan Elizabeth – born April 14 2012, deceased September 18 2090 (78 years)*

*WINTHROP (HANSON), Caroline Rhiannon – born July 8 1983, deceased February 28 2078 (94 years)*

*HANSON, Jordan Taylor – born March 14 1983, deceased January 19 2012 (28 years)*

*CLARKE (HANSON), Georgina Anne – born July 27 1959, deceased February 9 2040 (80 years)*

*HANSON, William Isaac – born August 22 1958, deceased February 18 1991 (32 years)*

"Yòng yì ge liàn jù zhǎn de cào wǒ," Taylor whispered.

Sarika forced out a shaky laugh. "My thoughts exactly," she said quietly.

## Chapter 7

*...under the same big sky...*

Upon their return to Merewether, Sarika and Taylor split off in different directions – Sarika to the porch swing on the first floor balcony with her datapad, and Taylor to one of the student bedrooms that Constance had insisted they take while they were in Five Points. His room had as its focal point a large window that looked out across the grounds at the rear of the mansion, toward a greenhouse, a herb garden and an oak tree. He had so much he needed to work through and attempt to make sense of, and for that he needed privacy and quiet.

Finding out that he was Sarika's ancestor had been a massive shock, even more so than finding out he had been catapulted into the future had been. It was some small measure of comfort that he still had family so far into the future, even if it seemed that aside from himself the Hanson family name seemed to have died out.

A quiet knock sounded at his bedroom door not long after he had secluded himself, and he looked up from tinkering with one of his inventions. Strictly speaking, it wasn't his original concept or design – rather, his inspiration had come from a toy owned by one of his nephews, itself a toy prop from a British science-fiction series.

It was a sonic screwdriver. The second Taylor had seen it in action, he knew he wanted one of his own – and he knew that he wanted a real one, not a toy. He had subsequently gone online, sought out the original prop's design schematic, and built his own version. A ruby, his wife's birthstone, substituted nicely for the diode that was in place in the toy and (he assumed) the original prop, and he had even managed to wire it up so that it functioned as it did in the show. It had saved his sanity many a time, especially whenever he managed to lose his keys and lock himself out of his house or his car.

"*Qǐngjìn*," he said almost absently as he set the sonic screwdriver in its case, closed it, and wrapped his tools up in the knife roll he had bought as a teenager – needle-nose pliers, soldering iron and its various bits, Swiss Army knife, two small spanners each barely the length of the palm of his hand, two small adjustable wrenches, and a number of jeweller's screwdrivers. Just as the door opened, he grabbed his messenger bag and slid his knife roll inside.

"Is everything all right?" Constance asked as she stepped into the room.

Taylor nodded, not looking up from buckling his bag closed. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just needed a little time to myself – I've barely had a moment's peace the last few weeks."

"That's completely understandable. I spent a few weeks on the ship with Jared and Shannon after they bought it, not long after Jared graduated from flight school, so I can see where you're coming from." She sat down on the bed next to Taylor and took the strap of his messenger bag out of his hands. "You're a long way from home, aren't you?" she asked, her tone gentle.

Taylor looked up sharply. "How did you-"

"Jared explained the situation to me in a wave a week or so ago." Constance paused for a couple of moments. "Not only that, but I've become quite good at reading people. I've had to since I've become the headmistress here. It didn't take me very long to realise that the 'Verse isn't home to you." She studied Taylor briefly. "How far from home are you?"

"I honestly don't know," Taylor answered quietly. "I never thought to ask anyone if they knew." He raked his hair back off his face. "My home planet is Earth, from about five hundred years in the past."

"Goodness me," Constance said, sounding quite shocked. "You must have gotten quite a fright when you arrived."

Taylor let out a sharp, almost bitter laugh. "To be honest, I was in pain a lot more than I was scared. It took asking Jared what year it was for me to start freaking out. When he told me that it was 2512...that did me in completely. I could hardly believe it."

"I can understand that. I believe that's called 'culture shock', and it sounds as if you've been hit with a pretty bad case of it." She tilted her head slightly to one side. "I hear you've been settling in well, though."

"Well enough," Taylor allowed. "Sarika's been teaching me to swear and insult people in Mandarin – she seemed to take it as a personal affront that I didn't know any when I arrived. And Jared and Shannon are going to teach me to defend myself."

"Not with knives, I hope," Constance said. "One knife-fighter on that ship is one too many."

"Jared?" Taylor guessed, having only seen Shannon with guns around the *Sisyphus*.

Constance nodded. "He's very good with his knives, but they make me horribly nervous. I understand that in their work it's *bì bù kě shǎo zǔ chéng*, but all the same I wish it wasn't."

"I think I understand. I've got kids of my own – two daughters and a son. Found out today that my wife had our third child, my second daughter, after I came here." He forced a smile. "Sarika comes from that branch of my line, as it happens."

Constance also smiled, hers more relaxed than Taylor's. "I'm glad you've found family here," she said.

Taylor was just about to respond to this when another knock sounded at the door. It opened just enough for Sarika to stick her head through. "Jared and Shannon want to talk to you," was all she said before she disappeared again.

*Well, looks like I'm not the only one who's freaked out by us being related,* he thought as he left his temporary bedroom and headed downstairs, hands in the pockets of his cargo pants. Waiting for him in the kitchen were Jared and Shannon, both of them looking unusually solemn and stern. "Zënme le?"

"Have a seat," Jared said, motioning to the head of the table. Taylor frowned, slightly confused, but drew out a chair and sat down. The brothers in their turn seated themselves across the table.

"I'm going to guess that you've been worrying a little about what would be happening to you, now that you've healed up," Jared continued.

Taylor nodded quickly. "Started worrying about that not long after I got here. Figured that I'd better not let myself get too comfortable, seeing as I knew there was no guarantee whatsoever that I'd be welcome once I wasn't hurting anymore." He shrugged. "And I haven't. Let myself get comfortable, that is."

"Before we continue, though, mind telling us what's got Rika in such a mood?" Shannon asked, his tone almost conversational – but Taylor knew better. He knew very well that the brothers considered Sarika to be something of a little sister, and that his answer could have a lot of bearing on his continued existence.

"She had a trace done on her bloodline this afternoon," Taylor answered. "Part of it was trying to see if I still had family so far into the future – for all I knew my line could have died out during the Exodus."

"And it hasn't," Jared guessed.

"It hasn't," Taylor confirmed. "Sarika is my many-times-removed granddaughter, from the branch of my line that starts with my youngest daughter." And here he allowed himself a genuine smile for the first time since the ride to the restaurant, one that disappeared quickly. "I was hoping for another little girl, to be honest, and I wish I'd been able to meet her."

"You might still be able to," Jared reminded him gently. "But back to business."

"Before we got to know you and came to understand how far you had come to get here, we were more than prepared to let you go on your way once you were ready to. Finding out that you were a Traveller, and seeing how well you've settled in...well, that's changed our minds."

"And if you are open to it, because I know of a place or two here if you'd rather stay planetside, we'd like for you to join our crew," Shannon added. "You'll have your own bunk in the crew corridor, full run of the ship including access to the bridge, and you'll get a cut of the take from each of our jobs."

Taylor thought this over for a short while. Realistically speaking he knew he had very little chance of making it home any time soon, and to his mind seeing the universe sounded like the perfect way to spend his time. It was time for him to begin letting go of the past and start living in the moment.

"I'd like to stay on board," he said at last, and was rewarded with looks of satisfaction from both Jared and Shannon.

"We were hoping you would." Jared stood up from the table, with Shannon and Taylor both following his lead seconds later. "Come on. We'll give you a proper tour of the ship and get your bunk set up."

\* \* \*

On Saturday morning after breakfast, Taylor got his first look at what was essentially the *Sisyphus'* heart – its engine room. Out of respect for the shipboard rules he hadn't even considered going anywhere near it during his time as a passenger, but now that he was crew he could go anywhere on the ship that he liked.

"This is what keeps us flying," Jared said, putting a hand on the ship's engine. "She's driven by your standard radion accelerator core, powered by two trace compression blocks and a bunch of thrusters."

"It's a big engine," Taylor commented. He ran a hand along part of its housing, mindful that he didn't put his fingers anywhere near anything sharp.

"Specs say that her engine is sixty-two feet and eight inches long, twenty-eight feet and four inches wide, and twenty-nine feet and six inches deep. That's just a tiny fraction of the ship overall, though, as I figure you've probably gathered by now – she's two hundred and sixty-nine feet long, a hundred and seventy feet wide, and with the landing gear fully extended she's nearly seventy-nine feet tall. She can carry a total payload of nearly a hundred and sixty-five thousand pounds, and provided she's completely fuelled up her range is four hundred AUs. Forty-four if a full payload is on board. Since we're not a cargo ship, we can go a fair way between refuellings."

"How long have you had her?" Taylor asked. He was down on his knees now, and had twisted himself around to look up into the exposed part of the engine from below.

"About seven years or so. Her keel was laid in 2459 as one of the first Series 3 Fireflies, so she's older than both Shan and I. She still flies well and true, though, and provided she's taken care of she'll outlive us all." He gave the engine housing an affectionate pat.

"So what is it that you and Shannon do, if you don't carry cargo?"

Jared cast Taylor's back a questioning look, one eyebrow raised. He had half-expected the question to come up long before now. "We're bounty hunters. When we picked you up we'd just accepted a job and were on our way to the rendezvous to find out the specific particulars. Sarika pitches in on our jobs occasionally, but for the most part it's just Shannon and I."

Here Taylor stood up, dusting off the knees of his cargo pants before straightening up. Not for the first time he noticed that he was a few inches taller than Jared, and he was conscious of the fact that he had to be careful not to speak down to him. "Would you expect me to come along on your jobs?" he asked.

"Not unless you wanted to. Certainly not right now, considering you're not trained just yet, but once you're able to handle a staff we'd definitely welcome an extra pair of hands. Your choice whether or not to join us at work will have no bearing whatsoever on the cut you get from our final payoff. However, we do expect you to pitch in around the ship – that *will* have a bearing on your cut."

Taylor nodded. "Yeah, of course."

The communicator that Jared wore on his belt chimed, and he unclipped and opened it. “*Wèi*,” he said, and listened intently to whoever was speaking to him. “Okay, we’ll be inside soon,” he informed the caller, before snapping it closed. “Sia is on her way here to meet you,” he told Taylor. “She’ll be here in around fifteen minutes.”

“She’s the person who invented the wormhole tech, right?”

“One of them,” Jared confirmed. “Though you need to remember that she can’t make any promises on whether or not she’ll be able to get you home.”

“I understand.”

Slightly more than a quarter of an hour later a Mayfly-class public transport shuttle touched down in the front yard of Merewether. A tall, redheaded woman wearing glasses and carrying a briefcase stepped out of the shuttle, turning back briefly to speak with the pilot before walking across the lawn to the mansion’s front porch. Sarika was watching from behind a curtain at a window of the ground floor’s front room, ducking out of sight as soon as the woman stepped up on the front veranda.

“We got company!” she yelled as she pelted into the kitchen. Jared and Shannon, both of them used to Sarika’s outbursts by this point, didn’t so much as react as she burst in from the corridor. Constance and Taylor, on the other hand, got quite a fright – Constance dropped a glass on the floor and shattered it, and Taylor nearly broke the stylus of his new datapad, which had been a ‘welcome to the crew’ gift from Jared and Shannon.

“Gorram it Sarika!” he snapped, by now completely irritated. “*Guāiguāi lóng de dōng?*”

“A transport shuttle just landed on the front lawn,” Sarika explained, completely ignoring Taylor.

Jared and Shannon looked at each other. “That’ll be Sia,” Jared said. “Let her in, won’t you?”

Sarika nodded and turned back into the corridor, returning moments later with the redheaded woman. Both Jared and Shannon rose from their seats when she entered the room.

“It’s good to see you both again,” Sia greeted the brothers, accepting a hug from them each in turn. Soon enough her gaze shifted to Taylor. “And this is your Traveller, I can assume?”

In response, Jared moved to stand beside Taylor. “This is Taylor,” he replied.

Sia stepped forward and extended a hand. "*Gāoxìng jiāndào nǐ, Taylor,*" she said, but not expecting a response other than a nod.

"Likewise," Taylor replied, his bad mood dissipating as he stood and shook Sia's hand, and Sia shot Jared a smile over Taylor's shoulder.

"I like this one, Jared." She released Taylor's hand and sat down at the table. "I've been told a little about your circumstances already," she said as she unlatched her briefcase, "but I believe it would help me quite a bit if you could tell me whatever you can think of. Anything that comes to mind about how you got here, or any other details that you think would be a help. The aim here is to get you home if we possibly can, and for that to happen every little piece of information is absolutely essential."

Over the next half-hour, Sia listened and transcribed Taylor's words into a new file on her tablet, slowly but surely building a picture that she would eventually be able to work with. As she skimmed through everything that Taylor had told her, she realised that she had to do everything in her power to get him home. He had so much that he had left behind – his family, his friends, his career...his entire world.

"I think I have everything I need to know," Sia said once she was done reading. "Is there anything you wish to know about the wormhole tech?"

Taylor nodded. "How would you send me back?"

"There are basically two ways it can be done. The first is to generate enough power to open a wormhole for just long enough to transport a person back to the time they left behind. The second is to send that person back as nothing more than an echo of who they were, for a very limited period of time."

"To say goodbye," Taylor guessed quietly, and Sia nodded.

"I am going to do all that I can to get you home," she promised. "I lost my world too, during the war."

"Shadow?" he guessed, and Sia nodded.

"My dad and my brothers fought for Independence, during the Prairie Battles in 2508. I was away at tech college when war broke out, on one of the Core Worlds. I nearly got expelled when my Physics instructor found out I supported the Browncoats and told the college Chancellor. The only reason I even graduated was because I was coerced to renounce the Independents and

to support Unification. I had no choice – my family knew and understood why I did it, but it still hurt me badly. I did a complete about-face as soon as I'd left the Core.

"And then..." Here Sia drew in a deep, shaky breath. "Halfway through my third year of college, my mother waved me from here on Athens. She told me that our home was gone, the planet destroyed and reduced to a blackrock, and that my dad and all but one of my brothers had been killed in the Battles. She and Haden – that's my youngest brother – had barely managed to escape the planet on a rescue shuttle before our town was destroyed. I joined them in Cobham when I had graduated college. And, well...I've been here ever since. I haven't left the planet once, let alone the system."

She sat back in her seat, her story finished. As Taylor thought it over, he realised that he and Sia weren't all that much different. They had both lost their whole worlds, but in the end had found new ones. Both their families were gone, all save for one or two members – Sia had lost hers because of war, and Taylor had lost his because he had been slingshot into the future, with time in his absence doing nothing more than following its natural course. And he knew that Sia was completely sincere in her promise to do her best to get him home.

Sia and Jared went off into another room not long afterward and Shannon returned to the ship, leaving Sarika and Taylor alone in the kitchen. Neither of them spoke for a while, with Taylor finally breaking the tense silence.

"Sarika, do you have a problem with me or something?" he asked.

"Why would I have a problem with you?"

Sarika's answer was innocent enough, but her tone was enough to irritate Taylor all over again. "Ever since we found out that we're related, you've been avoiding and ignoring me. The second we got back here from the clinic you went and sat up on the first floor balcony. You didn't even think to say a word to me until Jared and Shannon asked you to come and get me from my room. You don't look at me during meals, and you've only been speaking to me when it's absolutely necessary." He got up from his seat and walked around the table to where Sarika sat. "We were getting to be such good friends until this got dropped on us. And I want to know just what the hell has got you all worked up. Because it sure as fuck can't be that I'm your grandfather from twenty generations back."

"You led me on."

Sarika's answer was spoken so softly that Taylor wasn't sure he had heard her at first. "*Shénme?*" he asked.

"You led me on, Taylor!" she almost yelled. "I *liked* you, all right? I really did. And I honestly thought something good could happen between us."

Taylor let out a quiet groan of frustration and ran his hands roughly through his hair. "Sarika, I need you to understand something that I consider to be very important? Okay?" When Sarika nodded, he continued, "Do you see this?" He lifted the necklace holding his wedding band away from his chest.

"Yeah," Sarika said quietly, her tone sullen.

"This means that I am *married*. I have *been* married since June tenth, 2006. To be completely honest, unless I am given a very good reason to do otherwise, and even though my wife died more than four hundred years ago, I intend to stick to my wedding vows for as long as humanly possible. One of those vows was a promise that I would love her until the day I died. I am still alive, and so that vow stands." He took the necklace off and unknotted the leather, letting it fall onto the table so that he could unthread his ring and read out the inscription that had been engraved on the inside of the band. "*Jordan Taylor Hanson + Caroline Rhiannon Winthrop – 06/10/06 until forever,*" he recited. "I still love her Sarika, and I always will. And I frankly don't think it's fair on me or on anyone else if I don't give them all of my love and all of my heart. Caroline still has them both."

He threaded the ring back onto the leather, knotted it again, and slipped his necklace back over his head. "Something good did happen between us, you know," he told Sarika as he fiddled with the necklace, making sure that the knot was at back of his neck. "We became friends. And I still *want* us to be friends. I'm sorry if you thought I was leading you on, because it certainly wasn't my intent and I never saw it that way."

"I want us to be friends too," Sarika said softly, her voice nearly a whisper.

Taylor smiled, and he scooted his chair closer to Sarika's. "Then let's be friends, yeah? There's still a lot I have to learn about the 'Verse, and I want you to be the one who teaches me. This is your world more than it is mine."

"It's your world too, Taylor," Sarika said as the two of them embraced. "Even if you make it back home one day, it always will be."

## Chapter 8

### *My words just break and melt*

Over the following week, life for the crew of the *Sisyphus* went on more or less as normal – or as normal as was possible while remaining planetside. Sia returned home the morning after her meeting with the crew, leaving behind a promise that she would get in contact as soon as she could. Shannon pitched in around Merewether to make sure the school was ready to welcome students for the new academic year. Sarika rode her borrowed bicycle around Five Points during the day, collecting supplies to restock the ship's kitchen and infirmary, and drilled Taylor in Mandarin in the evenings.

And every day almost from dawn until dusk the cargo bay of the *Sisyphus* was transformed into a training space, as Jared taught Taylor how to wield his new weapon.

"Easy, *easy!*" Jared cautioned loudly as Taylor's staff came close to giving him a rather violent haircut. "You're not supposed to try and take my *head* off!"

"Sorry!" Taylor apologised. "I didn't mean to!" He went to try and spin the staff around in his hands again, but it slipped from his grasp and fell on the mats that were laid out on the floor of the cargo bay.

"I think that's enough for right now," Jared said as Taylor bent down to pick up his staff. The weapon was almost as long as Taylor was tall, which meant there was one major downside to carrying it – unlike Shannon's pistols or Jared's knives, he couldn't hide it away in a holster or sheath to keep it out of sight. On the other hand, it could be used as more than just a potentially lethal weapon, giving it a distinct advantage over the weapons most people in the 'Verse carried. "Staff away, and we'll grab a bit of lunch."

Sarika had left lunch for them in the ship's kitchen that morning, stored in one of the chiller compartments under the bench. They collected the plates of chicken and salad, along with knives and forks from the draining rack next to the sink, Jared closed the compartment door, and they went across to the kitchen table.

"Can I ask you a question about the ship?" Taylor asked as they sat down.

"Of course."

"Where did you get the name from? It sounds kind of Greek to me."

Jared eyed Taylor with one eyebrow raised. "It's not 'kind of Greek' at all. It *is* Greek." He speared a piece of chicken with his fork. "How much do you know of Earth-That-Was mythology?"

"I know little bits and pieces. Not a lot though, I never studied it beyond high school."

"Did you ever learn about someone called Sisyphus?"

Taylor frowned, biting his bottom lip. "I might have."

"Well, Sisyphus was a king of Corinth in Ancient Greece who would kill travellers and his guests, in violation of the laws of hospitality. It was something that he took a great deal of pleasure from because it meant he could maintain his position of dominance. Not only this but he seduced his niece, took over his brother's throne, and betrayed the secrets of the god Zeus."

"Sounds like a major piece of work," Taylor commented.

"Oh, he was. After that, Zeus ordered Thanatos, or Death, to chain Sisyphus up in Tartarus – that's the level of the Ancient Greek underworld even lower than Hades," he explained, nearly as an afterthought. "Sisyphus asked Thanatos to show how the chains worked, and when Thanatos did so promptly secured the chains in place."

"Which meant that nobody could die."

Jared nodded. "Right in one. Ares, the god of war, was particularly irritated by this – his battles had lost all their fun because his opponents just wouldn't die, no matter what he threw at them. So he marched right into Tartarus, freed Thanatos from his chains, and sent Sisyphus there in Thanatos' place."

"I'm guessing that's not the end of it," Taylor said.

"Not by a long shot. Before Sisyphus was sent to Tartarus, he told his wife to throw his naked body out into the middle of the public square, supposedly as a test of her love for him. She did so, but then Sisyphus bitched to Persephone that his wife had disrespected him. This persuaded Persephone to allow Sisyphus to return to the upper-world so he could scold his wife for not burying him. Once he was back in Corinth he refused to go back to the underworld and had to be dragged back there by Hermes. At one point he also decided that he was on the same level of the gods and could therefore report their indiscretions. His punishment for his trickery and his other misdeeds was to spend an eternity rolling a boulder up a very steep hill."

"That doesn't sound like much of a punishment."

"That wasn't the whole of it. Every time he came even close to reaching the top of that hill, the boulder would roll straight back down to the bottom, and he'd have to start all over again."

Taylor let out a low whistle of awe. "Damn. That'd drive me insane."

"Which is exactly why the gods punished him in that manner. Shannon and I chose the name *Sisyphus* for the ship because of the myth. It's kind of a reminder that we shouldn't consider ourselves to be better than anyone for any reason. We're all human, after all."

They resumed training after lunch. Fifteen minutes in Jared's communicator chimed, and he held up a hand to pause the session. The call, it turned out, was from Sarika.

"Jared, Sia's on your mother's Cortex," she was saying. "She needs to speak with you and Taylor – it sounds pretty important."

"All right, thanks Rika," Jared replied. He ended the call and returned his communicator to its place on his belt. To Taylor he said, "Go take a shower, and meet me in my mother's office in twenty. If I'm not mistaken, Sia may have just come up with a way to get you home."

In response, Taylor snapped off a mock military salute, picked up his staff from where it had fallen on the floor, and headed up the stairs toward the crew corridor. His bunk was next to Sarika's, on the left hand side as he entered, and he propped his staff up against the corridor wall before opening the entry. At that point he felt as if he could sleep for a week, but he knew well that eight hours that night would have to do. Once he had climbed down into his bunk he stored his staff away up on its wall brackets and gathered up some clean clothes to change into after his shower.

He met Sarika, Shannon and Jared in Constance's office slightly more than twenty minutes after training had ended. "Are we all here now, then?" he heard Sia ask as he took a seat at Constance's desk next to Jared.

"We're all here now," Shannon confirmed.

"Good, good," Sia said, sounding satisfied. "I'm sure you're all aware of the reason for my wave this afternoon."

"Somewhat, yes," Jared replied. "Though I have a feeling it's not exactly what one of us was hoping to hear."

"Unfortunately," Sia said. "I spoke with my colleagues and looked over all of our calculations, even tried tweaking a few of them. And I am really quite sorry to say that the furthest someone can be sent back in time via the wormhole is about fifty years."

At those words, Taylor felt like his world was ending all over again.

He was well and truly stuck now. Sia's wormhole was to have been his best chance at getting home to the twenty-first century, but now it looked as if he had to try and find another way returning to his own time. He had known that Sia couldn't make any guarantees about getting him home, but that didn't mean it hurt any less to be told it wasn't possible.

"So I guess that's it, then," he said, unable to keep disappointment from creeping into his tone. "I'm stuck here for good."

"Not necessarily," Sia said, in an effort to reassure him. "I'm going to keep at this and see if we can't figure something out. Technology is advancing all the time, and who knows – in a few months, we might have made enough modifications and improvements that a trip of five hundred years might be perfectly feasible." She gave him a smile. "Two weeks ago travelling back fifty years was completely unheard of – the best we could manage was six months. So you never know your luck."

"Didn't you say something about echoes?" Sarika asked.

"I did, now that you mention it," Sia replied. "And I think we can manage that quite easily. When would you all be able to come here to Cobbham?"

Jared and Shannon glanced at one another. "Tomorrow morning at the earliest," Shannon replied. "You'd need a full day, *shi?*"

Sia nodded. "I would, yes, particularly if I can send Taylor back as an echo for as long as I believe I'll be able to."

*And once again everyone forgets I'm even in the room,* Taylor thought a little bitterly as Shannon and Jared worked out the details of the second meeting with Sia. *I wish they wouldn't do that.*

"She's doing her best, you know."

Taylor looked back over his shoulder at Sarika. "Yeah, I know. I guess I was just hoping for a lot more."

"I know you were. But this isn't the end of it – you heard what Sia said, two weeks ago being able to go back as far as they can now was pretty much a dream to them." She put a hand on Taylor's shoulder and squeezed gently. "She'll find a way to get you home. I know she will."

\* \* \*

Early the next morning, the *Sisyphus* lifted off from the grounds of Merewether, bound for the town of Cobbham. Constance had offered the use of her personal shuttle, but as there was no telling how long they would be away from Five Points it had been decided that the *Sisyphus* would be the better transport for this particular trip.

"Sia will be expecting us at around nine," Jared said as he walked into the dining room. Shannon, Taylor and Sarika were sitting around the room, each absorbed in their own specific activities – Shannon was cleaning and maintaining his pistols, Sarika was stretched out on her back on one of the lounges with the earphones of Taylor's iPod jammed in her ears and her eyes closed, and Taylor sat leaning against Sarika's chosen spot with one of his language books propped up against a knee. "Hey, are you three even listening to me?"

"We heard you," Shannon replied without looking up from his self-appointed task. "Nine o'clock."

"Sarika's not listening," Taylor said, also not looking up. "She found the Genius function on my iPod last night and she's been listening to it ever since." He reached back to Sarika with his free hand and poked her hard in the side without even looking, before holding both hands up in the air. He kept his right thumb folded down against his palm for just long enough that Sarika could register what Jared had told them. "What time is it now?"

"Quarter to," Shannon replied. "Judging on how long it took Sia to get to Merewether in the first place, and that we've already been in the air five minutes, we'll be in Cobbham at ten to. It's not far to Leviathan after that. Easy. You're worrying far too much, Jared."

"Well...okay then." Taylor looked up from his book just in time to see Jared turning back toward the crew corridor, before he obviously thought better of it. "And I do not worry too much!"

"Yes you do," Sarika said from behind Taylor. "You've been worrying too much ever since Taylor came on board."

"Of course I was worrying then, he was hurt!"

"And also, as they say, a fish out of water," Shannon continued. "But he's healed up now and settling in nicely. No need to worry any longer."

"I'm right here, you know," Taylor pointed out in irritation.

"Sorry, Taylor," Shannon apologised.

Sia was waiting for them in the reception area of Leviathan Technologies when the crew entered the main building of the company's complex. "I'm glad to see that you've all made it here safely," she said as they shook hands all around. "Come on through to the main lab, and I'll explain the process." She smiled warmly at them before turning around and leading the way down the corridor.

"So how does this work?" Jared asked once they were inside the laboratory. It was a very clean and sterile space, all unfriendly white and cold stainless steel, and it made Taylor shiver a little. Right in the centre of the room was a recliner that looked too much like a dentist's chair for everyone but Sia to be comfortable with its presence.

"There is a drug that is used to place...well, I hesitate to use the word 'subject', but it's really the only word that applies here. It's called epaxoyin, and one dose is enough to put a fully-grown adult into a trance – the only thing that separates it from byphodine is that it doesn't simulate death."

"Is it safe?"

The question had come from Shannon. Sia nodded. "It's very safe. The only side effects are disorientation after coming out of the trance, and fatigue that is remedied by a few hours' sleep."

Here she turned to Taylor and motioned toward the chair. "Once you're seated I'll hook you up to a machine that controls the echo state by means of a series of electrodes. After you are dosed with the epaxoyin, you will enter a trance almost immediately, one that lasts for about six hours. Nobody will be able to see or hear you for the time you are in the trance, and you will not be able to touch anyone or anything." Sia gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm truly sorry I can't do more."

"Is there some way you could increase the power input?" Sarika asked, and Taylor shot her a look of gratitude. His technical knowledge extended only as far as tinkering with and making repairs and modifications to his sonic screwdriver. That being said, he was learning more every day – especially since after their training sessions Jared had begun teaching him the ins and

outs of the *Sisyphus*' engine and how to maintain it. The science and technology behind time travel was far beyond him.

Sia frowned and studied the screen of the tablet she carried. "And this would accomplish *what*, exactly?" she asked without looking up from its display.

It was Taylor who spoke up to answer Sia's question. "Before I left home that morning, I promised my wife that I would come home, just like I always did. Obviously that day I didn't. I just..." His eyes dropped closed briefly. "I just want to tell her that I'm sorry, and that I still love her – and that I always will love her, no matter what happens. And I want to hold her one last time."

Sia seemed to consider what both Sarika and Taylor had said. "I can give it a shot," she replied at last. "But I can make no promises or guarantees."

"I understand," Taylor replied before Sia had a chance to change her mind. He started to dig around in his pockets, obviously in search of something he had brought with him, finally coming up with his sonic screwdriver. "Would this help?"

Sia took the tool from Taylor and looked it over. "Yes, I believe it would," she said after a few moments. "I'd need a demonstration of its workings, but it should be enough to ramp up the power that the machine requires."

A crash course in the use of the sonic screwdriver followed, concluded by Taylor demonstrating its unlocking function on a wall cabinet that required a combination and a thumbprint scan to be opened without setting off an alarm, and he handed the instrument over. "How long would I have with Caroline if you can increase the power?" he asked as he sat down in the chair.

"Around an hour." Another apologetic look. "If I could do more, I would."

Taylor nodded quickly. "*Wǒ zhī dào*," he told her.

Pretty soon Taylor was settled in the chair, and Sia had attached what seemed like hundreds of tiny electrodes to his head, face, insides of his wrists and ankles, and the pads of his fingertips. All of them were wireless, the largest of them barely bigger than the button on the one pair of jeans Taylor had managed to bring to the twenty-sixth century with him. He looked up at the ceiling, focusing on one of the downlights as he waited for Sia to dose him with the epaxoyin.

"Are you ready?"

His focus shifted to Sia's face and he nodded, not entirely sure he could trust his voice were he to speak. Sia seemed to understand his anxiety, and she gave him a smile of reassurance. "Everything will be okay," she said. "I promise. You will not physically leave this room."

"I just have one question," he said as Sia readied the required dose. "Would I be able to bring anything back? Because I just have this feeling that Caroline will try to send something back with me."

"I think there's only one way to find out, and that's to try it for yourself." She flicked the tip of the syringe, the barrel of which held the dose of the drug, and took up Taylor's left hand in her right, turning it so that the inside of his wrist faced upward. "One hour," she reminded him. "Once you enter the trance, you will have one hour and no longer. *Dống ma?*"

Taylor nodded. "*Wở đống,*" he replied quietly, and returned his focus to the ceiling. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Sia inject the epaxoyin, managing to remain aware of his surroundings for just a few moments longer. The drug worked as quickly as Sia had said it would, and barely five seconds later he fell into darkness.

He opened his eyes to find himself standing on the footpath outside the apartment complex he and Caroline had called home for so long, and he fought the impulse to grin like an idiot. "I'm home," he whispered, before giving himself a metaphorical smack upside the head. Sixty minutes was all the time that Sia had been able to give him, and that time was ticking away too fast. He took in a deep breath before walking up the path to the complex's front door and buzzing himself inside.

Caroline looked up from her reading at the knock on the front door of the apartment. Nowadays it was just her and Elizabeth living there – Rhiannon had started a family of her own, and Lucas was off at college in New York. Even so, with Elizabeth in school and working part-time, she spent most days alone.

"I'm coming," she called out as she set her book down and stood up off the couch. A short walk to the front door later she was squinting into the corridor through the peephole, and she frowned. "Lucas William Hanson, you had better not dropped out of college or so help me God," she said as she pulled the door open, "I'll put you over-"

Much to her shock, it wasn't Lucas at the door. Standing there in the corridor, not looking a day over twenty-eight and very much alive, was someone she hadn't seen in almost eighteen years.

"Oh my God," she whispered, barely daring to believe her eyes. "Taylor?"

His response shocked her even further – he nodded. She pressed a hand to her mouth and started shaking almost uncontrollably, the grief that had been sparked almost two decades earlier returning in full force. “It’s not possible,” she whispered, shaking her head in disbelief. “Y-you died...”

Taylor didn’t say a word at first. He stepped inside the apartment and caught Caroline up in a tight embrace, burying his face in her hair and closing his eyes tightly. “I missed you so much CJ,” he whispered at last. “So, so much. I’m so sorry I left you...”

“How can you be here?” Caroline asked in a whisper. “They told me you died when the truck crashed into your car.” She shook her head again. “It’s not possible...”

“It’s completely possible, CJ. Believe me on that. I don’t have the time to explain why, but I can tell you that I am very much alive.” He led her across to the couch, and they sat down. “I only have an hour here, and five minutes have already ticked away. After that...” He shrugged, as if what would happen to him was unknown.

“You’ve come back to say goodbye,” Caroline realised.

“Pretty much, yeah. I really wish I had longer than an hour, but it’s the most they could give me.” He tucked an errant curl back behind Caroline’s left ear. “Are you doing okay?”

“Honestly?” Caroline asked, and Taylor nodded. “I’m doing the best that I can. The first few months...that was hell. Your mother and brothers helped out as much as they could, but it really wasn’t enough. I used to cry myself to sleep a lot, and so did Ree – I don’t think Lucas understood, not at first. And Lizzie...” Caroline looked down at her lap. “I wish you could meet her, Tay. She’s amazing – looks so much like you.”

“Do you have any photos I could look at?”

Caroline nodded. “I have a lot – I’ll go grab them.” She got up from the couch and darted across to the bookshelves, taking down a photo album. “There’s some of Lizzie by herself near the middle,” she explained as she handed it over for Taylor to look through.

“She’s beautiful,” Taylor said as he paged through the photographs of the daughter he would never be able to meet. He stopped at a portrait photograph of Elizabeth, which judging from the date written beneath had only been taken a few weeks earlier. She really did look a lot like him. He could even see small hints of Sarika in his daughter – the eyes were the biggest giveaway. Both Rhiannon and Lucas had dark brown eyes like their mother, but Elizabeth’s eyes were the same as Taylor’s – a clear, bright blue. “Why Elizabeth?”

Caroline bit her bottom lip. "I almost named her after you," she admitted. "But then I remembered that you had a grandmother named Elizabeth, so I just substituted your middle name for your grandmother's. Lizzie's full name is Jordan Elizabeth Hanson."

They spent the next half-hour or so just talking, trying to bridge the gap that now separated them. Taylor was particularly careful during their conversation not to tell Caroline about when or where he had come from. Even though he knew that the world was already going to hell, he didn't know what sort of effect that telling Caroline about the twenty-sixth century would have on the future.

He realised that his time was running short when he started to hear a faint, incessant but steady beeping in his ears that he knew was his heartbeat. "I don't have long left," he told Caroline, wishing that he could stay with her for the rest of his life. As grateful as he was to have gotten this opportunity to see Caroline one last time, he knew that once he returned to Cobham he was going to regret leaving her behind even more than he did already. A spark of an idea ignited in his head, and he did something he thought he would never do.

He took off the necklace that held his wedding band.

"I want you to give this to Lucas the next time you see him," he told Caroline. "Tell him that he is to hand it down through his family after he gets married, to his second-oldest son, and so on down his family line. If I'm as right as I believe I am, I'll get it back eventually." He handed the necklace to Caroline. "Make sure he looks after it."

"I will," Caroline promised.

The beeping in his ears grew almost maddening, and he knew his time was almost at its end. "Tell the kids I love them," he said as he and Caroline embraced for the last time. "I'll never stop loving them." He drew back slightly so that he could look into Caroline's eyes. "And I'll never stop loving you. I still remember my vows – I will love you until the day I die. I promise."

"I'll always love you too," Caroline assured him.

Out in the corridor, the photo album held tightly in his arms, Taylor slid down the wall outside the apartment's front door and squeezed his eyes shut. He missed Caroline like crazy already – somehow, being able to see her one last time and to finally say the goodbye he hadn't properly been able to say made him feel even worse than he had already. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind that it would get even worse in the days and weeks to come.

"*Wǒ huì yǒng yǔan ài nǐ*, Caroline Rhiannon Hanson," he whispered, seconds before a bright flash of light overtook him.

## Epilogue

### *Carried through the centuries*

When he opened his eyes, it was to cold steel and unfriendly white walls, and he almost wanted to close them again.

"He's awake."

The first voice he heard after coming out of the trance was Sia's. "Am I back?" he asked, feeling more than a little out of sorts.

"Yes, you're back," Sia confirmed. She came up to him, datapad in hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I did when I first got here, except without the burning and the broken bones." He realised that he was still holding something tightly in his arms, and he looked down to see that somehow, he had managed to bring the photo album back with him. He released it so that Sia could begin to remove the electrodes, and counted his necklaces quickly – two instead of three. That made him smile a little – he had brought something back with him, but at the same time had left something behind.

"Well, at least we've established that an echo of a person can be made solid for a short amount of time," Sia concluded once she had removed all of the electrodes from Taylor's skin.

"D'you reckon you could work on making it longer for the next person that echoes themselves?" Taylor asked as Sarika helped him out of the chair.

"Provided that you're able to either loan me your sonic screwdriver or build me one of my own, I think I can definitely manage that," Sia replied as she handed Taylor his sonic screwdriver.

"I'll build you a new one," Taylor decided. "It shouldn't be too hard to find all the materials I need. I've got the schematic on my laptop and my tools back at Merewether." He held up his screwdriver, waving it slightly in the air. "It took me almost a year to build this one. Odds are it won't take me so damn long to build yours."

Sia nodded and smiled. "I look forward to receiving it."

"Thank you for letting me say goodbye to Caroline. I really appreciate it."

Somewhat to Taylor's surprise, Sia drew him into a tight hug. "It was my pleasure. I'm more than glad I was able to give you that opportunity – I think that somewhere deep inside, I knew you needed it."

"I did at that," Taylor agreed.

Back on the *Sisyphus*, Taylor hid himself away in his bunk and started to page through the photo album. He had missed out on so much of his children's lives, but he knew that now he wouldn't feel so left out. Photographs could never measure up to real life, he knew that much, but to Taylor they were the next best thing.

"Taylor?"

He looked up at the entryway of his bunk to see Sarika coming down the ladder. "Want to see a few photos of your grandmother as a little girl?" he asked, and held up the photo album. "I've got a whole book full of them now."

"I'd love to!" Sarika replied, sounding excited. "This is Grandma Liz you're talking about, right?"

"My Lizzie, yes." He shifted closer to the wall on his bed so that Sarika could lie down next to him, which she did so. The first photograph Taylor turned to was the photograph of Elizabeth at 17 years old.

"She looks like you," Sarika told him, and Taylor smiled.

In another part of the crew corridor, Jared was hunting through his own bunk for something his mother had given to him the day of his graduation from flight school. It had been passed down through the generations and the centuries, even surviving the Exodus from Earth-That-Was, and he knew very well that if after all this time he was the one who had managed to disappear it, his life wouldn't be worth living. He finally found it inside a clean glass jar that had, at one point, held peanut butter (at least according to the faded Blue Sun label, it had), and examined it closely for the first time.

It was the inscription on the inside of the band that caught his eye right away.

"*Jordan Taylor Hanson + Caroline Rhiannon Winthrop – 06/10/06 until forever,*" he read off to himself. A few seconds later he realised why it had caught his eye so quickly. "Oh no way," he mumbled. "No rutting way..."

The next knock at the entryway of Taylor's bunk was a lot more insistent and nearly impossible to ignore. Which is not to say that Taylor and Sarika tried to ignore it at first. Finally they both got so fed up by it that Sarika hopped up off the bed and marched over to the ladder. "Shannon, would you *kuài qù hěn yuǎn de difāng* already?" she yelled up toward the door, figuring that it was the oldest Leto brother come to annoy the hell out of her again.

"That's a first," Jared commented as he climbed down the ladder. "Never been mistaken for Shan before." In his hand he held something rather important to Taylor, something he had left behind with Caroline on nothing more than the barest of hopes.

His wedding band.

"What are you doing with my wedding band?" Taylor asked, trying not to sound too suspicious.

"My mother gave this to me on my graduation day," Jared explained. "She told me that it had been handed down through the generations, always through the second son in the family. According to her, the passing-down started all the way back in 2030."

"The year I got echoed to," Taylor realised. "You're kidding me, right?"

Jared shook his head. "I'm not kidding."

Taylor grinned, and he took his wedding band back. "I told Caroline I'd get it back eventually," he said happily as he returned his necklace back to its rightful place. "I *told* her."

"Wait, so that was *you* who started the chain off?"

"That was me," Taylor confirmed. "I figured I had to have family other than Sarika around here – and to be honest, it was really only a lucky guess that you'd come from my son's line. You could have come from Rhiannon's for all I knew, or from another family entirely. I'm just glad it was his."

"So it wasn't luck at all that brought you to us, then," Sarika surmised. "It was fate."

"More than that, I think." Taylor was getting up off his bed as he said this. "Back when the Hanson family was still the Hanson family, we had a saying. *Hansons stick together*. All four of us here on this ship, in this crew, we are all Hansons. Even despite our different last names. I think that may be some of the reason why you joined the crew, Rika – subconsciously, you knew you belonged here and nowhere else. And when I got catapulted through the centuries...something,

I really don't know what, was just making sure I found my family. I guess it was so that way, if I didn't manage to find my way home, I wouldn't be so alone."

"Well, you found us," Jared said as he led the way up into the crew corridor. "So who wants to tell Shannon the good news?"

Once up in the crew corridor, the three of them meandered their way through to the bridge, where Shannon could be found piloting the ship back to Five Points. Taylor hung back as Jared and Sarika went up into the small room, leaning against the corridor wall and smiling to himself.

Sarika had been right, he decided. It *had* been fate that brought him to Greenleaf and to the Kitchener Docks all those weeks ago. At the same time, though, it had also been that innate connection between all members of the Hanson family playing its most important part – ensuring that he was never alone.

*Hansons stick together.* The old family saying had been irritating when he was a lot younger, but for the first time in his life he was thankful for it. For now he knew, more so than ever before, that family always came first – and that when all was said and done, his family would never abandon him, and that he would never abandon them.

"Taylor, get your *pigu* in here!" he heard Shannon yell out, and he shook himself mentally before touching his ankh, his wedding band and his dog tag all in turn. All three of them were symbols of the family he had left behind – and he had no doubt that it wouldn't take him long to adopt a few symbols of his new family.

He climbed the short flight of stairs up into the bridge, only to find himself faced with a somewhat shocking sight – a madly-grinning Shannon Leto.

"You are *zhēn de shì tiāncái*, you know that right?" Shannon said as Taylor stepped into the room.

"I've been told that once or twice," Taylor said with a grin of his own. "We headed back home, then?"

"We are," Shannon confirmed. "Nearly there in fact."

Taylor nodded. "Shiny. Let me know when we're there?" he requested, and Shannon snapped off a mock salute in reply.

It wasn't until he had left the bridge that he realised he had called Five Points, and by extension Merewether, *home*. Calling it that was as natural to him as breathing, however – because wherever his family was, that would always be his home.

~ *fin* ~