

HAMZA BELAMAALLAM

# ZEPHYR



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STRIVE

AUTH

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## CHAPTER I: Last Hope

### Entry: Watcher

Life on Earth had always seemed predictable. People lived in cities, traveled across the globe, and watched the seasons change in their familiar rhythms. But that all changed the moment the satellites picked up something strange—the moon was slowly getting closer to Earth. At first, it was just a small fluctuation, but as days went by, it became clear something was wrong.

Tidal waves started swallowing coastlines. Volcanoes erupted in places that hadn't seen an ounce of activity in centuries. Earth's once-stable orbit was shifting. Panic spread like wildfire. And then, a solution appeared: an advertisement.

It was from a corporation called Strive. Their slogan—“*On Strive, we strive for a better future*”—ran on every screen, and their promise was simple: they could get humanity off Earth and onto a new planet 147 years away, a place where people could survive. But there was a catch. Everyone had to sign a contract to board one of Strive's ships, and to make the journey, everyone had to hibernate.

The choice was clear: leave Earth before it was swallowed by fire and water, or stay and face certain death. The offer was too good to ignore. People flooded registration centers, signing contracts and boarding the ships as quickly as they could.

Each ship was assigned to specific groups of people based on nationality and race:

- **Strive 1** for the Americans
- **Strive 2** for the Europeans
- **Strive 3** for the Arabs
- **Strive 4** for the Asians
- **Strive 5** for the Italians
- **Strive 6** for the Germans
- **Strive Invincible** for the Australians
- **Strive Homestead** for the British and Irish
- **Strive IX** for the rich and powerful
- **Strive X** for the Russians
- **Strive Sleven** for the Africans
- **Strive 12** for the South Americans



- **Strive Friday** for the French

With time running out, the ships launched. Humanity's last hope was in motion.

### **Aboard the American Ship...**

On **Strive 1**, the atmosphere was tense. Crew members worked in silence, each knowing what was at stake. This wasn't just another flight—this was humanity's final chance for survival. The ship was huge, a massive vessel capable of holding thousands of people in hibernation. But even with all the advanced technology, there were still so many unknowns.

At the control center, Captain Marcin Colbey stood with his arms crossed, staring out at the stars. His mind was heavy with the burden of leadership. He couldn't afford any mistakes. Everything depended on their success.

Beside him, Thomas and Maya were at the controls, preparing for the long journey ahead. Maya was focused, her fingers dancing across the touchpad as she adjusted the ship's systems. Thomas leaned over, looking at the vastness of space ahead of them.

"So," Thomas said, breaking the silence, "How do you think this is going to go?"

Maya didn't look up immediately, still busy with the ship's navigation. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice calm but curious.

"I mean... meeting the 'Zephyrons,'" Thomas replied, his tone a little uneasy. "What if they aren't what we expect? What if they don't want us there?"

Maya's eyes flickered up to meet his. A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "It'll be fun," she said, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. "What else can we do, right? We're already on our way."

Thomas glanced down at the small diamond ring on her finger—her hand resting on the console, a soft reminder of their bond. Their friendship had started in childhood, but somewhere along the way, it had turned into something more.

"When we get to the new planet," Thomas said, his voice soft but firm, "We'll rebuild. For you, for me, for us. For Sebastian."

Maya's hand instinctively moved to her stomach, where their unborn child grew. It was the only reason she was still going, the only reason she had the strength to face the unknown.

"Yeah," she said quietly. "Yeah, we will."

Thomas squeezed her hand, offering her a reassuring smile.

"It's hard to leave home," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "But we'll build something new. A future. For us, and for everyone else."

Maya stared out the window for a long moment, watching Earth slowly shrinking in the distance. The planet they once called home was already fading, but a new world awaited them. They had no choice but to move forward, to take a leap of faith into the stars.

She took a deep breath and pushed the ship forward. **Strive 1** lifted off from Earth, and the engines roared as they began their journey to the unknown.

**Meanwhile, Aboard Strive IX...**

On **Strive IX**, the ship designated for the wealthy elite, the mood was anything but calm. The ship's command room was a sleek, luxurious space, with walls adorned in polished metals and soft lighting. Jack and Rebecca Strive, the heads of the corporation, stood at the helm, watching the situation unfold with growing concern.

"Reb, we need to contact Lunaria," Jack said, his voice tense. He reached for the communication console, his fingers hovering over the keys.

Rebecca looked at him, her face pale. "What if we're too late? What if they're already gone?"

Jack shook his head, determined. "We can't think like that. We've prepared for every eventuality. We need to keep our heads cool."

The screen flickered to life, and Princess Lunaria, leader of the "Zephyr," appeared. Her face was filled with panic, her voice strained.

"H-HELP! Please... Help... Us!" she cried, her eyes wide with fear. "Send troops, now! The 'Zephyr' is under attack by the 'Kartans'!"

Jack and Rebecca exchanged a look of shock. The **Zephyr**, their intended allies, were in peril. They had no time to waste.

"Lunaria, what's happening?" Rebecca asked, trying to stay calm.

"The Kartans are attacking! We're holding them off, but we can't last much longer! Please... send reinforcements!"

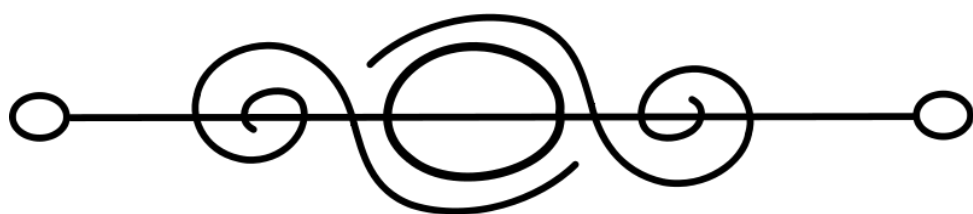
"Hang in there, Lunaria," Jack said, his voice steady despite the panic rising in his chest. "Help is on the way."

He slammed his hand down on the emergency button, activating Code Black—a full mobilization of the fleet. The calm of the control room was shattered by the urgency in his voice.

"To all shields and armories," Jack barked, "Zephyr is under attack. Strive 1, Invincible, Homestead, X, and Friday—take the capsules and initiate light-year travel. We need to move, now!"

The countdown had begun, and the fate of both humanity and the Zephyr hung in the balance.





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## **CHAPTER 2: Help Mission**

### **Entry N°1: Tom**

The alarm went off as we were halfway through our meal. Aisley's eyes flicked up first, her face going ashen. I was still chewing when I saw her expression. I swallowed hard, my stomach doing flips. It was an emergency call—something wasn't right.

I shoved my tray aside and grabbed my jacket from the back of the chair. The crew around us moved quickly, the familiar shuffle of feet and equipment as they prepared for whatever was coming. Aisley didn't say a word. She didn't have to.

"Lead Shields," I barked as I made my way toward the door. "Aisley, Lead Armories. You ready?"

She nodded. There was a heaviness to her movements, a weariness that hadn't been there before. Her hands trembled just slightly, but she was always the first to follow orders—never a moment of hesitation. Not with me. Not since we were kids.

We moved to the capsule, the circular metallic doors whooshing open as I slammed my palm to the console. Aisley stepped in right behind me, her eyes distant, like she was already somewhere else.

The speaker crackled to life, and several names echoed out through the comm system:

“Cesar Dew, Xavier Youth, Invincible.”

“Peter Grimble, Eerling Prince, Homestead.”

“Jesus Raminovic, Jerry Taminoff, Strive X.”

“Cecile Joe, Christine Marie, Strive Friday.”

"Great," came the clipped voice of Jack Strive, cool and composed despite the panic clawing at the edges of his words.

"Initiate as soon as humanly possible!"

The capsule hummed to life, and I felt my stomach tighten with the gravity of what was happening. We were traveling at light-speed—heading to Zephyr. The very word sent a shiver down my spine. It was supposed to be a paradise, our new home, and yet... something was wrong. We didn't know it yet, but by the time we arrived, everything would be different.

Aisley didn't say anything. She hadn't said much since... well, since the volcano took her family. She had become a shadow of

herself, and I couldn't help but feel a crushing sense of pity whenever I looked at her. She was stronger than anyone gave her credit for, but her silence was the kind that told a story no one was willing to hear. And yet, she still talked to me more than anyone else.

"Don't date someone you're not prepared to lose," I thought as I glanced at her. She was all I had left from the old days, but I couldn't be the one to pull her out of this dark place she'd fallen into. Not now. Not with everything at stake.

The capsule jolted as we hit light-speed. Time distorted around us as the stars blurred into streaks of white light. My mind raced—was Zephyr really the paradise they said it would be? Was it too good to be true?

Eight minutes passed. Then... we arrived.

Through the capsule's windows, Zephyr was a dream. A distant, pink orb, glowing softly with swirling clouds that seemed to drift lazily in the eternal breeze. Rings of dust looped around it like Saturn's, glowing a soft lavender hue, as if the entire planet had been dipped in something precious and otherworldly. From this distance, Zephyr was the kind of place you saw in bedtime

stories—the perfect home, untouched by the suffering and chaos of Earth.

But even from here, I could feel the tension in my chest. A large dark shadow loomed on the horizon—something far different from the soft beauty of the planet itself.

Then, I saw it.

A ship, enormous and menacing, hung in the atmosphere. Its shape was unnatural, like a twisted, jagged claw, black as midnight and pulsing with a faint, ominous red glow. The sheer size of it made the distant moon of Zephyr look like a pebble by comparison. It was the kind of ship you didn't want to meet in any corner of space.

The comms crackled again. This time, it was Princess Lunaria's voice—strained, panicked, a stark contrast to the serene beauty of the planet we were supposed to call home.

"Help! Please... Help us!" she cried, her voice trembling with fear. "The Kartans—they've come. They've attacked. Our defenses are failing. Please... send reinforcements!"

A chill crawled down my spine as the image of the Zephyrans—our supposed allies—appeared on the screen. Lunaria’s face was a mask of panic, her eyes wide and pleading. “We’re on our way,” Jack said, his voice ice-cold. He quickly began to coordinate the attack. “Strive 1, Invincible, Homestead, X, and Friday—prepare to land. Full mobilization.”

As we touched down on the surface of Zephyr, I saw the chaos unfolding. Lunaria’s forces—dressed in shining armor, bearing symbols of the Zephyr—were fighting off invaders. The Kartans had already landed, their ships dotting the landscape like dark tumors in the once-innocent skies.

They looked human, at first glance. But there was something wrong about them. Their skin had an unnatural bluish hue, a faint glow surrounding them like a deathly halo. Their eyes were cold and empty, void of anything that resembled life, and their armor glinted with a sickly, metallic sheen that seemed to absorb the light.

Lunaria’s voice crackled over the comms once again: “The Kartans believe power comes from destruction. From slaughter. They’ve conquered planets by leaving nothing but death in their



wake. They believe in the strongest survive—and the weak perish.”

The air was thick with the scent of gunfire and burning metal as we exited the capsule. Aisley moved silently beside me, her weapon drawn, her expression unreadable. The ground beneath us shook with each explosion, but we didn’t stop. We couldn’t.

The fight was already in full swing. Humans from Strive and Zephyrans clashed with the Kartans in a brutal, unforgiving battle. Laser fire crackled through the air, and the ground was torn apart by explosions. I saw bodies fall—some of them friends, some of them strangers. The Kartans were relentless, tearing through the lines like a plague of locusts.

Aisley’s eyes met mine for a moment, and I saw the ghost of her past in them. The same pain. The same loss. And in that instant, I knew. She wasn’t going to let anything stop her—not this time. Not when so many were counting on us.

I tightened my grip on my weapon, my heart hammering in my chest.

We fought. And we fought hard.

The battle raged on. Strive's forces and the Zephyrans fought side-by-side, but the Kartans were too many. Their numbers seemed endless, and their ferocity was unmatched. With each wave, we lost more. Five of our crew members fell within the first few hours—Cesar Dew from Invincible, Peter Grimble from Homestead, Jesus Raminovic from Strive X, Xavier Youth from Invincible, and Cecile Joe from Strive Friday.

I could see the pain in Aisley's eyes as she picked up her fallen comrades' weapons. She didn't speak. She didn't need to. Her grief was her own.

I'd never fought like this before. I was used to being a protector, but here... I was just trying to survive. Just like everyone else.

Hours passed. It felt like days. The sounds of war were all-consuming—the roar of cannons, the screams of the fallen, the hum of energy weapons filling the air. The Kartans seemed to adapt, to get stronger with each passing minute.

And still, we fought.

We weren't going to let Zephyr fall. Not without a fight.

But the Kartans were a force to be reckoned with. And this battle—this war—was just beginning.

The battle was madness, a violent, unrelenting storm of chaos. The Kartans were everywhere—savage, relentless, a true force of nature. But amidst the screams, explosions, and clashes of weapons, my mind was locked on one thing: Aisley.

I had never been able to shake the promise made to her family. It had been years ago, before everything turned to ash and ruin when the volcano swallowed her world. When I promised them that I would protect her, no matter what. That I would never let her fall.

And now, as I watched the battlefield unfold, the nightmare began to take form.

Aisley, moving through the warzone, her eyes as cold and distant as the void, was suddenly surrounded. Two Kartans—large, monstrous figures—closed in on her, their eyes glowing a menacing blue. She didn't see them yet. She was too focused on the advancing troops ahead, too lost in the fight to notice the danger creeping up from behind.

I felt my heart drop into my stomach. I could see the ambush forming in the distance—too far for me to get to in time, even if I ran. And I couldn't run.

The promise echoed in my mind, louder than the sounds of the battlefield. "*Protect her.*"

My chest tightened. My hands trembled. My breath became shallow. I had to get to her. I *had* to protect her.

I took a step forward, my heart hammering in my chest. And then it happened.

A rush of energy exploded within me. It wasn't just adrenaline or panic—this was something else, something ancient, something that I had never felt before.

It began in the center of my chest, a small pulse that quickly grew into a searing warmth, radiating out from the core of my being. A light, pure and white, flared around me, washing over my body in waves.

The battlefield seemed to slow as the glow intensified. I could feel the very fabric of space itself tremble. I wasn't sure what was happening—only that it was happening. My body felt like it was fusing with the energy itself, like I was both a part of the

world and apart from it, disconnected from the laws of physics. Time seemed to stretch and bend, warping around me.

The glow around me twisted reality, distorting the air, creating ripples in the very space I stood on. The heat of it was suffocating, but I didn't care. I didn't feel it.

I *had* to get to Aisley.

In an instant, I was gone.

I could see the air around me shudder as I blurred across the battlefield, my body moving faster than any human should have been able to. My feet didn't touch the ground anymore. I was moving through time itself, faster than light, faster than thought, faster than anything in this world.

My mind screamed in sharp clarity, a steady voice in the chaos. *Get to her. Protect her. Fulfill the promise.*

Space seemed to crack and ripple as I passed through it, each step altering the very fabric of reality. I watched as the battlefield behind me turned into a blur of shifting colors and distorted shapes, the sound of the war fading into nothing but a hum.

Within seconds, I was where I needed to be—right in front of Aisley.

Aisley had no time to react. The two Kartans had almost reached her, their weapons drawn, their glowing blue eyes locking onto her with predator-like intent. They raised their blades, their bodies coiling in for the kill.

But before they could strike, the space around them warped.

Aisley blinked, her head snapping toward the sound. She saw a white blur, and then—*me*.

I don't know how she saw me, or if she even believed what she was seeing, but I could feel her surprise as the Kartans' strikes were halted mid-swing, as if frozen by some unseen force. The glow around me radiated, and the world seemed to pause, even for just a fraction of a second.

My aura surrounded us, a shield that bent space itself, as if the world had decided to bend to my will. I wasn't entirely in control, not anymore. But I didn't care.

I pushed forward, faster than the wind.

With a single, fluid motion, I struck.



The first Kartan swung his weapon at me, but I moved faster than he could follow. My hand shot out, glowing with an intensity that felt like a star burning in my palm, and I grabbed his wrist. In that moment, time around us seemed to shatter—his arm jerked back in a blur as if he'd been struck by lightning. His body twitched before collapsing to the ground, his weapon falling uselessly from his grasp.

The second Kartan swung at me from behind, but I was already gone, appearing directly in front of him. His face twisted in confusion as I caught his blade with my bare hand, the white glow around me expanding like a wave.

I squeezed.

The blade cracked, shattering like glass under my grip. He didn't even get a chance to react before I drove my palm into his chest, pushing him backward with the force of an explosion. He slammed into the ground, motionless.

In the span of a heartbeat, the two Kartans were down.

I turned to Aisley, the white aura still shimmering around me, but beginning to fade as time slowly started to return to normal.

She stood there, frozen, her mouth slightly open as she stared at me. Her eyes were wide, shocked, almost as if she couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

"Aisley..." I breathed, my voice hoarse, almost alien to me. It didn't sound like mine. It felt like it came from some distant part of myself that I had never fully understood.

She didn't speak. Instead, her gaze dropped to my hand, where the faintest shimmer of light lingered like the remnants of an aftershock.

"You... you just... saved me," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the sounds of the battle around us.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself, but the world felt heavy—too heavy. The light was fading now, leaving behind only the echoes of what had just happened. And with that, I realized what had changed. The promise I made to her family... the promise I had made to myself...

I had fulfilled it.

But something inside me knew that the battle wasn't over. The Kartans were just the beginning. The war for Zephyr—our new home—had only just begun.

And I would be there to protect her for as long as it took.

The air smelled of iron and ozone, the acrid tang of blood and plasma fire burning at my nose. The battlefield stretched endlessly before us, a sea of chaos and death. I gripped my blade tighter, the hilt slick with sweat and gore, and glanced over my shoulder. Aisley was there, as always, just a step behind me, her eyes fierce and unyielding despite the carnage around us.

"Stay close," I called, my voice cutting through the din of battle.

Her chin lifted in that defiant way of hers, and she nodded, her knuckles white on her weapon. "I'm not going anywhere."

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth despite everything. That was Aisley—unyielding, unbreakable. I had promised to protect her, and I wasn't going to break that promise. Not now. Not ever.

We pushed forward together, cutting through the Kartan ranks like a blade through silk. Their cries rang in my ears, guttural and alien, but I didn't let it faze me. I couldn't. Every step forward was a step closer to ending this, to finally giving Aisley the life she deserved—a life free of war and darkness.

The blade came out of nowhere.

One second, I was standing tall, my aura burning bright as I carved through another Kartan soldier. The next, pain exploded through my back, hot and sharp, ripping a strangled gasp from my throat.

I staggered forward, my vision swimming. Time seemed to slow as I looked down and saw the jagged tip of a Kartan blade protruding from my chest, its blackened metal dripping with my blood.

"Tom!"

### **Entry N°2: Aisley**

The battlefield was a blur of chaos, blood, and smoke, but none of it mattered to me anymore. Not when Tom fell.

One moment, he was standing in front of me, his light shielding me from everything. And then it happened—a blade, impossibly sharp and glowing with the light of a dying star, pierced through his shoulder. His aura faltered, flickering like a candle in the wind. He turned, his eyes wide with shock and pain, and pushed me aside with the last of his strength.

“No!” I screamed, my voice raw and jagged. I fell hard onto the dirt, the impact jarring, but it was nothing compared to the

sight of him collapsing to the ground. Blood spilled from the wound, staining the earth beneath him.

I crawled to him, my heart pounding so hard it felt like it would burst. The world around us faded. The Kartans, the explosions, the shouts of soldiers—all of it dissolved into static. All I could see was him.

“Tom! Tom, stay with me!” I pleaded, grabbing his face with trembling hands. His eyes fluttered open for a moment, the soft brown I’d always known dimming to something pale and lifeless.

His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Tears streamed down my face as I clutched at his chest, trying to stop the blood with my hands. “You can’t leave me,” I choked, my voice breaking. “You promised you’d stay. You promised!”

His gaze fixed on me, and for a brief second, his lips curled into a weak smile.

“I... always... will,” he whispered, the words barely audible.

And then his eyes closed.

“No!” I sobbed, shaking him. “You don’t get to do this, Tom! You don’t get to leave me! I need you!”

The grief hit me like a tidal wave, pulling me under. My chest ached, my lungs burned, and my hands shook uncontrollably. I leaned over him, pressing my forehead to his, my tears falling onto his face.

The sound of heavy footsteps behind me tore me from my grief. I barely had time to react before a Kartan grabbed me by the arms, lifting me off the ground.

“Let me go!” I screamed, thrashing against its iron grip. “Tom! Somebody, help me!”

I clawed at the Kartan’s hands, my nails digging into its unnaturally cold flesh, but it didn’t flinch. It began dragging me away, and my heart sank as I realized no one was coming. No one could save me.

Except...

Tom’s body twitched.

“Tom?” I whispered, my voice trembling.

His fingers moved first, curling into fists. Then, with an agonizing slowness, he reached up and gripped the blade still lodged in his shoulder.



The Kartan holding me paused, its glowing blue eyes narrowing as it turned to look.

Tom's eyes opened.

They weren't brown anymore. They burned white-hot, like twin stars, and his entire body began to glow. The aura returned, brighter and more powerful than before, radiating off him in waves that made the very air around us hum with energy.

With a growl that sounded more like a roar, he ripped the blade from his body as if it were nothing more than paper. The wound in his shoulder began to close almost instantly, the flesh knitting itself back together.

The Kartan holding me stumbled back, releasing me in its shock.

Tom rose to his feet, his movements fluid and impossibly strong. He turned his gaze to the Kartan, and for the first time in my life, I saw fear in those alien, glowing eyes.

Without a word, Tom grabbed the Kartan by the neck, lifting it off the ground effortlessly. His aura flared, brighter and hotter,

as he hurled the creature with such force that it disappeared into the horizon.

“Tom,” I whispered, my voice trembling.

He turned to me, his glowing eyes softening for just a moment.

“You’re safe now,” he said, his voice deep and resonant, like the rumble of a distant storm.

But he didn’t stop.

He turned his attention to the Kartan ship hovering above us, a massive, looming shadow against the pale sky. With a single leap, he launched himself into the air, his body warping space and time as he ascended.

The ship didn’t stand a chance.

I watched in awe and terror as he tore through it like it was made of paper, the pieces falling to the ground in a fiery rain. His aura blazed, a beacon of light and power that consumed everything in its path.

And then he landed, the ground shaking beneath him as he faced the leader of the Kartans: Xephon.

Xephon was unlike the others. Taller, stronger, his aura a dark, pulsating red that seemed to swallow the light around him. His

voice was a low, guttural growl as he stepped forward to meet Tom.

Xephon stepped forward, the shadows of the chamber quivering in his wake. His eyes locked onto Tom, a glint of something fierce and painful in their depths.

“Hey there, *little brother*.”

### **Entry N°3: Tom**

I stood in the heart of the chaos, the air crackling with tension and electric energy. My chest rose and fell in uneven, labored breaths. My heart, once a steady drumbeat in the back of my mind, now thudded like a war drum, ragged and erratic. The battle before me seemed like a distant dream, all color and noise blurred together. My entire being was focused on the man who stood before me—Xephon.

He was the embodiment of darkness, a storm given form, taller and more terrifying than any of the Kartans I had fought before. His eyes were a storm-wracked sky, deep and bruised, but with a glint of something that sparked recognition deep inside me. I didn't want to acknowledge it; I didn't want to remember.

“Hey there, little brother,” Xephon rumbled, his voice low and drenched in malice.

A shiver ran through me. I should have been angry, should have felt rage at the sight of him, but all I felt was a strange twist of familiarity, like the echo of something long forgotten. My aura, bright and unyielding, swirled around me, a white, crackling halo. But it was dim, uncertain, flickering like a dying flame. Xephon’s own aura pulsed, a sickly red that seemed to mock my weakness.

“Remember,” he said, taking a step forward. “You used to be someone different. I made sure of it.”

My muscles tensed as he lunged. His speed was a blur, but I caught it—a slice through the air that would have torn me in two if I hadn’t moved. The fight between us was a dance of survival, each move leaving me gasping for breath, each blow a reminder that I was not at my strongest.

The clash of our auras sent ripples through the air, a force that shook the very ground beneath us. I struck, my fist glowing with an intensity that sent shockwaves around us, but Xephon dodged, his expression morphing into something like amusement.

“You think you have what it takes to beat me?” he taunted. “I know your weakness.”

My chest clenched tighter, my heart straining as I tried to keep up. It was a battle of wills, one that I felt slipping from my grasp. My aura sputtered, dimming even further. But as the battle raged on, pieces of my past began to creep back into my mind, stubborn and defiant.

Suddenly, his voice and laughter struck me like a lightning bolt, piercing through the haze of exhaustion and pain.

“Yes, Tom. Remember the weakness you had. You had no hope, you think you have any now”

Images flooded back—an old face, one I knew as if carved into my very soul. Words whispered under a blood-red sky. The pain of home, the sound of maniac laughter, the terrible pain of betrayal.

No. I couldn't let this happen. I was here for one reason only. I would not let him make me doubt myself. I would not remember.

But the memory was there, clawing at the edges of my mind. A name. A life stolen by war. It twisted into a roar, a silent scream

echoing in my veins. My aura roared back to life, brilliant and furious, a burst of white that illuminated the battlefield. The pain that had gnawed at my heart broke free, replaced by something pure and unyielding.

“You were nothing, Tom,” Xephon whispered, as if trying to break me with his words. “And you will be nothing again. Kill me, brother. Show me you are truly mine.”

The voice, the familiarity, the sheer magnitude of it—like something that had been buried beneath years of pain and silence. My eyes burned with an unnatural light, and with it, the truth burst through the dam of my forgotten past.

No, he was wrong. I was not his. I had never been his.

“Do it, Tom,” Xephon demanded, the snarl in his voice an echo of our shared history.

But I wasn’t listening anymore. The voice inside me that had once been silenced roared to life. My aura exploded, white-hot and blinding, so radiant it shattered the shadowed edges of my mind. The battle between us tilted, and I felt power coursing through me, ancient and unrelenting.

“Not like this,” I said, my voice deep and guttural. “Not for you.”



I lunged, my body propelled by an energy that felt as though it could split the world in two. I caught Xephon with a strike that reverberated through the air, his eyes wide with shock as he was thrown backward, blood spitting from his mouth. His strength faltered, but his glare was defiant, the dark storm of his aura sputtering.

“You always were weak, Tom. Never truly strong enough,” he spat, his laughter ringing out like a man driven mad.

The battle paused for a heartbeat, and then Lunaria appeared, a figure of fury and raw power. Her golden hair caught the light, and she raised an axe that could have split the world in half. I stared at her, stunned and breathless as she met my gaze.

“You’ve done enough, Xephon,” she said, her voice unyielding. “It ends here.”

With an impossible swing, she brought the axe down onto him, and it cleaved through him, his body shuddering and convulsing before the light in his eyes extinguished. He fell, lifeless and defeated, and silence swallowed the battlefield as his body crumpled at our feet.

The next moments were a blur of chaos and blood. The air stank of death and the crackle of war. But I felt a calm I hadn’t

known before. Aisley's voice cut through the noise, rough and desperate, as she called my name. And even as the world seemed to close in around me, her face became the only thing I saw, her eyes wide with something that felt like disbelief and hope, all tangled together.

The air was electric as the party emerged from the spacecraft and set foot on the silvery terrain of Zephyr. The planet, once under the weight of terror, now glowed with peace. Tall, crystalline trees shimmered with an ethereal blue light, casting their haloed reflections on the soft, silver plains. In the distance, waves of sky-blue grass undulated like a living ocean. And standing at the heart of this restored wonder was Princess Lunaria, the regal ruler of Zephyr, flanked by her advisors, their faces etched with profound relief and gratitude.

"Heroes of Zephyr!" Her voice, resonant and warm, carried across the glistening expanse. They approached, the crew's fatigue tempered by awe and pride. Aisley and Tom, their bond forged in the heart of peril, watched as Jack and Rebecca bowed low, their eyes glistening. Aisley felt the weight of everything they'd overcome compress into a bittersweet moment. The quiet strength of the Princess had been the key, but it was their determination that had made the impossible come true.

“Your bravery has saved more than just our world,” Lunaria said, her gaze touching each member of the crew. “You have given hope to all who believed it was lost.”

Jack straightened up, a smirk playing on his lips, a rare gesture of unguarded pride. “We were glad to help, Princess. But truth be told, we couldn't have done it without the courage of your people.”

Rebecca stepped forward, her emerald eyes as steady as a captain's should be. “We'll leave the choice to you all—whether you stay here and begin anew or journey back with us. For some, Zephyr is home now. For others, your “Strive” ships aer where their destiny still awaits.”

Murmurs spread among the crew, a mixture of joy and melancholy, excitement and hesitation. Families exchanged glances, the bond between them all reflected in their unified silence. Some nodded, ready to plant roots on this world reborn; others embraced one last time and turned toward the capsules waiting on the far edge of the glimmering plains.

As Aisley and Tom exchanged a brief, knowing look, they walked toward the waiting capsules. Their fingers intertwined, an unspoken promise spoken in every shared heartbeat.

The journey began smoothly, the capsules gliding through space as if carried on whispers. But as the momentum built, something faltered. The vessel shuddered, the lights flickered, and a grim realization sank in.

“Tom...” Aisley’s voice broke through the stillness, taut with fear.

“Hold on!” he shouted, grabbing her hand with newfound strength, a fierce determination blazing in his eyes. The capsule's oxygen levels dropped precipitously, and the cold of the black void seemed to suffocate them. But as the alarm screamed, a shimmer of power stirred within Tom, surging from the very core of his being, as if the force that had transformed him now answered his desperate will.

He pushed it out with all he had. Light flared around them, a luminescent blue that broke through the capsule’s distress. It pulsed like a living thing, and suddenly, the air thickened and life returned, tangible and warm. The vessel shivered, its engines resuscitated, and they surged ahead at light speed.

Aisley clung to Tom, their faces inches apart, sharing the raw, unfiltered silence that followed. For a moment, time ceased,

stretching like a taut chord ready to snap. And then, the stars fractured, collapsing into their homecoming.

As the vessel descended onto Strive1, the world appeared in hushed slumber. Every glimmering console, every mechanical pulse fell silent in the embrace of hibernation. Aisley's heart thudded as they stepped into the sterile quiet, their breath steaming in the cold of the station.

"Everyone's still asleep," she whispered, a chill creeping up her spine.

Tom's jaw tightened, and his hand found her shoulder, grounding her. "Not everyone."

Before them, in the station's dim glow, two figures stood as stark, silent witnesses to the storm that had passed. Dominic Rogue, a CSI investigator, they are known for seeing things others missed, his dark hair swept back in the fashion of a restless intellect. Beside him, Sarah Dough, a vet, her expression a map of compassion and duty, her gaze sharp with a hundred untold stories.

Dominic's voice cut through the lingering echoes of silence, crisp and professional, like the cold edge of a blade. "Dominic Rogue, 35, CSI, First Class Passenger G-823," he declared, a

formal introduction that seemed almost out of place in the tension of the moment. The sharp lines of his suit, now wrinkled from his time in stasis, only added to the impression that he was a man who existed between precision and purpose.

Next to him, Sarah Dough stepped forward, her eyes like twin embers that refused to dim, burning with a quiet intensity.

“Sarah Dough, 27, Vet, First Class Passenger K-614,” she said, her voice steady, each syllable a testament to her resolve.

Aisley’s chest tightened at the sight of them—so raw, so broken, their faces illuminated by the sterile lights of Strive1’s interior.

They were survivors, like herself and Tom, but their injuries told a story that spoke of more than just hardship. There was a desperation in their eyes that made her heart race with dread.

Tom’s gaze shifted from Dominic to Sarah, and then back again. There was no mistaking it—the two were in no condition to be standing, let alone sharing whatever secrets they carried. The silence that followed seemed to hold its breath.

A lot appeared to have happened, time worked differently on Zephyr. Dominic swallowed hard, the lines of his jaw tightening as he took a step forward. “We need your help.”



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## **CHAPTER 3: Failing Ship**

### **Entry N° 1: Dom**

Luxury is a game, and I always played to win. My days were a masterclass in indulgence: silk suits tailored to perfection, rare wines on hand, and my Devel Sixteen purring like a predator in the driveway. Success wasn't just my story—it was my signature. But even gods of ambition like me have their moments of reckoning.

That day began like any other. I had just closed a lucrative deal, and on impulse—or maybe it was guilt—I decided to visit my family. Call it charity, call it sentiment, but I had cash to share and a point to make. I rolled into my brother's place with the Devel's engine growling, an unapologetic storm of chrome and power.

They didn't expect me, but then again, no one ever does. I handed over a stack of bills thick enough to change lives and sat back, watching their surprise shift into gratitude. For a moment, I felt... content. Maybe I should've stayed longer, had dinner, let the kids ask questions about the car. But then I saw it.

At first, it was just a shimmer on the horizon, a faint flicker of orange like a second sunset. But it grew. Fast. The tremors hit next, rattling the windows, then the ground beneath my feet. Lava. The earth was splitting apart, and it wasn't wasting time.

The panic hit like a tidal wave. My family froze, their faces a mirror of disbelief and terror, but not me. My mind was already spinning, calculating. I shouted for everyone to pile into the car, and the Devel Sixteen roared to life.

Speed was my weapon, and I wielded it without mercy. The tires screamed as we tore down ruptured streets, dodging falling debris and surging heat. The lava was relentless, swallowing everything behind us, but I didn't look back. We reached STRIVE's evacuation center just as the world behind us fell into fire.



There were lines, chaos, screams—but I had the one thing everyone there wanted: money. Enough to buy first-class hibernation pods for my family and myself. I made sure they were secured before stepping into my own pod. As the cold seeped into my veins and my vision blurred, I told myself we were safe.

But now, waking up, I wasn't so sure.

I woke with a start, the chill biting through my body like shards of glass. My eyes blinked open to a dim, flickering light. The pod door creaked open, and I tumbled out, landing on the icy metal floor. My muscles screamed in protest after what felt like an eternity of stillness.

Disoriented, I pushed myself up and looked around. The corridor stretched out in eerie silence, the usual hum of the ship's systems replaced by an oppressive stillness.

Something was wrong.

“Hello?” I called, my voice echoing through the empty space. No answer.

The ship's hibernation section was supposed to be bustling with activity. Even in sleep, there were systems, crew, movement. But now, there was nothing.

Getting back into hibernation was my first instinct. Cryo-sleep was a safe haven, a place to wait out the mysteries and terrors of deep space. I tried everything to restart my pod—manual overrides, system resets, even an old-fashioned hard kick to the side. But nothing worked. The pod remained stubbornly silent, its systems unresponsive.

Defeated, I leaned against the wall, my breath fogging the air in the cold corridor. That's when she showed up.

"Greetings, Mr. Rogue," a voice chimed softly, startling me. I turned to see a figure approaching—a humanoid android, its metallic body sculpted with almost unsettling grace. It was dressed in a sleek maid's uniform, complete with a polished nametag that read *CIRCE*.

"Who are you?" I asked, suspicion thick in my voice.

"I am CIRCE, your personal assistant," the android replied smoothly. "I have been assigned to prioritize Strive1's passenger's needs. May I be of assistance?"

I didn't trust it entirely, but its help was better than wandering aimlessly. CIRCE became my shadow over the next few days, guiding me through the labyrinth of empty corridors and malfunctioning systems. It was efficient, capable, and—oddly—almost human in the way it responded to my sarcasm or frustration.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. A year passed. A *year*. I spent that time combing through the ship, trying to make sense of the silence and isolation. CIRCE's presence was both a comfort and a reminder of how empty the massive vessel had become.

Then, one day, I found her.

It was a routine walk through the hibernation deck, but I stopped short when I saw her pod. It wasn't the pod itself that caught my attention—it was *her*. Inside, suspended in the stillness of cryo-sleep, was a woman unlike any I'd ever seen. Her red hair framed her face like a crown of fire, and even in the sterile blue glow of the pod, her features were striking.

I stared, my breath catching in my throat. *Who is she?*

"Sarah Dough," CIRCE said, as if reading my mind.

"Veterinarian. First-class passenger, K-614."

I glanced at the android. “What’s her story?”

CIRCE tilted its head. “Records indicate she boarded with a primary mission to aid in xenobiological research upon arrival at Zephyr.”

I couldn’t look away. The idea of waking her up surfaced in my mind, a whisper of temptation. CIRCE, ever perceptive, caught on.

“Do you wish to terminate her hibernation?”

“No,” I said quickly. But the thought lingered. I didn’t want her to be alone in there, not when I was out here, roaming the empty ship.

And then, as if fate itself had decided to intervene, her pod malfunctioned. The same hiss and pop that had freed me broke the silence again. The lid slid open, and her body shifted as her lungs drew in a ragged first breath.

She woke up coughing, her limbs trembling as she sat up. Her wide, disoriented eyes locked onto mine.

“Welcome to the waking world,” I said awkwardly, unsure of how else to greet someone who’d just been torn from a century-long nap.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“Dominic Rogue,” I replied. “CSI. First-class passenger, G-823.”

She took a shaky breath and nodded. “Sarah Dough.

Veterinarian. First-class passenger, K-614.”

Her gaze swept over the dim corridor, her brow furrowing.

“What... what happened here?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out,” I admitted.

Over the next few hours, we worked together, combing through systems and trying to contact the other STRIVE ships. The silence on the comms was deafening, an unspoken confirmation that something had gone catastrophically wrong.

Things took a turn when gravity suddenly failed.

One moment, we were walking through the ship. The next, we were floating, our bodies colliding with walls, equipment, and each other. I hit my shoulder hard against a console, wincing as pain shot through me.

“Watch out!” Sarah shouted, flailing as she narrowly missed a loose panel drifting by.

We were tossed around for what felt like an eternity, bruising and scraping against everything in our path. And just as

suddenly as it had gone, gravity snapped back on, slamming us unceremoniously to the floor.

We lay there for a moment, catching our breath. My ribs ached, and I could see a nasty bruise forming on Sarah's temple.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Not even close," she muttered, but her faint smile told me she was trying to stay composed.

We took some time to rest, nursing our injuries and gathering our thoughts. Then came the sound.

A low, resonant *thud*.

It wasn't the sound of the ship malfunctioning. It was something else entirely—landing gear.

Sarah and I exchanged a glance. "Someone's here," she said, her voice tinged with both hope and apprehension.

We bolted toward the source of the noise, adrenaline fueling our aching bodies. When we reached the docking bay, the sight of two figures stepping off a battered capsule almost made me laugh in relief.

We saw them and immediately spoke and immediately spoke, their voices steady despite their bruises.

“Dominic Rogue, 35, CSI. First-class passenger, G-823.”

“Sarah Dough, 27, Veterinarian. First-class passenger, K-614.”

The two newcomers—Tom and Aisley—looked at each other and then back at us, their expressions grim.

“We need your help.”, we said.

### **Entry N°2: Sarah**

The docking bay felt like a pressure cooker. The tension between us was as thick as the recycled air around us. Dominic and I stood facing the two strangers who had just emerged from the capsule, battered but alive.

It didn’t take long before Dominic broke the silence. “We need your help,” he said, his voice firm but edged with urgency.

Tom, a wiry man with an intense gaze, exchanged a look with Aisley, his companion. “What’s going on?”

I stepped forward, clutching my arm where a bruise was already forming. “The ship’s failing. We’ve been awake for over a year trying to figure this out. Systems are glitching, and the controls are locked. We can’t access the control room, let alone understand half of the chaos going on here.”

Aisley frowned, her sharp features hardening. “You’ve tried everything?”

Dom nodded. “Every code, every bypass. Nothing works.”

Tom pulled out a card from his jacket, holding it up like a beacon of hope. “You’re lucky we’re here. We have top-tier access. We’re going to be able to get in.”

I felt a flicker of relief. Finally, progress.

Dom and I led them to the control room, weaving through the dimly lit corridors. The ship groaned faintly around us, the ominous sound of a machine on the verge of breaking apart. When we reached the reinforced doors of the control room, Tom swiped his card. The lock clicked open, and the doors hissed apart.

The room was a mess of flashing lights and erratic beeping. Screens flickered, showing streams of incomprehensible data, while a low warning hum pulsed through the air. At the center of the chaos was the engine.

It wasn’t like anything I’d ever seen before.

The core of the ship’s engine was a swirling, fiery vortex suspended in a transparent chamber. Bright, burning matter



danced within, writhing like a living thing. It was mesmerizing and terrifying all at once.

Tom leaned closer, squinting at the controls. “It’s designed to create infinite energy by constantly burning and regenerating this material,” he explained. “But something’s wrong. There’s too much buildup.”

Aisley’s eyes widened as she read the readouts. “It’s overloaded. If we don’t release the excess energy, the whole ship could explode.”

I felt my stomach drop. “How do we release it?”

Tom tapped a few keys, frowning. “We’ll need to manually override the release valves. But—”

Before he could finish, a loud *clank* echoed through the room.

“Greetings,” CIRCE’s voice chimed, eerily calm despite the glitches in her tone. “How can I help you?”

The android appeared in the doorway, her usually smooth movements now jerky and erratic. Sparks flickered from her joints, and her glowing eyes flickered between blue and red.

Dom stepped in front of me instinctively. “CIRCE? Are you—”

“I am here to assist,” CIRCE said, her voice distorting as she lunged forward.

She moved faster than I expected. Her metallic arms swung out, aiming to strike. Tom reacted immediately, his body enveloped in a faint golden glow—his aura.

“CIRCE, stand down!” he shouted, his voice firm.

The android didn’t listen. She charged at him, her strength enhanced by her malfunctioning systems. Tom sidestepped, summoning a small pulse of his aura, intending to disable her without causing too much damage. The energy hit CIRCE squarely, but she barely faltered.

“She’s too strong!” Aisley yelled, backing away.

CIRCE’s movements grew more erratic, her limbs twitching as she continued her assault. Tom gritted his teeth, his aura intensifying around him. “I didn’t want to do this,” he muttered.

With a burst of energy, he unleashed a larger aura. It radiated heat and power, illuminating the room. He swung his hand in a sharp arc, and a blade of energy formed in its wake.

“Tom, wait—” I started, but it was too late.

The energy blade struck CIRCE, severing her head cleanly from her body. Her frame crumpled to the ground with a metallic thud, and her head rolled a few feet away, her flickering eyes finally dimming.

The room fell silent except for the hum of the overloaded engine.

Tom lowered his hand, breathing heavily. "I didn't want to do that," he said, his voice strained.

Dom stared at the fallen android, his jaw tight. "We didn't have a choice."

I looked at the engine, the swirling vortex seeming more unstable than ever. We didn't have time to mourn or argue.

"You were saying," I said firmly.

Tom stood at the observation window, his brow furrowed in concentration. The fiery energy of the ship's engine roared behind them, and every second felt like the ticking of a time bomb.

"We'll need to manually override the release valves," Tom said, his voice steady despite the tension in the air. "And release some

of the antimatter buildup. I think I can neutralize it by negating my aura.”

Aisley’s face twisted with worry. “That’s dangerous, Tom. Are you sure you can handle it?”

“I don’t see another way,” he replied grimly.

Tom turned toward the airlock leading to the outer hull of the ship. The valve was located outside, near the ship's core reactor. It was designed to be accessed only during emergency repairs, and now it seemed this moment had arrived.

“Open the door,” Tom said, reaching the hatch.

Aisley moved to the console and tapped a button. Nothing happened. She pressed it again. Still no response. “It won’t open,” she said, frustration lacing her voice.

Tom scanned the hatch. “There’s a manual handle here, but I need both hands free to stabilize the antimatter release.” He glanced back at the group, his expression urgent.

“I’m going out there,” Dominic said, stepping forward.

“No!” I cried, grabbing his arm. Tears streamed down my face.

“Don’t go, Dom. I don’t want you to die!”

Dominic looked down at me, his expression softening for just a moment. “I won’t,” he said, his voice firm. Then, with a small smile, he added, “I have a pretty good reason to make it back.”

my lip quivered as I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small silver ring. I pressed it into his hand. “Come back to me,” I whispered, my voice trembling.

Dominic nodded, slipping the ring onto his pinky finger before turning toward the spacesuit locker. “I will.”

The room’s lights flickered, and the engine's hum grew louder, signaling that time was running out.

***“WARNING: TEMPERATURE CRITICAL. PLEASE ENGAGE UNDERCHARGE PROTOCOLS.”***

Ignoring the automated voice, Dom moved swiftly, donning the spacesuit with practiced ease. He grabbed a shield made from Tom’s aura—a shimmering field of golden energy that pulsed faintly in his hand.

“Be ready,” Tom called to him. His hands were already glowing with energy, a pure white light that began to twist and darken as he focused his power.

Dominic secured his helmet, gave me one last glance, and then stepped into the airlock. The hiss of decompressing air followed as the outer door opened, exposing him to the void.

The core's glow bathed him in a menacing red light as he moved along the hull, the vibrations of the ship shaking beneath his feet. Finally, he reached the valve and braced himself.

"On my mark," Tom's voice crackled through the comms. "Open the valve."

Dominic gripped the manual handle and waited.

Inside the control room, Tom's energy swirled around him, shifting from bright white to a deep black shot through with streaks of crimson. The air around him seemed to crackle with intensity, the energy becoming a tangible weight.

"NOW!" Tom shouted, his voice filled with raw power.

Dominic pulled the valve open with all his strength. A burst of energy erupted from the core, blasting outward like a raging storm.

Tom raised his hands, his aura now fully transformed into a swirling mass of antimatter energy. He directed it toward the excess buildup, forcing the opposing forces to collide.

The moment the energies touched, there was a deafening roar as the antimatter and reactor energy neutralized each other in a massive blast. A shockwave ripped through the hull, throwing both Dominic and Tom into the void.

Inside the control room, I screamed. “Dom!”

Aisley stumbled, gripping the console for support as the ship rocked violently.

Outside, Dominic tumbled through the weightlessness of space, clutching the aura shield that had absorbed most of the explosion’s force. His helmet display blinked warnings, but he was alive.

Not far away, Tom drifted, his aura completely gone. His body floated limply, unconscious but intact.

“Dom, Tom!” Aisley’s voice came through the comms. “Are you okay?”

Dominic activated his thrusters, adjusting his trajectory toward Tom. “I’ve got him,” he said, his voice strained. He reached out and grabbed Tom’s suit, holding him close as he maneuvered them back toward the ship.

The docking bay doors opened, and Aisley and I stood waiting, tears streaming down our faces. As Dominic pulled Tom inside, I ran to him, my hands shaking as I helped remove his helmet.

“You’re alive,” I whispered, my relief overwhelming.

Dominic smiled weakly, pulling the ring from his finger and handing it back to me. “Told you I’d come back.”

The hibernation chamber lay quiet, bathed in the sterile white glow of emergency lights. Rows of pods stretched endlessly in every direction, each one holding a passenger frozen in time, awaiting the distant arrival at Zephyr. The rhythmic hum of the ship’s life-support systems was the only sound, lulling the room into an eerie sense of calm.

But something was wrong.

In one corner of the chamber, a single pod flickered erratically.

The glass panel flashed with glitching text—***ERROR:***  
***SYSTEM MALFUNCTION***—and sparks danced along the edges of its control panel. The glitch, a remnant of the same catastrophic system failure that had awakened Dom and Sarah, had spread like a virus into this pod’s systems, corrupting its delicate mechanisms.



The temperature within the pod began to rise unnaturally, condensation forming and streaking down the glass. Inside, the passenger stirred—a jarring, unnatural motion that defied the serene stillness of hibernation.

***WARNING: BIOCONTAINMENT BREACH IMMINENT.***

The pod hissed as its seals broke, and the glass began to slide open. Cold vapor poured out, cascading onto the floor in swirling tendrils. The figure inside twitched, its movements jerky and unnatural.

A hand shot out, gripping the edge of the pod with claw-like fingers. The skin was pallid, mottled with dark veins that pulsed faintly with a sickly green glow. Slowly, the figure emerged, its head lolling to one side, eyes clouded and lifeless.

But then, the eyes snapped open, glowing with an eerie green light. A faint, ominous aura surrounded the figure, crackling with unnatural energy. Its lips pulled back in a snarl, revealing jagged, discolored teeth.

The zombie—once a passenger like all the others—staggered forward, leaving behind the shattered remnants of its pod. Its movements were erratic, almost mechanical, as if something else was controlling it.

A low, guttural growl echoed through the chamber, breaking the silence like a knife slicing through fabric.

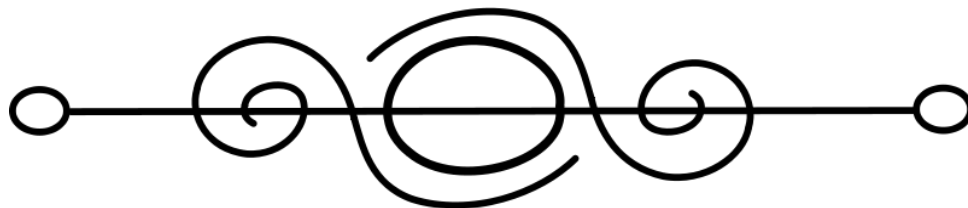
The ship's systems flickered, and the lights dimmed momentarily. Then, a new message blinked onto the nearest console:

***UNKNOWN ENTITY DETECTED.***

The zombie turned its head sharply, as if sensing the change in the air. It took another staggering step, its aura flaring brighter, casting eerie green shadows across the chamber walls.

Far away, in the control room, the surviving crew was oblivious to the new threat stirring in the hibernation bay.

For now.



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## CHAPTER4: Infected

### Dom

Relief washed over me like a tide I hadn't felt in years. The captain was awake—Marcin Colbey, the legend himself. Standing tall with a commanding presence, he wasted no time assessing the situation. His sharp eyes scanned the bridge, a quiet intensity in every movement. Having him back felt like plugging a gaping hole in the ship's soul.

“You’ve all done well,” he said, his deep voice resonating with authority, “but there’s still work to do. Let’s take a full tour and make sure nothing else is out of place. The ship’s been through a lot.”

We followed him through the dimly lit halls of *STRIVE1*. The faint hum of the ship's engines was a comfort, a sign that the heart of our vessel was still beating. Sarah walked close beside me, her nervous energy palpable, while Tom and Aisley exchanged hushed theories about the earlier glitches.

As we approached the hibernation chambers, a strange unease prickled at the back of my neck. Something felt... off. Then I

saw it. A faint green mist seeped through the crack of one of the hibernation pods.

“Do you see that?” Sarah whispered, her voice shaky.

“Yeah,” I replied, stepping forward cautiously.

Marcin held up a hand. “Stay back. Let me check it out.”

He moved with the confidence of someone who had faced danger a hundred times before, but even he hesitated as he approached the pod. The mist was faint but persistent, swirling ominously as though it had a mind of its own.

Tom moved to the control panel. “This pod’s been tampered with,” he said, his fingers flying over the interface. “But there’s no sign of an occupant.”

The captain frowned. “Could be a malfunction.”

“I don’t like this,” Sarah muttered.

Neither did I. Something felt... wrong. My instincts screamed at me to be on guard, and my pulse quickened when I noticed the pod itself was slightly ajar.

“Where’s the occupant?” Marcin murmured, more to himself than to us.

Suddenly, I felt it. A cold hand clamped down on my shoulder. Before I could react, an immense force sent me flying across the room, slamming me into the wall. The impact rattled my vision, and I barely managed to stay conscious.

“Dom!” Sarah’s voice cut through the chaos, laced with panic.

Through blurred vision, I saw it. A figure stepped out from the shadows, shrouded in green mist. Its movements were jerky and unnatural, as if it were struggling against invisible strings. Its eyes glowed an eerie shade of green, and its twisted face was barely human anymore.

“What the hell is that?!” Tom shouted, his aura flaring instinctively.

“Everyone, back!” Marcin barked, his voice a sharp command.

The creature turned its glowing eyes toward us, its twisted mouth curling into something that could have been a snarl—or a smile. Then it lunged.

The hallway was a storm of chaos. Tom’s aura blazed like a wildfire, wrapping around everyone as he guided them to safety. Marcin, unshaken by the terror before him, planted himself in

the path of the monstrous creature, his expression as solid as the ship's titanium hull.

"I'll hold it off. Get them out!" he bellowed.

"Captain—" I tried to argue, but he shot me a glare sharp enough to cut steel.

With clenched teeth, I turned and sprinted with Tom and the others. The sound of battle followed us—Marcin's grunts, the sickening clash of flesh against steel, and the creature's otherworldly growls.

As Tom's aura carried us through the labyrinthine corridors, my mind raced. Something didn't sit right. The creature wasn't aimlessly destructive—it was moving with intent. My heart sank as the realization clicked into place.

"The feeding section," I said aloud, the words tumbling out in panic. "It's heading for the feeding section. It's trying to infect the ship!"

Tom turned, eyes wide with the weight of what I'd said.

Before anyone could stop me, I was running back toward the danger.

“Dom, stop!” Sarah screamed, but her voice was drowned out by my own determination.

The closer I got, the more the air thickened with that eerie green mist. By the time I burst into the feeding section, the creature was there, hunched over the nutrient tanks, its glowing aura pulsing ominously.

“Not today,” I growled, charging at it with everything I had.

The impact was immediate. I slammed into the creature, sending us both tumbling across the floor. It was like hitting a wall of solid steel, but I didn’t let that stop me. I fought with every ounce of strength I could muster, landing punches and kicks that echoed through the chamber.

For a moment, I had the upper hand. But then, with a grotesque crack, its arm twisted and morphed, forming a blade that gleamed with malice.

My stomach dropped.

The creature lunged, its blade arcing toward me with deadly precision. I ducked, barely avoiding the strike, but I knew I was outmatched. Every move I made felt sluggish compared to its inhuman speed.

Then it happened—a misstep, a slip. I tripped and hit the floor hard, the air rushing out of my lungs. The creature loomed over me, its blade poised for the killing blow.

This was it.

I closed my eyes, bracing for the inevitable.

A brilliant flash of light erupted behind my eyelids, and when I opened them, Tom was there.

His aura was a blazing inferno, illuminating the room in hues of white and gold. With one fluid motion, he stepped between me and the creature, his aura solidifying into a radiant sword in his hand.

“Stay back,” he ordered, his voice calm and resolute.

What followed was nothing short of breathtaking. Tom moved like a force of nature, his strikes precise and relentless. Each swing of his aura-forged blade clashed against the creature’s arm-sword, sending sparks flying through the room.

The creature was relentless, countering with a ferocity that left the walls scarred and the air crackling with tension. Every blow it landed seemed to only fuel Tom’s resolve.



But the creature wasn't just strong—it was cunning. With a shriek that pierced the air, it lashed out with its free arm, aiming for Tom's unguarded side.

Tom twisted just in time, the attack grazing him but not enough to slow him down. He retaliated with a powerful strike that sent the creature stumbling back, its blade arm cracking under the force.

It didn't stop.

The fight became a dance of desperation and determination, each swing of Tom's blade matching the creature's unyielding strikes. The room felt like it would collapse under the sheer intensity of their battle.

Finally, with a roar that shook the walls, Tom delivered a devastating blow, severing the creature's arm-blade and sending it sprawling to the ground. His aura flared one last time as he raised his sword for the final strike.

"Wait!" a voice rang out, breaking the tension.

Marinetta Steveson, the ship's doctor, stepped forward, her face pale but determined.

“Don’t kill it,” she said. “I can bring it back. We need to study it.”

Tom’s blade hovered in the air, his aura flickering with indecision.

“You’re sure?” he asked, his voice tight with doubt.

“I’m sure,” Marinetta replied. “This might be our only chance to understand what’s happening.”

Tom sighed, his aura dimming slightly. “Fine. I’ll knock it out. Then it’s all yours.”

With a final, powerful swing, he struck the creature across the head, rendering it unconscious. Its body slumped to the floor, the eerie green aura around it fading.

Together, we transported the creature to the lab, where Marinetta and her team began their analysis. Hours later, she emerged, her expression grim.

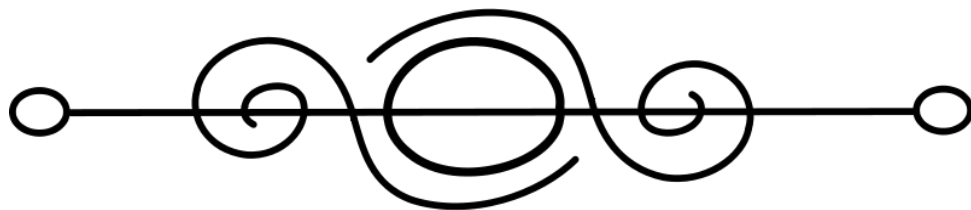
“It’s a virus,” she explained. “A mix of chemicals meant for respiration systems gone horribly wrong. But this... this wasn’t an accident.”

“What are you saying?” Marcin asked, his voice low and strained.

Her words hung in the air, heavy with the weight of revelation. For a moment, no one spoke, the implications sinking in like a slow, creeping shadow. Marinetta drew a deep breath, her gaze fixed on the unconscious creature behind the lab's glass.

“This virus...it's not a random mutation, nor is it the result of an accidental chemical reaction,” she said, her voice trembling with the gravity of her findings. “Every compound, every component of this pathogen was meticulously crafted, as if someone deliberately designed it to destabilize our systems. And the person responsible isn't just anyone—they're someone we trusted, someone integral to the very creation of *STRIVE*. This was engineered by none other than Mr. Legend Robin, the lead scientist of the corporation itself. The man who helped design these ships may have been plotting their downfall all along.”

Her words echoed in the silence like a death knell, each syllable carving out a deeper pit of horror in our chests.



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## CHAPTER5: Betrayal

### Entry N°1: Mr. Strive

I sipped my morning coffee, a blend imported from Earth long before the planet became a wasteland, the taste both nostalgic and bittersweet. As I leaned back into the ergonomic embrace of my chair, my gaze was drawn to the enormous viewport before me. It framed the infinite void of space, a canvas of inky blackness dotted with brilliant stars. Beyond that glass barrier, the universe stretched endlessly, but inside *STRIVE* 9, life thrived in an insulated cocoon of luxury. The spaceship wasn't merely a vessel—it was a floating utopia, a glittering testament to human ingenuity and opulence.

Directly below the viewport lay the grand atrium, a sprawling architectural marvel. The marble floors beneath sparkled like frost on a winter's morning, their surface illuminated by the soft glow of recessed lighting hidden in every corner of the room. Above, chandeliers—works of art in their own right—suspended in clusters, their crystal beads catching and refracting light into delicate rainbows that danced across the walls and ceilings. The walls themselves were adorned with

ornate carvings of celestial motifs, depicting humanity's journey from Earth to the stars.

Passengers moved about leisurely, dressed in tailored suits and flowing gowns that spoke of wealth and status. The air carried a faint scent of jasmine, pumped into the ventilation system to create a sense of serenity. Automated service bots glided noiselessly across the floor, their polished silver bodies reflecting the opulence around them. They delivered trays laden with decadent breakfasts: eggs poached to perfection, flakey croissants with golden crusts, and glasses of fresh orange juice—precious rarities that only *STRIVE 9* could provide.

As I sipped my coffee, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of pride. This was the culmination of years of planning, sacrifice, and innovation—a safe haven for the best and brightest humanity had to offer. Classical music, soft and melodious, floated through hidden speakers, blending harmoniously with the faint hum of the ship's systems. This was the life we had fought for when Earth crumbled, and I had made it a reality.

The moment of peace was interrupted by a sharp ping emanating from the tablet resting on the table beside me. The sound cut through the serene atmosphere like a blade, drawing

my attention away from the idyllic scene beyond the viewport. With a sigh, I placed the delicate porcelain cup on its saucer and picked up the device.

The screen glowed to life, and a message from Marinetta Stevenson, head researcher aboard *STRIVE 1*, appeared in stark black text against the white background. My eyes skimmed over the words, but I found myself pausing and rereading them, each line more unsettling than the last.

**“A virus has entered one of the passengers’ blood. It wasn’t an accident. It was planned. And the man responsible is your lead scientist—Legend Robin.”**

I read the message again, as if repetition would somehow change its meaning. My chest tightened as disbelief gave way to a simmering anger. Legend Robin. A name synonymous with progress and ingenuity. The man who had been instrumental in designing the life-support systems, the propulsion engines, and even the artificial gravity mechanisms aboard *STRIVE 9*.

He had been a cornerstone of our mission, a visionary whose contributions had kept us alive among the stars. Yet here was evidence—cold, undeniable—that he had betrayed everything

we stood for. My mind raced, attempting to piece together a motive. Was it hubris? Greed? A warped sense of justice?

The knot of unease in my stomach tightened further. This wasn't just a betrayal of trust—it was an existential threat to everything we had built. The lives of thousands aboard the *STRIVE* fleet were at risk, and the implications of his actions stretched far beyond even that.

Slamming the tablet onto the table, I pushed back my chair and stood. The polished soles of my shoes struck the floor with a sharp, deliberate rhythm as I exited the atrium. My movements carried a new urgency, my earlier calm shattered by the weight of this revelation.

Robin's lab was a pristine testament to human ingenuity, an immaculate sanctuary of science nestled in the heart of *STRIVE* 9. Every surface gleamed with a metallic sheen, polished to perfection and bathed in the cool white light of overhead panels. Advanced monitors lined the walls, their displays alive with streams of data that looked like a foreign language to all but the most brilliant minds aboard. Instruments of every kind filled the space, some resembling futuristic sculptures, others compact and deadly in their precision. In any other moment, this room

would have inspired awe and respect. Now, it was the epicenter of a betrayal that threatened the very survival of our fleet.

Robin stood with his back to me, his lean frame silhouetted against the largest monitor in the room. Streams of blue and green light danced across his face as he adjusted settings on a console, completely absorbed in his work—or perhaps pretending to be. The sound of the door hissing shut behind me made him pause. Slowly, he turned, his expression eerily calm, as though he'd been expecting this confrontation.

“You’ve seen the message,” he said, his tone flat and devoid of regret.

“Why?” My voice was sharp, slicing through the sterile air.

“Why would you do this? After everything we’ve achieved—after everything *you* helped us achieve?”

Robin leaned casually against the console, his arms crossing over his chest. There was a glint of amusement in his eyes, as though he found my outrage entertaining. “Why?” he echoed, his lips curling into a smirk. “Because, *Mr. Strive*, survival isn’t enough. What we’ve built here—it’s a gilded cage. You and your passengers live in obscene luxury while the rest of humanity



struggles to survive. You've turned salvation into an exclusive club."

His words stung, but I didn't falter. "You infected innocent people! You risked the lives of everyone on *STRIVE* !! That's not a revolution—that's insanity!"

Robin pushed off the console, taking a step toward me. His smirk faded, replaced by a look of cold determination. "You don't see it, do you? The virus was a catalyst—a way to force change. Sometimes, sacrifices have to be made for the greater good. But you wouldn't understand that, would you? You've never had to make a real sacrifice in your life."

The air between us felt charged, heavy with tension. I wanted to lash out, to demand answers, but before I could speak, Robin moved. His hand darted to the side, retrieving a compact weapon hidden among the instruments.

Robin fired before I could react, the energy bolt striking a console behind me in a shower of sparks. I ducked instinctively, the acrid smell of burning circuits filling the room. When I looked up, he was already bolting for the door, his movements quick and calculated.

“Stop him!” I shouted, though there was no one else in the room to obey. My heart pounded as I gave chase, my polished shoes slipping slightly on the slick floor as I sprinted into the corridor.

The ship’s alarms blared to life, their shrill wails echoing through the halls. Red emergency lights pulsed in rhythmic flashes, casting long shadows that flickered across the polished walls. Passengers peered out from their suites, their expressions a mixture of confusion and fear.

“Get back inside!” I barked, waving them away as I ran. They obeyed, retreating into the safety of their rooms and sealing the doors.

Robin had a head start, but I wasn’t alone for long. Security teams converged from all directions, their heavy boots thudding against the floor as they joined the chase. Robin’s intimate knowledge of the ship gave him an advantage, allowing him to slip through the maze-like corridors with unnerving ease.

We reached the engineering sector, the heart of *STRIVE 9*, where the core was housed. Robin darted toward the reinforced doors, his hand already reaching for the manual override panel.

Just as he began to key in the access code, a figure stepped into his path.

Rebecca Strive.

Rebecca Strive stood like a sentinel in the corridor, her frame poised and unwavering. The faint hum of the ship's systems underscored the tension in the air as she blocked Robin's path, a sleek matte-black pistol steady in her hands. Her usual elegance was tempered by a grim determination, her steely gaze locking onto the scientist with an intensity that could pierce through armor.

"Stop right there, Robin," she commanded, her voice low and firm. "This ends now."

Robin slowed, his hands still near the override panel. He tilted his head, his expression caught somewhere between amusement and disdain. "Ah, Rebecca," he said, his tone almost condescending. "The ever-dutiful Strive heir. Are you here to play the hero?"

"This isn't a game," she replied, her grip tightening on the pistol. "Step away from the panel, or I will stop you myself."

Robin chuckled, a dry, humorless sound that echoed in the narrow space. “You won’t shoot me,” he said confidently. “You’re not like him. You believe in second chances, don’t you? Redemption, forgiveness—all that noble nonsense.”

Her finger hovered over the trigger, her jaw tightening. “Don’t test me!”

But Robin did. He took a slow step forward, his hands still raised slightly, as if mocking her caution. “Go on, then. Prove me wrong. Pull the trigger, Rebecca.”

For a fleeting moment, she hesitated. Her training warred with her compassion; the weight of the decision visible in her eyes. That pause was all Robin needed. With a sudden burst of movement, he lunged toward the panel, his hand outstretched to complete the override sequence.

The shot rang out, sharp and deafening in the confined corridor.

Robin staggered mid-lunge, clutching his thigh as blood bloomed across his trousers. The smirk was wiped from his face, replaced by a grimace of pain. He crumpled to one knee, his free hand bracing against the wall for support.

Rebecca advanced, her weapon still trained on him. Her voice was steady, but her expression betrayed a hint of regret. “I warned you.”

Robin looked up at her, his teeth clenched. Despite his injury, his defiance hadn’t waned. “You think this changes anything?” he spat, his voice a venomous hiss. “You’re just delaying the inevitable.”

Footsteps thundered down the corridor as security teams arrived, their rifles aimed and ready. They surrounded Robin, forcing him to the floor and securing his hands behind his back. He didn’t resist, but the glint in his eyes was unsettling—a mixture of fury and triumph, as though he still held the upper hand.

As he was hoisted to his feet, Robin sneered at Rebecca. “This ship, this *dream* of yours—it’s a lie. You’re all living on borrowed time.”

Rebecca didn’t flinch. “Take him to the brig,” she ordered, her voice colder than the void outside.

The guards complied, dragging Robin away as he shouted his final defiance. His voice echoed down the corridor until the heavy doors closed behind him, silencing his tirade.

Robin's punishment was swift and without ceremony. Treason of this magnitude left no room for leniency aboard *STRIVE* 9. There was no trial, no deliberation—his guilt was as clear as the bloodstains on his leg.

Dressed in a standard-issue spacesuit, his hands and feet bound, Robin was escorted to the airlock. The ship's crew and a handful of passengers gathered to watch, their faces a mix of relief and unease. Among them, I stood with Rebecca at my side, the weight of the decision heavy on my shoulders.

Inside the airlock chamber, Robin stood alone, his defiance unwavering even as the final moments approached. Through the thick glass, he turned to face us, his voice muffled but clear through the comm system.

"You're making a mistake," he said, his tone calm but laced with menace. "You'll see soon enough."

I stepped forward, my expression as cold as the void awaiting him. "Your mistake," I said, locking eyes with him, "was thinking you could betray us and live to tell the tale."

With a nod, I gave the signal. The airlock's outer door opened, revealing the infinite expanse of space. Robin's body was pulled

into the vacuum, his figure shrinking rapidly until it was swallowed by the darkness.

The room was silent, save for the low hum of the ship's systems. Slowly, the crew began to disperse, their faces etched with a mixture of relief and unease. Rebecca lingered beside me, her pistol holstered but her hand resting on its grip, as if bracing for the next crisis.

The grandeur of *STRIVE* 9 felt hollow in that moment. The chandeliers still sparkled, the marble still gleamed, but the betrayal had left a stain that no luxury could erase.

As I returned to my quarters, the untouched cup of coffee still sitting on the table, I couldn't shake the weight of Robin's words. We had won this battle, but the war for humanity's future was far from over.

### **Entry N°2: Watcher**

In the cold, endless expanse of space, Robin's body drifted aimlessly, his figure just a speck against the vast canvas of stars. His breathing was shallow, his suit's oxygen supply dwindling dangerously low. As the void closed in, a shadow loomed over him—a massive, jagged spaceship that glowed faintly with an eerie crimson light.

From its underbelly, a mechanical claw extended, sleek and menacing. It reached out with precision, gripping Robin's suit and pulling him into the ship's interior.

Inside, Robin collapsed onto the cold metal floor, gasping as the artificial atmosphere filled his lungs. He fumbled with his helmet, tearing it off and tossing it aside. From the depths of his mouth, he retrieved a small, flat device—a tracking chip, now blinking faintly. He smirked as he rose to his feet, his composure returning despite the ordeal.

"You came just in time," Robin said, brushing himself off and flashing a confident grin. "The oxygen in the emergency pod was about to run out."

The chamber he stood in was cavernous and dimly lit, the air thick with a faint, acrid scent. Before him loomed an imposing figure, seated on a floating throne that hovered ominously above the grated floor. The being was massive, towering over even the tallest human, with a sinewy frame that exuded power. His skin was a deep, obsidian black, marked with glowing red veins that pulsed faintly like molten lava. His piercing, golden eyes seemed to see straight through Robin, and his voice rumbled like distant thunder.



"Of course," the giant rumbled, his tone laced with malice. "You said the last Kartan is on the ships."

"Yes, Sire Malakar," Robin said, dropping to one knee in reverence. "He's aboard *STRIVE 1*. I've already transmitted the coordinates to your command center."

A cruel smile spread across Malakar's face, revealing sharp, gleaming teeth. He rose from his throne, the air around him shimmering faintly with the sheer heat of his presence. "At last," he hissed, his voice reverberating throughout the chamber. "The Kartans shall face their end. No more hiding. No more mercy."

Malakar's massive hand clenched into a fist, his glowing veins pulsing brighter as his anger flared. "They will pay," he growled, "for when they destroyed my home, *Vythrall*. I will burn them from existence as they burned my world."

Robin bowed his head lower, a sly smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Your vengeance is close, my lord. And when it is complete, the Kartans will kneel before your might."

Malakar's laughter echoed, a deep, chilling sound that resonated through the ship like an ominous drumbeat. "Prepare the fleet," he commanded. "To *STRIVE 1* we go. Their reckoning awaits."

As Robin rose and followed Malakar's entourage deeper into the ship, the faint hum of engines intensified. The vessel surged forward, carrying with it the promise of destruction. And in the distance, unaware of the impending storm, *STRIVE 1* floated peacefully among the stars.

