

# THE GAIA STARSHIP

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## THE GAIA STARSHIP

The Gaia Starship made everything small; and thinking of the people who built it made Hawk feel small. The Gaia Starship served as a galactic life raft for species that had once been extinct, species made by genetic engineering that had no place in nature, and even places long lost to the ruthlessness of the universe and war. The great starship had been named for the personification of the most famous planet that had been rendered to a collection of rocks. The spirit of Gaia continued even if Earth did not.

Though function had been the first principle of the Gaia Starship's construction, artistry hadn't been ignored. The Gaia Starship moved through the Universe like a great whale. A large central body that tapered, and seven pairs of fins of differing lengths. It spun to mimic gravity, but that gravity differed from the core to the fins. It would have been near invisible without the artificial stars moving in the spheres that dotted its body. Each sphere contained a recreated environment kept separate from the others by the incomprehensibly complex machinery that formed the starship.

No civilization since the dawn of time had created something so ludicrously large. Just to bring together the genetics and geographic data had required the co-operation of many of the galaxy's powers. The hull of the Gaia Starship shone with the stars without, and the stars within. Each star looked to Hawk like an eye slowly blinking and looking back at the universe.

Hawk's people had lost Earth over a millennia ago. His family had long worked at turning almost living worlds into something liveable. The Gaia Starship mocked their work. Its beauty had come from the work of hundreds of worlds and the passion of uncountable lives. The entity behind it had counted all those lives gratefully. The planets of Hawk's people took centuries of careful nudging to turn a single planet into sustaining a crude ecosystem, the Gaia Starship contained incredibly complex biospheres kept in a careful stasis.

Looking at the shuttle screen Hawk saw the thrusters in the Gaia Starship's rear ignite with yellow light and then explode into a glorious blue before turning to nuclear white. The starship began to move for the last time, it would likely never stop again as it travelled through the dark of the universe between galaxies where it's great size wouldn't disrupt any star systems. The Gaia Starship had been built to be independent, functional, and safe.

“Since we were making something beautiful inside, I suppose we had to put some work into the exterior. They could have made it to be a polygonal monster, but instead they made something astounding.” Airgid spoke with a casual smile on their lips.

Hawk had seen Wohulain in the news and media, but the amphibious feather crested reptiles never made it to the cold forests of his home. Airgid stood shorter than most of the students they were acting as a guide to. Hawk found it impossible to know Airgid’s sex or gender. Parts of their body were a riot of colour, shining scales and a feathered rainbow crest. The other parts of Airgid’s body were muted colours and hardened scales. Airgid’s feathery crest stood on end giving the impression that Airgid expected anything to go wrong. Airgid’s mismatched eyes looked at Hawk before they pointed to the Starship.

“You’ll be looking at me plenty, don’t miss seeing this.” Airgid said to everyone. Hawk looked back to the Gaia Starship in embarrassment.

Another one of the contest winners, a small dark coloured Wohulain, argued the Gaia Starship could be called the Gaia Star System. The first artificial star-system, depending on how both the word star and system were defined. Everyone had rolled their eyes at that; they had seen his online videos already. A brighter scaled Wohulain pushed his face aside.

Everyone had got their spot on this tour in different ways, and Hawk recognized the two Wohulain as the brother/sister infotainment duo who explained how The Confluence had haphazardly been built. They hadn't excited people like other contenders had, but they were undeniably too brilliant and knowledgeable not to get a spot. Hawk felt a flush of brief upset wondering if he only got on the starship as a token of the terraformer community. Hawk had only written an essay. Really Hawk had written twenty essays, but only one had been good enough.

"Okay, keep staring at that beautiful thing out there. You can still listen to me." Airgid clapped briefly jolting everyone out of their awe. "We will be docking with the starship in the next ten minutes. I am going to give you a completely private tour, no cameras or publicity. You'll be camping somewhere no one has camped before. After camping for two standard weeks by ourselves on the starship; the camera's will be on us when the press arrives. Mind your mouths if you're putting this on your university application. We are hoping for everyone to get some time in at least a dozen environments before the press shows up. After we camp you will be meeting Amino Datum..." Airgid winced.

The excitement filled the shuttle like a pressure wave.

"Amino will..." Airgid continued waving the noise down. "...well look you're lucky Amino just finished a two-century long project so

there's time for a lot of your questions. I'll be around for your safety, but the only thing you should worry about is having fun! We have the much-advertised resurrection system just in case of the unexpected, but we don't want to test that because we couldn't get ethical approval for it. Disaster system only. Lastly." Airgid waited for a moment, but no one became quiet. Airgid raised their voice. "I will boot you out an airlock if you become a problem. Damage the starship. Shuttle home. Injure the wildlife. Shuttle home. Try and smuggle something cute home. Shuttle into the endless abyss of space. This place is a sanctuary, not a playground." Airgid took a moment looking at the half attentive group. "You're all very lucky."

Hawk watched Airgid sit down next to the pilot, he'd seen the body of the starship hundreds of times hoping to win the contest. He hadn't expected an oddity like Airgid. He felt bad staring at their muted coloured limbs but couldn't quite help it. He had only seen male Wohulain with muted coloured scales and feathers, or brightly coloured female Wohulain. Airgid had both and Hawk could not stop staring. Airgid would absolutely turn around at any moment and catch Hawk gawking. Someone behind Hawk poked him in the shoulder.

"Are you frontier too?" Hawk turned and couldn't help but stare again. Hawk came from the frontier. Hawk's parent, grandparents, and

the family tree deep and wide were frontier terraformers. They were human so were well suited to the cold forested planet Hawk called home. The Mahi-Kahd that the terraformers belonged to had many species in it, but Hawk hadn't met most of them. For two years he had been friends with a large furry Diarmpf who moved from an uninhabitable planet to another uninhabitable planet with their family installing CO2 filters. Largely though Hawk had seen other humans and snow. A lot of snow. Without the network he'd barely have had a friend at all.

Hawk had expected to see the amphibious and scaled Wohulain, he'd seen the large and long horned Diarmpf, he had even prepared for someone as exotic as the insectoid Oohaytae. Today he had seen all of them and tried very hard not to stare. Hawk hadn't prepared to see a Genesis. The Genesis were the newest species to the Mahi-Kahd, and special in so many ways. They had been intended to be soldiers, but their creators revolted and gave them sapience. They were designed to be soldiers and during the Clygor war they became heroes, now they were just people. They were people. Yet they were genetically constructed to their core. This one lowered her hood.

The Genesis still holding her fingers like a gun poked him again. A light velvet fur covered her olive skin, a colour that Hawk expected to

see on plants but not people. Her face had broad features, and a predator's teeth and eyes. Parts of her body had bone like protrusions. Her whiskers twitched nervously, and thick tail gently tapped the ground. Like all her kind she had been designed to be athletically gifted. Hawk couldn't have stopped staring if she had been a 'normal' Genesis, but she had something no one ever had in this day and age. She stood on thin cybernetic legs. Hawk caught himself and remembered his mother reminding him as he left his home for the first time. 'Be polite'.

"I'm sorry. I'm... this is... I'm a bit out of it seeing the starship! I never really thought I'd get this far. I'm Hawk, where are you from?" Hawk looked into two big staring orange eyes.

"Karst, I mean I know it's not exactly frontier, but..." She gestured to her clothes and Hawk's and then to everyone else. Their clothes were functional and little else. Everyone else had fashions. "I think we might have a bit more in common. Colonist?"

"So, no we come before colonists. My parents are working on Hibernia, we're terraformers. I think that might be why I won. Though maybe they just thought it'd look good to have me for the picture." Hawk clicked his tongue.

"Is it possible.... maybe that... we might be actually interesting? I'm Lozen. I think I'm here to represent the genetically engineered

cyborgs. Small group.” Lozen shrugged. “Who cares, it’s an adventure. Hawk, what’s your thing?”

“Thing?”

“Everyone here is here because we want to see The Gaia Starship, but you know she...” Lozen pointed to a fashionable human with a gaggle of new friends. “... Is here for the prestige. He.” Lozen pointed to the Wohulain. “Is here to see the engineering. I’m here to not be at home. You?”

“The ecosystem.” Hawk surprised himself with how quickly he answered. “In terraforming we usually transplant ecosystems. Here are some whole new eco-systems built from scratch!”

“Excited to see some of Earth’s animals?” Lozen raised an eyebrow.

“Like everyone else. I mean who doesn’t want to see an elephant! Heard they used to be in every major city on Earth once.” Hawk grinned widely.

“Strap in. Top is going to become bottom very soon.” Airgid’s voice rang out.

The shuttle became a tempest of activity. Hawk ran to a seat next to Lozen. His parents always said you only need one good friend, and

he wasn't missing the chance to have one. Hawk fumbled with his buckles, and he couldn't get it right. His anxiety knew everyone's eyes were on him, even if his eyes saw everyone focused on their own buckles. A hand pushed him against the seat. Airgid buckled him in with the other hand. After a nod they inspected everyone else's buckles in turn.

"Ranger Airgid, we're missing the docking port!" A sallow skinned teen pointed out for Ranger Airgid.

"I see you've studied the schematics. If my comrades in arms had done the same my eyes would still match! You all won an adventure; you're getting an adventure! We'll be docking by a port no one else will ever dock by if things are going right! Now you haven't had lunch yet. Here's why."

The shuttle suddenly shifted direction as docking arms before grabbed it before accelerating the shuttle along a tunnel. A violent clanking shook their shuttle as the Gaia Starship secured the vehicle and pulled it forward. Everyone strapped found themselves slowly turned upside down through the unexpected thrill ride where time got lost and gravity missed the deadline.

Airgid steadily moved their feet from the floor to the ceiling with a relaxed but practiced series of steps, navigating the sudden shift in

gravity easily. Hawk just about kept his stomach down. Everyone who wasn't gripping the straps of their seats held their hands between their knees. The ship glided quietly. Airgid stood up on the ceiling and waited.

"Back during training to retake Unity Station only half of us kept our lunch down on that maneuverer. You've done wonderfully!" Airgid said before humming for a minute. A series of loud mechanical noises heralded their arrival. "Come on. Your luggage awaits!" Airgid looked down at the ceiling as the docking porthole opened, Airgid jumped took a step and fell through.

Lozen undid her belt but held herself upside down with one hand and her tail so she could undo Hawk's buckle. Hawk held himself in place for a moment before taking Lozen's hand so they both carefully reorientate themselves. Everyone else had been waiting for the seats to turn around for them but that wasn't happening.

Lozen wondered if she might have been a bit too fast to help Hawk from his confused reaction and tried to remind herself that she wasn't back at home with the wounded and elderly. Everyone on the shuttle had the youth and limb to be able to help themselves. Lozen gracefully dropped down onto her metal legs like a gymnast and stretched on the shuttle's new floor.

Hawk knew that he would not land with Lozen's grace, he stumbled and steadied himself as he fell towards and then through the porthole. His body flushed, as he imagined everyone else looking at him as he struggled to find his feet while he made his way through the porthole and onto the ground. He fell on his knees as he tripped twice on his feet. His hand grasped against the wet soil before feeling a strong smooth grip pull on his shoulder pull him up onto his feet and away from the porthole.

"You get points for going first." Airgid looked him up and down for a moment. "You remind me of my brother. Come on, You'll feel better watching everyone else struggle." Airgid smiled.

Hawk noticed Airgid's snout ruffle in slight disappointment as they waited for anyone to come through, then Lozen flung her metal legs through the porthole and landed stumbling. She shook her body for a moment and adjusted to the soft dirt. It wasn't until seeing her stand straight and look around that Hawk noticed where they were.

Forests were not new or strange. Frozen monochrome trees, endless snow, and more forests where the place Hawk grew up in. This forest shone with golden green and tints of fiery yellow that shifted and glittered as the light danced. Above creatures long dead sang. Once extinct insects hummed. Above everything there an endless sky teamed

with life. The world felt as real as any Hawk had been on. The air even felt heavy with dew. Lozen stood arms slightly spread, smiling. Hawk ducked nearer to a tree to stay on the fringe.

“Come on! It’s a porthole. Half of you are from Unity Station. None of you sneak into the maintenance tunnels?” Airgid helped more of the other passengers down from the porthole. They sent them on their way with a pat on the back. Airgid carried on this way with each student until a black skinned human dropped down onto the soil and gestured Airgid away confidently.

“I don’t need to show off knowing the tunnels of Unity. Everyone knows Khoudia knows Unity station.” Khoudia straightened her outfit being the fashionable human Lozen had pointed out. Airgid shooed the fashionista away for a moment, but the fashionista stayed and gathered her friends together before leaving Airgid to help the rest of the guests.

“Not much rain on Karst?” Hawk asked Lozen as she basked in the slight misty rain.

“There used to be a long time ago, but we only get rain out of a hose now.” Lozen opened her eyes and stood military straight. “Though I guess this is just rain from a fancy hose really.”

“We got snow. It’s cold but at least it’s not wet, until you go indoors.” Hawk wiped his eyebrows. “I’ve never heard a forest be so loud. My parents spent years trying to get any fauna to take to the forests. We only got the muck rakers to take last year.”

“It’s quiet. You’ve never been to a city. This is peace and quiet.” Lozen held her hands up enjoying the peace for a moment before being loudly shaken out of the calm by some squawking and clapping noise in the far distance that reverberated through the forest.

“Okay, short walk to camp and you all get that branded gear you’ll be showing off for the next few years in university. Then we have a very relaxed trek with a few places to see something special, and we’ll get you into the starship and your quarters. I need three things. One; find a buddy. Hold hands, hold tails. I don’t care, stay close. Two; follow me and the path. We made it to be followed. Three; Do not touch anything, throw anything, or for life’s sake don’t eat anything. Buddy up.” Airgid jumped to pull the porthole shut and seal it by sliding a rock panel. No one who didn’t know it would suspect the overhanging stone hid a shuttle dock.

“Hawk, would you mind if I...” Lozen gestured to a large group of other students.

“Yeah... no... that’s okay! You can buddy with someone...”

“...partner with you Hawk.” Lozen rubbed her snout. “Partner with you. You’re literally the only person I’ve talked to so far. Come on man, I know as many people here as you.” Lozen scratched at her braided hair aggressively. “Do you know where we are?”

“...” Hawk took a moment to recover from self-inflicted emotional whiplash. The trees were tall and bulbous with short branches full of leaves. The chirping insects now sounded more like small furry animals, and the sounds were louder and more distant than they sounded.

“Haytae?”

“Haytae wasn’t destroyed, I thought we’d be on Earth. One of the famous ones.” Lozen scrunched her face up. “I really wanted to see a deer. Something with mad antlers or horns.”

“Haytae wasn’t destroyed, but its southern forests were wiped out in the war. This is a recreation from the Haytae genetic vault that has been kept travelling far from Haytae for fifteen centuries.” The fashionable Khoudia spoke. “I thought you’d know that, considering.” The human gestured to Lozen in general. Lozen’s fuzzy fur rose for a moment.

“Khoudia Lux is correct.” Airgid began to wave to everyone to follow, an incredibly tall Diarmpf stood near to Airgid. Hawk assumed they had been left out of the buddy process one way or another. “We

thought of bringing you to Earth, but while it's famous, Haytae is a recent example of what this starship is for. So recent, this starship was being constructed long before the Clygor war devastated the planet." Airgid stopped for a moment. Hawk noticed Airgid's dark coloured limbs clashed harshly with their bright scales. "I actually fought in these forests, or what these forests were based on. I hate them so much!" Airgid turned with a smile, tongue between her teeth, while walking backwards.

"You all know what this starship is for. Preserving fauna, flora, fungi, and anything that doesn't have a natural place. None of you really know why." Airgid's feathered crest rose as they turned, and their voice became grim. "During the war I hated these forests. There were, and I guess now are, small furry things stealing food, there's massive insects whose chitinous carapace means you must...well kill them if they don't like you. Colossal birds who will ruin your camp. This forest is part of what made the Oohaytae, and it's part of what makes all of us now." Airgid stopped talking for a while, and folk whispered and talked. Lozen and Hawk walked close. Airgid led them to a cliff.

It a place preserved in time. The cliff dropped into a deep and dark nothing. Into the caverns that made up the interior of the planet of Haytae. When night would come the fungus lining the caves would glow.

The landscape stretched on so dense that the horizon disappeared; lost to the trees and beasts. Mountains, caves, and forests picked the end of the landscape where they happened to be. Great multi limbed beasts pruned the branches of trees grazing before they gently fell back into the cave below.

“This was a vacation spot for people just thirty years ago. An awful place to fight in, but a worse place to lose.” Airgid pointed to a massive cavern riddled mountain in the distance. “That mountain was where we thought we’d stopped the Clygor war-machine Horgar. Two years later this island was nothing but ash. I hated everything about this forest. Still though, I am proud to have fought under Admiral Napoleon to reclaim these ashes. Much prouder to rebuild this place here though. I hate it, but for many folks this recreation is a tribute to the most precious place in their lives.” Airgid stood up and pointed behind them. “I hope you remember it. Anyway, your packs are over the ridge.”

Everyone slowly went past Airgid and picked up their pack. Hawk looked back at Airgid who stared at the mountain with an expression he’d never seen anyone wear. Airgid stared at the mountain like it might move and come to find them in the dark of the night. The reality of the mountain fell away around it the longer Airgid stared. Then Airgid’s head

snapped to the students, and their hands gestured to everyone to move on. Hawk had barely looked into his pack at all.

“This starship, this place, is a memory of things that died and failed. Of life that died and failed. Species that survived all the trials of survival and failed because our wars destroyed them. We will get to Earth, but everything around you is just as dead. We brought it back because all life is precious. That’s what this starship is for.”

“What about genetic engineering?” A quiet voice asked.

“That’s the left primary fin of our starship. Many societies created a lot of new life with good and evil intentions, but this project decided they too should be preserved.” Airgid looked at Lozen and no one noticed it more than Lozen and Hawk did.

For a moment Lozen felt every single eye in the forest looking at her, but Lozen planted her cybernetic legs and looked behind herself at nothing in particular. Airgid walked past Lozen and continued to speak.

“We have more duty to all the life we have created than the life we destroyed. Anyway, we have a long walk ahead, and Amino Datum will tell me to the second how much I am late by, so we must walk! Come on!” Airgid jumped forward and half ran to get everyone moving.

Hawk wanted to follow, and his legs nearly left without him, but Lozen didn't move at all. Her knuckles kept running against her thumbs, her eyes scrunched and looking down. Hawk didn't know what to do because he had committed himself to being a friend full well knowing he did not have the usual expertise. Hawk picked up Lozen's half open pack. An eternity passed while he held the pack and watched everyone else move further and further away. They were being left behind, then finally Lozen snatched the pack from Hawk and jogged to catch up to everyone else. Hawk had to run. He cursed his short legs.

For a time Hawk managed to keep jogging simply encouraged by the breeze and Lozen's swift speed, but being human Hawk's and unathletic his feet started to protest. As Hawk caught his breath, he found it impossible to keep in mind that the entire forest existed only because of machinery. The forests felt like they had always been there. The soil stuck to his shoes and leaves followed. Some of the bulbous branched trees rose high and dominated their hill. Others were small and had branches reaching out to the sun. Clouds drifted high above. Hawk really felt that if habitats like this were possible, terraforming was a waste of time.

Creatures were here and there among the trees. The largest six legged and two armed grazers could be seen briefly, but they

disappeared into the trees in moments. The smallest crab-like tree eaters were almost invisible, but their sounds were constant and filled the air. Bulbous hovering creatures were buffeted by the air and drank sap from the trees they landed on. Leaves were rustled by flat creatures disguised as the four-foot-long leaves they took and digested to glue their nests. A shout cut through the air and called attention to nature's reality; 'That is not right!'

Hawk first noticed Airgid's shoulders fall as they walked back to the crowd of guests. The circle of guests moved back and forth from the sight with sickened groans. On a rock a squat creature struggled with legs sprawled out twitching as it died. A furry creature sat upon it biting into it and cracking its limbs open. The furred thing had small hands tearing apart the shell and tearing at chunks of flesh. Even among the cries of students the sharp squeal rang out from the still living creature. Hawk wanted to do something. The time to help had long passed.

"Life is cruel." Airgid pushed through the crowd. "You should watch. This starship preserves nature. Nature is often a cruel and brutal thing. Universe doesn't care if an asteroid hurtles through space or destroys a civilization." Airgid stared at the gruesome scene. "That little monster were so common we used to kick the nasty things into the horizon. It felt a lot easier to do before the species evaporated in a day

of bombardment. All life is precious, but rarely beautiful.” Airgid walked close to the grim scene squatting down to get a closer look. “We’re twenty minutes from our camp site.” Airgid walked away waving at everyone to follow.

“I walked in on my guardians having sex once.” Lozen spoke up. “This is so much worse. I’d cheer my guardians on if the other option was seeing that.” Lozen got a wincing laugh from the crowd before everyone started walking away. Lozen perked up and waited for a moment as everyone walked on, she shook herself out and jogged on the spot for a moment before smiling.

“Karst doesn’t have wildlife, right?” Hawk asked.

“Yeah, it’s pretty much just us. Someone had a goat in our barracks. One from Earth. Must have been part of a research program and escaped. Karst is such a weird place. Zoos, labs, and rocks. Can’t be much different where you’re from though?”

“11-F-T-Z has more zoos, labs and snow.”

“11-F-T-Z? That’s... that is a name. Do they keep the official naming for the colonists?” Lozen picked up and pocketed a rock.

“My parents always say we’re just hanging the drapes, but we call it Hibernia. Well Hibernia 32 to be accurate. Some of the other families

are in it for the long haul, but I'm like generation twenty of terraformers. We go to university for a few years and go from barely survivable rock to barely survivable rock. Only reason I heard about this contest was we had a school trip visit for a week."

"Well, that sounds... differently grim than Karst." Lozen climbed up a rock face, and held a hand down for Hawk, who pulled himself up. Lozen threw her hands up and shrugged.

The thick grass tangled around itself making an easy climb up the rocks. Almost no one had prepared for the climb, and Airgid moved back and forth helping students up the path constantly. Insectoid Oohaytae simply flew to the top ahead of everyone. Lozen saluted Hawk before racing ahead leaving everyone behind. Her artificial legs slowed her down, but not much. She had practice moving across the all-rock landscape of Karst. Hawk had training for trekking through snow in environmental gear. It wasn't ideal training for going up a rocky mound in increasing humidity. Hawk desperately hoped every other human sweat as much as he did in this heat.

Airgid stood at the top of the rocky outcrop on the plateau, pulling students up. Hawk wasn't doing badly, but his clothing had conspired with his sweat to weigh him down. Hawk couldn't help but let everyone else get ahead of him. Lozen gave a wave from behind Airgid. The

closer Hawk got to the top the closer he came to taking his shirt off, which Hawk did easily conceive of doing; removing clothes was literally an easy way to die in the dark and freezing cold he came from. So Hawk suffered a slow walk. After everyone had gone ahead of Hawk, he got to the rock plateau Hawk like everyone else put his hand up to Airgid to be pulled up. Airgid walked away gesturing for Hawk to follow.

Hawk grasped at some of the thin grass, enough to pull himself up and throw his arm on to the rock. He briefly saw everyone sitting, except for Lozen and Airgid. Hawk scraped his arm as he lost his grip. Hawk grit his teeth and tensed. He could hear Airgid telling everyone to take a moment. His fingers found a small groove in the rock, Hawk dug his fingers into the groove. He breathed out and pulled himself closer to the ledge and threw his leg up onto the plateau. In a moment Hawk through himself onto the warm rock. A few people sitting down gave an unenthusiastic cheer. Lozen looked down at Hawk.

“Get up by yourself?” Lozen sat down next to Hawk. “Airgid gave me a hand up. I made it just behind those who could fly.”

“I got here didn’t I.” Hawk couldn’t summon the energy to emote anger.

“Could have been easier if you took my hand at the start.” Lozen pointed to where the treeline met the sky. “A lot of my folk were on Haytae and told me about this. Look at the tree line.”

A faint glow came from just below the tree line. Airgid waved everyone away from the centre of the plateau right to the edge. The last of the first artificial star’s light began to fade leaving a twilight from the equally fake second brown dwarf star hiding just enough to keep true night away. The forest lit up. The trees slowly began to glow a faint yellow-green. From below the trees yellow lights began to swarm through the forests. Unlike the cold and still beauty of the sunsets of Hawk’s home, this sunset had warmth and a busy sky illuminated by scattered moons.

All but the most jaded stood, looked out and appreciated the sight. Lozen pulled Hawk up by his shirt as she stood up. The skies were beautiful. The forest filled with a glow unlike anything like Hawk had heard before. The crude reality barely hid the easy twist of the culture. The noise grew and receded like a wave of sound. He noticed Lozen’s ears twitch. Then in the distant Hawk saw a small place of dark and quiet. A quiet you could listen to and a darkness you could see. A creature of a great weight moved throughout the forest eating the lights. The smaller creatures of the forest erupted as a surreal riot of sound and

colour unlike anything Hawk had ever seen in the long quiet nights of home.

“Life is cruel and unfair.” Airgid spoke. “There is a beauty here, and a price. All those points of yellow are a small little thing asking to die so it’s eggs can be spread through the forest. All those glowing leaves are looking to have their fruits eaten by those yellow lights so they can be spread through the forest.” Airgid sat down. “There are other groups of guests. None of them are seeing this, they’re in other orbs. This, this is nature. We preserved this. It is horror and beauty.” Airgid looked out into the forest and their eyes were alight with nature's dance of death. “We will get you comfy soon. Take it in”

Hawk looked at Airgid instead of the sky. Airgid should have looked like a strong Wohulain, but Airgid had been clearly marked by war and damage. Something had happened to them; their eyes and manic smile were rebuilt and unnatural. Airgid’s left leg had rough scales, their left arm looked burnt black, the opposite of their limbs were playfully mottled yellow to blue. Airgid’s crest had a mix of turquoise and dark brown feathers and where those colours and differences met their skin knit together strangely. There were plenty of veterans in the media with cloned limbs and even the rare adult cyborg, despite that Airgid still

seemed like a rare creature. Hawk had to assume something happened in the war. Airgid looked at Hawk.

“Okay, if we’ve all taken in the sights enough.” Airgid nodded at Hawk before walking to the centre of the plateau and turned a rock over with their foot. The fake rock had hidden a pad that scanned the clawed foot. ‘Why use a good trick only once?’ Hawk thought. Airgid jogged away from the centre of the plateau. The middle of the plateau sank below and moved slid underneath the rest. A metal shed began to rise from the centre of the plateau. “Line up. Everyone goes in the shed, stop. Wait for the scan to be done. Four to a tent. Figure it out fast, the thunder is coming.”

It took a moment. Everyone looked to the sky. The clouds quietly drifted above. Then. The cracking sounds rumbled throughout the forest in long rolling bursts. The cracking sounds died down for a moment as the sky became suddenly illuminated by a web of lightning.

The group stood looking around, expecting Airgid to do something more. Airgid did act. Airgid sat deliberately and looked at them. The thunder boomed and lightning wracked the sky. In the sky Lozen saw and pointed out some winged shapes in the sky. They were far in the distance so they could only imagine the actual size of the small shapes.

In the twilight cast by the shed's lights Hawk moved first and a line formed behind him.

Hawk stepped into the metal shed, a brief gentle warning sound for him to wait until the scan completed. A gentle blue light that came with a strange static feeling and a mild sonic pulse. A sound signalled go. He grabbed what he assumed to be a tent and a case next to it. Hawk would have liked to have carried both out with ease but had to leave the case. When Lozen stepped out with the heavy case in one hand they went to the broadest leafed tree on the plateau and set it down. Lozen opened up the case. She recognized everything in the case. Nothing strange to her, basic tent. She twisted a lamp that lit up the area and prepared to help Hawk erect the tent. Lozen didn't show her shock when she realised Hawk didn't need any help erecting a tent.

Hawk hadn't seen this type of tent, but Hawk had spent a life being taught that exposure would kill you fast. The rain came more aggressively than the snow of home, but it didn't steal the heat from your bones as fast. Hawk laid the tent down flat and took a moment to think about the heavy metal shapes in the pack. There were no pegs, and even if there had been pegs were there was no way to hammer them into the ground. Hawk remembered a supply trip with his parents on a zero-gravity ship. These were a different shape but...He placed the

magnet lock over one of the tent's struts and found the button. Its light illuminated nothing with its light. The heavy magnet locked onto the strut fixing it in place.

Lozen copied Hawk, they set down the other seven magnets near to where they needed them and threaded the struts through the tent. The rain picked up. Hawk found his brow constantly drowned in water while he talked himself through the steps. Lozen's fuzzed skin captured and held the water. Lozen went back to the case as Hawk magnetised the struts to the ground, returning with a poncho and throwing it over Hawk who pointed to the other unmoored strut. Lozen sighed, for herself. When Lozen went to the strut, she watched him put on the rain poncho.

Hawk looked up. Lozen saluted as she secured the last post. The rain continued to grow in ferocity. Lozen had been right to get the poncho. Looking out on the plateaus other groups had figured out the tent situation but not as fast. Airgid had gotten up and begun searching through the shed to help the beetle-like Oohaytae put on some type of helmet. Hawk looked around. Amongst all the groups stood the tall Diarmpf, hair matted in rain, horns on its head dripping with water, their broad muzzle twitched, and mouth opened as if they were trying to talk themselves through what to do. Hawk did that, he walked over.

“Come on, we’ve got space.” Hawk yelled offering a hand, looking up. The Diarmpf looked to be shaken out of their frozen panic for a moment. Hawk took their hand and gently shoved them towards Lozen who struggled with the last part of the tent. Together as a trio they got the tent up. The Diarmpf and Lozen lifted the tent so Hawk as the shortest could get the tents core inside and pop the tent up to full height. They all fled inside with Lozen pulling in the case behind her.

“Got it.” Lozen pulled up a panel in the tents core and pulled out a heating unit from its lower level. The Diarmpf went so close to it they expected to smell burning fur. “Well, our tour guide is a lunatic. That’s good to know. Howdy, I’m Lozen, the human is Hawk.” Lozen gave a salute.

“Hello, I am Teegle. Thank you.” The Diarmpf whispered looking to the side. Lozen looked through the case and handed them a towel.

“I’m going to check if anyone else needs help.” Hawk got up and left the tent. Lozen almost got up. Lozen took a minute or two to check that Teegle was okay, before looking out of the tent to the plateau. Hawk dragged a case out of the shed and towards another group who almost had their tent set up but hadn’t got the case containing the tent core. Airgid helped one group set up their tent by doing most of the work while they dripped. Lozen thought about running out to help. Lozen looked

around deciding where to go when a shadow passed above and one of a dozen eyes met hers.

“BIRD” Lozen roared.

If Lozen’s voice hadn’t brought every eye up to the sky, the screech did. It landed upon the shed clinging to it with short back legs, its long wings flung out three times knocking over unsecured tents and people before it pulled its wings in, the claws on the second of three joints tore at the ground. Its head and neck were longer than its body, its multiple eyes shone green. The creature slung its long neck and colossal beaked head around the camp until it fixed onto Hawk. The great bird creature crawled away from the shed as Hawk turned around. Lozen took off running

## THE CLIMB

Hawk turned to see a red beak with many strange glowing eyes turning to focus on him. It breathed in, its gullet rattling as it tasted the air. Feathery antennae extended from the back of its head tasting the air to choose its prey. The creature rose, three times the size of anyone in the camp, its head and neck made up half of its body. Hawk had never felt like prey before. Trees had been the largest lifeforms Hawk had been close to, they were much less threatening. The flying predator lowered its head so its many eyes could turn in their socket's half focusing on Hawk, half watching the rest of the camp. Hawk didn't freeze. His legs scrambled to get him away. He never saw how close or far he came from death. He felt the creature's head stab through the air.

He heard the beak screech and clack and felt the clap of air as its gullet rattled.

Lozen slowed as they were steps away from becoming the new target of the bird's hunger. Seeing Hawk duck behind a large boulder Lozen had a moment of clarity. Punching the colossal bird may not be a sufficient plan. She had no idea what it was, or how to get rid of it. Lozen tried to turn around but slipped. Her metal knee hit the stone hard, sending a riot of pain from her thigh to her eyes. Lozen dropped and rolled. She looked up at the whirling uncaring eyes. She could roll out of the way. Maybe twice. The great head pulled back preparing to take her.

There light from the shed suddenly shifted from a faint blue to a pulsating pink-to-red. Lozen heard a faint whine. The creature's long neck shook and threw its head around, it cracked the tree over their tent. Airgid walked carefully over towards Hawk and Lozen. The creature walked awkwardly from the plateau on its winged fore limbs stumbling and scrambling. Its feet barely missed crushing Hawk and Lozen. Everyone who had been frozen with fear started to flood out of their tents to watch the creature awkwardly escape. It ran to the edge of the Plateau and dived off, disappearing for a moment before taking flight. Airgid went and pulled Hawk out from behind the boulder.

“Is everyone okay?” Airgid waited a moment to hear everyone shakily confirm they were okay. “Karek is the mask holding up?” Airgid walked over to the insectoid Oohaytae. Karek clung to the floor with his six limbs, and he looked stunned. Usually his beaked face sported one compound eye surrounded by a number of ocular eyes, however the mask he had to wear made Karek look like a machine. He gave four thumbs up to Airgid.

“There’s no reason to worry, Amino Datum is able to run the safety systems down to the nano second. I am certain the Nochtzotyl would have been neutralized if there was an actual danger to anyone.” Airgid helped Lozen up. “Hawk, Lozen, I’m sorry. I had to get Karek’s mask on first. The basic security is effective, but not manageable for Oohaytae senses. It’s unusual for the Lancefishers to be active this early. I thought we had more time.”

“Fine.” Lozen pulled her hand away. Airgid checked Hawk’s hands before taking out two sprays from their waistcoat. A disinfectant and protein bandage. Hawk limped towards the tent. Airgid almost followed, but Hawk waved them off. Airgid shoved the sprays into his pocket.

There were curtains of stress in the air, and the gossip barely made it through. Even when everyone stayed in their tents Tension escaped the tents and into the air. The rain drummed loudly against the

tents. Hawk got into his sleeping bag as soon as possible. His teeth were grinding against each other, and it took a lot for him to hide that his body shook from the adrenaline and the cold. Not anxiety. He didn't sleep well. At least he could blame that on sleeping on hard ground with two strangers. Lozen sat reattaching their legs, and Teegle laid on the ground as if they were dead, pretending to be unconscious. Hawk wondered what type of person pretended to be asleep. Hawk grumpily thought of being curled up asleep until it happened.

Lozen sat up and meditated. More accurately, Lozen sat up and wished she could meditate. She would have been able to escape without her cybernetic legs. She would have been as perfect as intended. Lozen was not as intended. Lozen cherished her cybernetic legs as a big part of who she was. She could have changed them any time and been exactly who she was designed to be, but by keeping them she got to be something else. Increased risk of death in exchange for a measure of freedom. Lozen took her hands and forced them to struggle to meet and then lowered them into her lap, crushing down her anxious feelings. Lozen lay down and smiled. Today she managed to not die to an extinct bird and make a friend who wasn't from her species or a carer at a veterans' facility.

Teegle trembled wrapped up in her sleeping bag. They hid their head inside the bag. Tomorrow they will talk. They would make one joke. They would say one thing interesting. Hawk and Lozen were nice. They could be friends. No one knew who Teegle had been here. This trip gave Teegle a clean slate. Teegle missed her siblings. It had only been a day. Teegle wondered if their family were right that this trip was too much for Teegle so soon.

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There were strange bluish green things like parachutes drifting on the air current, the strange paragliders distracted Lozen from meditating. Lozen heard the rustling of trees and sleeping bags. She looked down and locked eyes with Airgid. Lozen kept her face still. She had years of practice not reacting. She didn't frown or smile. She waited. Airgid paid little attention and stretched their body out and shook their feathered crest before walking over to Lozen and sitting down next to her.

"I am sorry. I didn't have Karek's mask secure, so I didn't put on the deterrent. I didn't think there would be Nochtzotyl active so early, and we always have Amino's defence bots active, so we prioritize comfort, because we know we are safe." Airgid gave Lozen a curt nod and got up.

"So, what do Hawk and I get to keep quiet?" Lozen got up and towered above Airgid, who slowly smiled.

“You’d get on great with my children.” Airgid laughed with a broad mouth and long tongue out tasting the air. “I am sure that we will find something for you.” Airgid suddenly became serious. “Look, you’re a responsible adult. Keep an eye on Teegle. They seem like a nice kid, but they’re a bundle of nerves. Things get stressful they’ll either lash out or break down.” Airgid walked away and started to rouse the other tents. Lozen held her tongue. It wasn’t long before Hawk got up.

“Not a fan?” Hawk asked, throwing his head towards Airgid. Lozen shut her nostrils at the stench of damp coming off him.

“Nah, Airgid is fantastic. I’m a big fan being attacked by giant birds. You should change your clothes and get a new sleeping bag.” Lozen simmered.

“I’ll get right on that. I’m getting some sarcasm. Anyway, we’re fine! Wildlife is bigger here but it’s not my first time having something wanting to take a bite. What are we here for except adventure?” Hawk recoiled after smelling his shirt.

“No one writes about adventures where you get eaten the first day, but they do happen.” Lozen shrugged. “I was expecting more of a campfire and a sing song.”

“I get it. I don’t think I’ve seen so many eyes at once. I ran away, what were you doing running at it? It looked like you were going to punch it. You’re not that big...” Hawk trailed off looking at Lozen’s tensile wire muscles.

“I can punch anything in this campsite. Usually.” Lozen playfully punched Hawk in the shoulder, Hawk punched back with a lot to prove. Hawk hit one of Lozen’s bone spurs and felt every millimetre of it on his knuckle. Hawk turned round and downplayed the pain but made note of the jutting bone above Lozen’s elbow.

Teegle crawled out of the tent. Teegle stood seven foot tall, and two-and-a-half foot wide. Diarmpf came in a broad variety. Mottled fur covered Teegle like a blanket covered a blanket. Teegle’s horns were long and their snout was embarrassingly long. Teegle looked like the type of person you’d cross the road to avoid, but their eyes were deep purple pools of worry you could drown in.

“Good morning.” Teegle said in a deep whisper.

“Hey.” Hawk said, waiting for Lozen to say something that never came. “I’m Hawk, I’m from a planet no one has heard of, I got in on an essay. This is Lozen. She’s from Karst obviously. Where are you from?”

“I’m from Teebeedee. I like to make drawings of what fossils looked like when alive, but I did something else for a project.” Teegle thought that explained who they were enough. At least it was more words than had been said yesterday. Things were quiet for a moment and adrenaline began to flood Teegle’s mind. “I like your clothes, they look a lot like the ones designed by Marion Tota in the early days of the colony on Teebeedee, which is very interesting if you read into how they came up with the designs since they lacked cloth, so Marion used what the colony had available which was mainly human jumpsuits, It created its own distinct fashion, especially as Teebeedee kind of started the independent colonies, so for a long time wasn’t really part of the Mahi-Kahd at all. Which is interesting because the Diarmpf population...” Teegle took a breath and summoned courage. Making friends was much more challenging when wrestling wasn’t the starting point. “I like your clothes.”

“I didn’t really know my clothes had a history; we’ve always just worn what works” Hawk looked at his clothes for a moment. “That’s amazing though. So, I know Teebeedee was an early Mahi-Kahd colony but that’s about it!”

“Most things are amazing when you look into them.” Teegle nodded. They sat and began drying their fur properly and combing a powder into their fur. Hawk ducked into the tent to change in privacy before stuffing the wet clothes in a sealed bag.

The morning had more chattering than excitement, the creature had made the danger more real and people were more interested in knowing each other in case they needed sympathy. People started to share the things they cared about. The Mahi-Kahd size meant it was impossible for everyone to share a common culture. Universally popular music, art, film, or literature were rare. Some folks were coming from places where minimalism was the current trend, few instruments in music, very slice of life entertainment. Stuff that focused on basic things people had to deal with like living on a strange planet, chromosomal therapies, maintaining sustainable farming, wondering when family might come home on a shuttle. Others were deep into complex music that realistically only Oohaytae could fully appreciate, and crazy complex special effects recreating huge parts of history, and stories that elevated the drama of live into mega-drama. Then there were the oddballs like Lozen who enjoyed stuff from well over a millennia ago and made a lot of arguments that everything everyone liked had already been done better.

Lozen did have a few moments when she thought she should pull back on her arguments. Lozen knew that she could be seen to aggressive and intimidating to most who weren't comfortable arguing to the bone, but it didn't stop Lozen. Lozen knew how arrogant and

condescending they came across as, but Lozen was right, and they all had to listen to a lot of the classics. I mean if you wanted human music you had to listen to the ancient stuff from just after Earth was shattered. The real raw stuff of post-apocalypse punk or revenge metal.

“We should be getting ready to hike.” The fashionable Khoudia stood up after twenty standard minutes of the argument and calmly left. Lozen slowly began to find herself alone at the table, the last to leave. By the time Airgid returned they found themselves with little to say as everyone began packing. Lozen felt warm, and the hair on her shoulders raised in a mix of embarrassment and anger that she was unintentionally following another guest’s orders. Lozen distracted herself by making Teegle stand still while Lozen altered the straps on her pack, so it fit properly.

“You sure you can carry that?” Lozen sharply asked Hawk.

“I wouldn’t be carrying it if I couldn’t.” Hawk walked toward Airgid where everyone had congregated. Hawk had limited experience of large groups of any people, but it clearly groups of people were starting to form. Hawk listened and learned a little. The fashionable Human from Unity Station was Khoudia Lux, and they were not like Hawk.

Khoudia had clearly established she was a leader, but of a particular group. They were all clearly from core worlds or wanted to be.

Unity station had a current trend in fashion for colourful clothes that often mimicked the coloration of female Wohulain on the core worlds, as well as slightly ironic fondness for modest gold jewellery. Hawk assumed (because he had read articles saying so) that this trend started because of a show set during the remigration period of the ancient Wohulain. In any case, Khoudia wore it well with her black skin. She then added to that immediate attention fashion brought by being quite calm and reserved. Khoudia just seemed like she had things figured out. A lot of people gravitated to her. Especially if they wanted to be close to the type of dignified broad-minded type of person Khoudia represented herself as.

Then there was a leaderless mass of adventurers. They were all better prepared than Khoudia's followers. They had brought practical things in their pockets. They were loud, they joked, they were only kept from running off by the fact Airgid impressed them and they wanted to be like Airgid. They didn't have a clear leader, but there one human man stood out that Hawk assumed lead the group. He had a broad laughing face, and beautiful brown eyes, perfect skin, and clearly took exercise very seriously. Hawk didn't have to listen hard to hear his name, Dara. Hawk heard his name while Dara half-jokingly wrestled with a tall and

short furred Diarmpf and when Dara won everyone cheered his name.

Dara helped up his opponent and gave them a hug.

The second loudest group simply had no leader. They were an eclectic group, in clothes, and interests. Something of a group of strange people from strange places, but not outsiders. They were by far the most diverse of species, and most diverse of each species varieties. Hawk got the impression that they weren't really taking any of this seriously and looked to Airgid for guidance who stared back with an annoyed expression.

They were just the big groups. There were plenty of small clusters of twos, threes, and fours. When Lozen and Teegle stepped to Hawks' side, he felt glad that he had his little strange trio. Hawk felt they were the most interesting. Though Lozen being a genetically engineered cyborg did most of the work of making them interesting. The only one of the Genesis species in the entire contest, the only cyborg too, teamed with the shortest guy from the furthest world, and the quietest and largest Diarmpf anyone had ever seen. They all added a bit.

“Okay, we are on a long trek today. We will take many stops as there is plenty worth seeing on the way. It's a long day night cycle, so we are going to trek to a cave system to enter the actual Starship itself. Please do not get too loud when I say the next sentence. We will be

meeting Amino Datum there.” Airgid breathed in and waited for the chatter to die down, much like a parent who had said to their children that they were going to the toy store.

Hawk and Lozen both noticed Teegle take two eager steps forward at the mention of Amino Datum. They shared a side glance, both knowing what their aim for the day would be. Teegle feet were tapping the ground, almost jumping up and down ready to go. Hawk had a moment of slight panic realising he had to pull on all his limited climbing experience to not be the embarrassingly slow member of their trio.

“Okay, settle down. Take a moment, check your boots and packs fit well. Grab some more water from the tap and follow. It’s a fairly relaxed hike, and there will not be a repeat of last night, I can guarantee.” Airgid gestured to the tap. So, they began to follow. Khoudia’s group went for the tap, but Dara’s had filled their water bottles early in the morning, so they followed Airgid first.

“Good thing I filled our water bottles while you were talking about music!” Teegle quietly took the lead while Lozen and Hawk checked their water bottles and shared surprised but impressed glances. While Hawk and Lozen both wore the usual boots Hawk had grown up with, Teegle wore open toed sandaled boots that buckled over her digitigrade legs.

The hike started on a broad rock path that led down to an unnaturally well-trod forest path. Hawk couldn't help but ramble about the signs that the path were deliberately designed. The changes were obvious to anyone thinking about natural geography, but most wouldn't have noticed the little signs. Most obviously the path was unnaturally flat with attempts to hide that fact with slightly jagged steps. The path also happened to be wide enough for groups of three or more to walk abreast, which nature typically didn't naturally develop.

Of course, the path had to be the path taken by robots of all types. Though Hawk assumed they had to have a bot who created these strangely curved paths. It had the appearance of nature by someone who never had to live in nature. As the forest was growing thick around them, Hawk stopped noticing all the little oddities. Then when Hawk had almost stopped thinking, Teegle threw out their arms and stopped them both.

"The starship's bots!" Teegle slowly pointed forward with everyone nearby following their hand as it slowly pointed.

A little into the forest there a chrome figure moved quietly. It had been built to be short with a bipedal frame, but with a second pair of hooks that held its round core from a tree. Its sloped head had many unsymmetrical sensing devices. It turned its head towards them and

waved before disappearing into the canopy to continue its mysterious purpose.

Teegle looked at the robot with wide eyes and felt satisfied with the entire trip. Hawk wanted to chase after it, and if his pack wasn't as heavy as he had made it might have gone into the forest looking to see where the bot was going. Lozen shuddered knowing they were being watched. Hawk started to walk forward along the path to go on quickly, but Lozen waved at Hawk to wait until Teegle was ready. They walked on wondering how many bots the forest had. Hawk wanted to keep everyone from thinking too much about that, as were already falling to the back of the line. As they walked Hawk decided to try spark a conversation that wasn't about bots.

“Okay, so I never thought I'd win the contest. I just wanted a chance to go on an adventure before going to a technical college. We've got ice, trees, and microbial ecology laboratories. When I graduate, I'll probably end up back on some other dull planet planting plants and growing germ cultures.”

“That's dumb. You could go work fishing on an ocean planet, or in a zoo, or farming if you want.” Lozen had an elegant way with words. “I was in hospital after my legs were amputated. Their genetic mistake will take a while to be corrected, risky to correct until I grow my first set of

armour. I reckoned being from a genetically engineered species that a video journaling how I adjusted to cybernetic legs would make for a pretty good shot to get away from home. Mission Accomplished.” Lozen shrugged.

“We all saw your videos, no one doubted you’d get a spot.” Hawk mumbled.

“Hey, I thought we met for the first time on the shuttle! That’s not cool pretending you didn’t know Hawk.” Lozen smirked. Hawk shook his head and shrugged. “Teegle?”

“I designed a subroutine for environmental systems to check against the estimated population of various temperature-determined-sex species, to prevent accidental imbalances.” Both Hawk and Lozen stopped and looked at Teegle. “They already had systems of course, but it was a fun challenge to work on, and I think I might have helped streamline some of the code.”

“So, you’re a genius. I know what you’re talking about. That stuff is complicated! If you ever want to visit Hibernia, just ask, you’d fit right in with that work.” Hawk said

“Oh, no. I like working on the code problem. I’m not interested in terraforming. I like complex systems, but ones you can control.” Teegle shook their mane as they spoke.

“Wait, so first what led a Diarmpf looking up temperature determined sex of all things? You guys don’t even have a single sex. Second, are you here for the starship? Not the long-lost environments of planets and forms of life long-lost in their natural environments?” Lozen’s brow furrowed.

“I was curious. Things are always more complicated and interesting the more you learn. I’m here to learn about anything I can! Plus, when you’re drawing from fossils you must learn to spot markers of sex. It gets very complicated past two.” Teegle’s voice almost rose at the end of the sentence, it was a quiet kind of excitement.

“Yeah...I guess you do.” Lozen said. “You ever heard of a band called Na Hiolair? No? Well, you’re going to learn about some things!”

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The trek was both long and relaxed. It had been slow enough that Teegle had time to take a picture of every plant, bug and Starship drone she could on a tiny camera they’d kept in their pocket. Lozen had long run out of steam trying to interest anyone in the various obscure bands from millennia past and had come to find a stick that was ideal for lifting things to reveal bugs Teegle had not seen yet. Hawk had kept his eyes ahead Airgid had stopped but the line kept moving. A pod stood behind

Airgid, they handed out a small pack as people passed. Hawk noticed they all hesitated before going up ahead. Hawk jogged ahead.

A clear ripple of rumour moved back toward them from the front of the trek, and Hawk caught up to it a little behind Dara. Dara, the leader of the clearly more adventurous group of students had fallen behind helping others who were poorly prepared. Dara's broad face was laughing as always, his non-human companions noticed Hawk first. Hawk talked through them to Dara.

"What's Airgid doing up ahead?" Hawk stood as tall as a short man could.

"Oh wow, you're the guy with the bird's name and the bird attack... Hawk, right?" Dara clicked his fingers. Hawk nodded curtly. "I don't think anyone here has ever gotten that close to being baby bird food." Dara threw a casual salute. "Story is we're going spelunking, you know like Airgid, and the soldiers had to back in the war, hide in the caves. Sad for us they've got those repulsors up, but hey good for you... And I guess Karek here." Dara nodded to the Oohaytae in the robotic mask.

"Thanks." It took Hawk a while to find his tongue to get the word out, but not much time to turn and run.

“Oh, hey man wait, if you and that Genesis badass want to join our group we’re going to be helping the less experienced kids down, if you want to help?”

“We’re just keeping Teegle on track.” Hawk blurted, before continuing the jog back. Hawk really hoped that he looked red faced from running and not for any other reason. Lozen and Teegle jogged slightly ahead towards Hawk leaving them in the middle of the back of the line.

“What was wrong? It was only an arm sized burrowing creature Lozen disturbed, they’re only poisonous if they bite. No need to run away.” Teegle bent down and gently put a hand on Hawk’s shoulder examining him.

“I just wanted to know what Airgid is up to.” Hawk caught his breath.

“Feeding us to the great wrym Cruach I assume, so we can fight through its stomachs.” Lozen quite deliberately found and pocketed another particularly fetching rock.

“No, we’re just going for a climb down into a cave.” Hawk rolled his eyes.

“Oh, a climb. Into a cave. Nice and easy. Something we’ve all done. I grew up being told not to go into caves, because that’s where

you die on my home world, plus the veterans of Haytae also told me, that's also where you die. Have you seen my legs, these aren't top of the range synaptic response prosthetics, I feel very little below the knee..."

Lozen pointed to her raised leg.

"It's okay Lozen, my family went spelunking often to gather plants and fungi, and once even into a cave for troglodytes. I'll go ahead so you don't fall." Teegle put their other hand on Lozen's shoulder. "I'm the best in my family, and I have eighteen parents and forty-two siblings." Teegle smiled, sticking their tongue between their teeth.

"...actually, that's quite reassuring... but Hawk goes before me so we can all die together if we slip." Lozen jabbed a finger into Hawk's chest.

"Don't poke me... Drag me to our death, okay. Don't poke me." Hawk pushed Lozen's finger away.

"Hey, Teegle, guess who definitely did not have forty-two siblings growing up. The guy who thinks he's not getting poked!" Lozen drew back a finger, Teegle half-heartedly followed. "Of course, you can easily escape Hawk. Why'd you run all the way up to the tall human with the baggy shorts and big friendly smile?" Lozen's smiled widely and had fierce eyes highlighting her bared fangs. Hawk huffed and stood his ground.

“Poke.” Teegle’s finger gently glanced Hawk’s chest.

“We’re at the back of the group again.” Hawk started walking away from the poking, unsure if he was being bullied or welcomed. It wasn’t long before they came to Airgid. Airgid sat on a rock with her own gear on for the climb. Airgid pointed up into the darkening sky at a triangle flying far away.

“They’re colossal terrors, that’s the literal translation of their name. You’d be a rare human to come face to face with one Hawk.” Airgid’s features were a mix, the thicker scaled and darkened side of their face clearly apologetic, but the colourful and smooth side had the faintest smirk hidden. “I won’t make the same mistake twice.” Airgid stood and jumped from the rock with the last three harnesses in a smooth movement. “We’re going down the ledge, the rest have been guided by the bot, but you can go down with me.” Teegle looked disappointed. Airgid handed out the packs.

Teegle the harness and had it on in moments. Airgid actually looked surprised and confused for a moment, before going to aid Lozen who was holding the straps anxiously. It took a long while to secure the straps and relax Lozen, Airgid took time to explain the process and affix special grips for Lozen’s prosthetic legs, taking off her boots, and

discussing how the grips would better give feedback for the limited sensitivity. Hawk struggled with the oversized straps.

“May I?” Teegle took one of the straps Hawk hand was fumbling with. Hawk released his grip and nodded. Teegle rapidly tightened the straps. “When you affix this grip to the cable it will only move when you squeeze your grip so you can move at your own pace. If you let go, you will stay completely affixed to the cable. If you stop, shout above to others so they know to slow or stop. Are you used to heights?”

“I’ve been on plenty of gliders above the forests at home.” Hawk clenched his fists, he didn’t even like his parents being as close as Teegle was.

“Then you should look down as much as you want! I’ve seen pictures of how beautiful these caves can be!” Teegle gave the straps a last check and looked Hawk in the eyes. Teegle’s eyes were like a warm purple bath. Teegle nodded.

“Hawk...” Airgid turned around from Lozen, who was holding her grip for dear life already. “Good you’re ready. Down in these caves there’s nothing harmful, this is our main way in and out of this environment since we stabilized it.” Airgid looked at Lozen “If you can, take in the view.”

Airgid led the way up to the edge past the tall lanky bots who stood ready at the repulsors around the ledge. The bots were clearly scanning that they were properly attired. Hawk took a step next to Airgid. The cave below shone with life. A rainbow of different plants and fungus giving off light. Insects hovered around, visiting each, pollinating. It was its own separate ecosystem to the forest above. Hawk had never seen life glow so strongly against the dark. Hawk turned around and held out a hand and pulled Lozen to the ledge. Lozen held onto Hawk for dear life.

“Oh. Wow.” Lozen felt herself almost pulled into the lights. Below along the cable the other could be seen descending into the glowing maw. Lozen pulled back sharply.

“Okay, Teegle your up firs...” Airgid started, but the moment the word okay was said Teegle recklessly descending into the cave. From the depths once they stopped, they could barely hear amongst the updraft of the cavernous expanse their voice.

“I’ve read about this plant!”

Airgid waved Hawk up to the cable, Hawk mimicked what Teegle had done, slipping the grip onto the cable, and closing it. It immediately magnetised and would not move without the trigger being squeezed. Hawk looked up and Airgid gave a nod.

“Whenever you're ready.” Airgid gestured for Hawk to go with their sharper female claw. Hawk squeezed the grip and started to walk backwards.

Hawk went over the ledge of the cavern; the rough rock face provided an easy grip for his boots. Walking backwards off the ledge and onto the wall felt extremely strange. There were only a few meters before the tough green plants began to give way to the bioluminescent plants of the deep. Hawk could swear that some of the fungi were moving very very slowly. Hawk wanted to stop and check but he looked up.

Airgid was quickly coming down the cable, coaching a swearing Lozen down the cable. After a few meters Lozen stopped her tail stuck out rigid and straight, and feet planted into the rock. Lozen wasn't frozen, Lozen was taking a moment to forget about how far down they were going. Hawk looked below, carefully turning around Teegle was quite far away, taking a video of the plants and fungi on the camera they had snuck on board. Hawk thought he'd just look at the video rather than stop, Teegle would know better about the wildlife to watch.

“It's not much further Lozen!” Hawk lied before starting to walk backwards at a steady pace. Airgid and Lozen started moving again soon after. The cave astounded Hawk it was full of life, the strange

glowing forest rippled with colour, and the lower down Hawk went the more the strange pollinators were visible.

Small ball things flew in clusters, suddenly extending tongues from the middle of their orb body. Long thin creatures walked on stalk-like legs to the top of their feeding ground, when they let go of the cavern walls they began to slowly glide down, identifying dying plants to feed on revealing glittering eyes on their underside. As Hawk went further down, hoping his feet would hit the bottom soon, he had his earlier question answered.

Hawk passed a swaying fronded plant that moved with the wind currents. It, like most plants, had found its place for better or worse. It picked up moisture, and its small fronds curled around small insects trapping them to feed upon. Then a mushroom ate it. There was a strange yellow pointed thing, it moved on pulsing yellow tubes lying among the plants. It slowly moved along this disgusting biological track sneaking up on its immobile prey, and then it opened along its length and engulfed the fronded plant before it sealed back up taking the plants place.

Hawk froze and watched the whole thing pulse steadily, disgusted at it. It didn't make sense, but he felt bad for the fronded thing. Hawk became entirely focused on the slow scene until he suddenly became

aware of the shadow of Airgid's tail. Hawk gripped the clamp and started walking back down the wall fast.

"Faster is better, we gotta get down fast." Lozen said loudly as a mantra. Hawk started to take a little risk, gripping tight and jumping down meters at a time. Hawk hit the bottom with a rough drop, his harness pulling on his groin and chest. The rush down confused everyone, but Hawk managed to remove the grip from the cable and sit to the side. Airgid feet hit the ground and soon after they helped Lozen down to the ground.

"That was some drop, really took one for your buddy." Dara up a salute as he passed. Hawk swayed from side to side as he stood up holding a hand to his stomach.

Teegle looked Hawk in the eyes demonstrating their hands moving in towards their chest and pushing their hands out with Teegle's breath. Hawk struggled to match Teegle's movements for a moment, but eventually caught his breath... The world came back to normal slowly. Lozen hands scrambled to get out of their harness while Teegle tried to help, but Lozen managed to pull the straps off herself and took a few steps on the floor of the cavern to calm down.

Hawk finally caught his breath and got to his feet. His brain had a blank flash that had him dazed. Looking around he saw Lozen and

Teegle looking to the centre of the cavern. The students were crowded around a figure. Hawk focused.

A single cyclopean eye sat in the Oohaytae beaked head. A cool blue light washed over the world the eye gazed at. Amino Datum stood at Hawk's height with two of its four arms undoing Hawk's harness and two digitigrade legs like those of a bird changing Amino's height to match Hawk's. Its body was a marvel of nanomachinery masterpiece encased in ornate and beautifully carved jade exo-skeleton. Amino Datum was the rarest of people in known space, an S.I. A highly advanced artificial machine species, Sentient Intelligence.

"I'm not sure if you were enjoying taking a risk or rushing down for your friend Lozen. It was an impressive fall all the same." Amino Datum's voice was like the wind and waves of the shore, gentle, stable, and forceful. "Hawk, I believe you prefer to be called, welcome to my home." Amino offered a hand. Hawk stood up before shaking the creator of the Gaia Starship's hand. Amino bowed before trotting to the centre of the group.

"We are very happy to have you onboard. I'm especially happy to see this group here, as this place on Haytae was one of the last environments we successfully recreated, but one of the first I ever saw. So recently lost, but so recently regained. The Gaia Starship has been

my dream since I first imagined anything at all. When I was young and developing on Mars I would look out at the ruins of Earth. It was the first time I felt a yearning to be somewhere that wasn't anymore, and it was gone eight centuries before I had a single thought. I wish I could go there. Instead, I made it my work to remake what I could. I could not and did not do it alone. I am aware that my people are held in some awe, but this place is too much even for my entire people. The Mahi-Kahd, of which you are all a part of, graciously hosted and helped fund my project. Your people worked here for generations. Your scientists worked to create new technology, your engineers to build them, your artists to keep this place in everyone's mind as a truly great achievement. A purpose beyond anyone. Even me." Amino Datum trod over to a rising transport pod that rose from nowhere, large enough for everyone.

"Please as a thank you, may I host you our first guests to a celebration of the Gaia Starship. I've been looking forward to it for almost three centuries when we first started."

## THE HOTEL

The group piled into the pod, exhausted. They sat on the floor or slumped against the walls. The pod shot through the Gaia Starship through a netting of tubes that ran throughout the structure. The tubes were near frictionless allowing the pods to travel at speeds almost equivalent to a space shuttle. It passed up to the surface of the Starship itself, the infinity of space above them and around them were long-lost places and times in their own bubbles. Teegle was pressed against the glass. Lozen looked up at the stars. Hawk looked around the pod. Even Dara was sat in a corner, simply exhausted. In the centre stood Airgid who smiled while Amino Datum happily hummed a tune. Amino's eye suddenly swung down to where Hawk was sitting.

“I was aware of the threat you and Lozen faced, while I know you were in no danger, I most graciously apologise that my timing was not ideal. I am not yet one with the Gaia Starship, so I make errors that are minor for me, but not for you. Time is a different thing to me than to you, as is mortal danger. I tend to forget this when I am working. I am having our bots deliver gifts as a form of apology.” Amino Datum bowed. Hawk was frozen having no idea how to react. He nodded uncertainly.

The S.I had, without question, the smallest population of any known species in known space. The first six had been made over three centuries ago by a Wohulain couple who had cracked the impossible problem of creating truly synthetic sapient life. The couple hid away till their death, and their six immortal children fled to Mars to continue their species. They had been once described by the first of the Genesis soldiers, Napoleon Francé as “Complicated and terrifying. Though generally pleasant”.

Some had served as mercenaries ending wars single handedly such as Vorian Sohl, where others like Lugh simply wandered the galaxy learning new crafts and trades. One notable example known as The Aegean had become a horrifying entity beyond control or containment that ran experiments both mundane and brutal. In contrast Cherries Petras had spent three centuries carving the most minutely detailed city

the galaxy had seen inside the Martian mountain Olympus Mons happily focused on their lonely task. Then there was Amino Datum, who left home and started selling a dream. Hawk never dreamed he'd be sitting half a meter from Amino receiving an apology.

“If I have timed things correctly, we should be arriving once I finish talking to our minor hall at the same time as the other five groups.”

Amino walked to the door of the pod. “If I am wrong, this will be terribly embarrassing.” Amino’s eye briefly shone brighter. The doors opened almost perfectly in sync with four other pods around a lobby. “Oh no. I was wrong.” Amino’s shoulders slumped as it walked out the doors greeting everyone else.

“Last push of our journey. It’s a tough one, we have to get up, get food, and stagger down a corridor to bed.” Airgid stood to military attention and smiled waving everyone out the door. “Good luck.”

Lozen helped Teegle up from the floor. Lozen was staggering slightly on her thin metal legs. Teegle looked like they could explore for another year without sleep. Hawk pushed himself up onto his feet and was the first to step out into the lobby. Most of the other groups of students didn’t look quite as rough from their journeys. Airgid was smiling talking to a long-haired bearded human who was dripping from melting snow. Looking at that man’s group Hawk thought maybe he’d

have fit right in as they were all miserably covered in melting water.

Hawk caught himself gawking at a long-furred Seft who walked on a dozen large paws, leaving a stream of water as he went, hopefully to dry.

“Do we get our own rooms or are we sharing?” Lozen put a hand on her companions’ shoulders.

“Two to a room. I read the schedule. Outside of exceptional circumstances and sizes.” Teegle said.

“So, I’ll sleep on the floor then.” Hawk said without thinking. “I’m pretty good at sleeping in uncomfortable spots, my parents bring me out in the” Hawk put on a voice imitating his father “‘long distance forest survey vehicle, our second home’. It’s as uncomfortable as it sounds.”

“The plan then is to locate a room, grab food, steal a bed, and sleep for hours. I actually have to because these legs are... on their last legs... I’ve got to charge my legs before they are just normal prosthetics is what I’m saying.” Lozen bent and rubbed her metal knees.

“The rooms are going to quickly fill up, and the best food is going to disappear. Hawk can go secure a room, and Lozen will get the food.” Teegle suggested.

“What will Lozen be doing? I notice a distinct lack of Lozen in this plan.” Hawk began stretching, noticing others making plans.

“Listening to gossip.” Teegle said conspiratorially.

“I like this plan.” Lozen nodded.

“We have to move before the others.” Hawk nodded. They split up. As they went Hawk wondered why they thought there might be ‘good’ rooms or that food might run out, but he was enjoying being part of a group too much to ask questions. Hawk nimbly moved through the crowd towards a corridor. He went to enter, and a bot stood and greeted him.

“Hawk, you are bunking with Khoudia Lux according to my records, in room 3-14.” The bot was an orb supported by numerous tentacles, using two like hands as if it was a polite guide. Its ‘face’ rotated experiencing the word through protruding sensors. Hawk knew it was checking who he was. It was a walking version of the systems that protected the labs at home.

“Could we change that to Hawk is bunking with Teegle and Lozen?” Hawk asked.

“I would prefer not to.” The bot said in its polite monotone. Then Amino’s voice came from it. “However, I do still feel apologetic to you

and Lozen. I will reassign you and should anyone be left out; I will find an adequate solution. My time is very precious, so this is quite the gift I am giving you.” The voice returned to the bot’s bland polite tone. “Please wait three minutes.” It moved aside as a different identical bot took its place. The new bot was soon leading others to their assigned rooms. Then the first bot gestured at Hawk to follow. The hallway was a mosaic of a forest, but one unfamiliar to him.

Just as Hawk and the bot reached the door three humanoid bots were leaving the room. Hawk stepped inside not really knowing what to expect. It was excessive in size. The bots had brought in and assembled another bed in under a minute, and the room was still larger than any bedroom Hawk had ever seen. It also had... themes. Amino Datum had a very clear sense of humour. All the bed clothes had various hawks on them, and the lamps had hawk shaped stands, the alarm clock was an egg nest and the wall decorated with various examples of different animals and the differences between their sexes. The other side had wallpaper depicting sporting events. Maybe Amino didn’t have a sense of humour and just wanted to be a good host. It was hard to tell.

Hawk walked to the middle bed. The two on each side had a small parcel. The one in the middle had three. He wanted to rip them open. Hawk waited. It would be more fun with company. He’d only ever

opened gifts with and from his parents. He also had a very short window of time where no one was around. Hawk dropped down his pack from the journey and opened the case that he had checked in and had been left to the side of his bed. He rushed to the much-needed shower.

Even though it was a short shower Hawk could have fallen asleep in it. When getting dressed he was aware of a few new bruises. He also took a moment to evaluate. He was definitely looking more muscled. Hawk was sure of it. He might be small, but he was definitely feeling taller. Hawk dressed into clean and loose clothes. He tried not to think about how he wasn't quite there yet. Hawk was running the towel over his short hair as he stepped out to find Lozen.

"I got everything!" Lozen had carried in a platter that sampled every bit of food available. At least three of everything. "I also found this!" Lozen held up a bottle of wine. "The bots just let me by since we're all past the age of majority, didn't realise that actually makes me younger than you two. It'll be fun, just the three of us!"

"I get the feeling you've done this before." Hawk said gawking at the mound of food.

"There were a lot of events, and I like good food. You've the right idea with the shower. My species doesn't sweat much, but I'm pretty sure I panic sweat the whole way down that climb." Lozen sat down on

her bed and reached down and undid some clasps. Her legs stayed where they were, but her thighs moved away from them. She rummaged in her military issue bag, it had 'Lozen Apache' stamped on it with the joking rank of 'Mascot-Senior Grade- Karst 1st Drop Infantry 'The Shooting Stars'. "These things do charge off sunlight, but not enough for that amount of walking and running."

"I don't think I've ever been outside so long. I'd die of exposure at home if I was walking outside that long. I'm so glad Teegle is a shutterbug, I want to see everything we saw five times more!" Hawk put his towel up on a hook.

"Really didn't think she'd be the type to smuggle anything in, they really wanted us to enjoy one day without distractions and screens. I'll just be glad to have seen it just once. I went down most of that climb with my eyes closed. Don't like saying it but glad Airgid was there." Lozen was quiet for a bit before she slipped off the bed onto her thighs, she grabbed some elastic caps to put over the metal that connected to her legs. "Still not over that bird though, that thing has me shook. All wildlife should be goat sized. Bigger is just showing off."

"I'm fairly sure goats might end up in a kid area of this place." Hawk tried not to stare too much at Lozen moving along the floor to the bathroom using her thighs and one arm. Lozen laughed as she slammed

the bathroom door shut, leaving Hawk to be stuck with the food and the mysterious gifts. It felt like an age waiting, but it wasn't long before Teegle arrived.

“Amino is a very nice person.” Teegle announced. “Amino said that they picked the winners of the contest.” Teegle stuck a tongue between their teeth in a smile. “Which is nice, we're all here because we were wanted as guests. Oh. Food!” Teegle rushed up to the platters Lozen had laid on the beds and began eating almost violently. Hawk joined in. It was impossible to tell if the food was truly amazing or if they were just hungry. For a few minutes they just pointed out different things to eat.

One of the things that would bring anyone to the Gaia Starship is that there was food to eat that no one had eaten in generations, and some food that no one had ever eaten. Hawk had grown up on stolid food, nothing fancy but you could be sure you got your nutrients. Teegle had been raised on four or five rotating meals that different parents cooked in huge batches. What they were eating would make the most experienced food critic jealous. Though the meat was grown artificially no one could tell. There was seafood from millennia before man walked the earth, wild fruits ancient Wohulain had eaten into extinction, bread made from grains from a planet no advanced species had ever tasted. Some of it was awful, but it was all special.

“Slow down! I got all that, I hoped to eat some too!” Lozen pulled herself quickly along the floor from the bathroom. Even draped in a towel it was clear she was mostly naked. Hawk fell off the bed and immediately stood and faced the opposite direction. Teegle kept eating. “Sorry Hawk. We shower together at home. Wasn’t even thinking. Throw me my bag, it’s just on your right!” Hawk reached out to Lozen’s bag and put it on the ground to kick backwards.

“You must exercise a lot Lozen.” Teegle said after swallowing a kebab of insects. “You must have a lot of privacy at home Hawk, my siblings would pull me out of the shower most days. Showering in the gym was more private than home. I spent the entire trip here in my room just to enjoy the privacy.”

“Just tell me when you’re dressed Lozen.” Hawk took a moment. “Look, at home we pretty much only see each other covered in layers of clothes. There’s the cold, the labs, the machine shops, you’re always wearing protective gear. We don’t have casual wear, definitely no casual nudity.”

“I get it. I wasn’t really thinking, back home we just really don’t think about it. I’m dressed.” Lozen announced proudly. Hawk turned around slowly. Lozen was technically dressed, wearing a sports bra and boxers. She’d climbed up onto her bed, and if she had legs below the knee, she’d have been sat cross legged. Lozen started eating from her

platter. She was halfway through swallowing a fruit when her eyes went wide. “We have gifts!” Hawk looked down at his bed and sat down next to the three boxes. Teegle tore their gift’s wrapping apart in moments.

“It’s makeup.” Teegle held up the box. It was oils and powders. Hawk was about to speak, and just about caught his tongue. “Made from the traditional ingredients from Diarm. I’ve never had makeup before.” Hawk bit his teeth before he said the wrong thing. Teegle got up holding the box to their chest and went to Lozen. “Can you help tomorrow?” Teegle’s ear flicked.

“Easy! You want to focus on your eyes. Accentuate your best feature.” Lozen snapped her finger. “We’ll look up a video. I’m not good at makeup. I overdo it. That’s what Alexandra says anyway.” Lozen shrugged and grabbed the box from her bed. She gently undid the wrapping. It was a small metal disk. Lozen placed it on her bed and pushed the button in the middle.

A Genesis man filled the room. He could have been Lozen’s twin, but anyone would know it was Napoleon Francé. His body was covered his custom armour mimicking the bone armour his species was known for, but Napoleon’s genetic defect prevented him from growing. His face was a broad smile, especially his eyes. At his side was a helmet. He was laughing at a small lizard climbing across his chest.

“Amino, I hate that I have to leave this place” The hologram froze on a happy middle-aged man. Lozen shook and smiled, letting a tear run down her cheek. Hawk had no idea what to do. Teegle got up and held Lozen’s hand. Lozen looked at the frozen hologram with a smile. More tears threatened to erupt.

“I wish we’d grown up together.” Lozen huffed. “He was supposed to be my brother, but I was born after he died. We were the tests.” Lozen gestured and shrank the hologram before reaching out to the smiling man. She ran a finger over his face and Hawk pretended she wasn’t crying. “Hawk, you have to have gotten something great!”

“I can wait.” Hawk looked at the holographic figure, Napoleon was as famous for his life as he was for his death. He was the first of his species but joined the navy instead of the army. Rose through the ranks on merit to become admiral of the Haytae defence fleet, and supreme commander of that planet’s armed forces. It was the second worst contested planet in the Clygor war. Hawk looked at Lozen. She really was remarkably similar in appearance. “Take your time.”

“I’ll have loads of time.” Lozen pushed her finger to the disc, and the hologram was gone. “This should be a fun moment though!”

Hawk pulled the boxes close. He pulled out his knife from his luggage’s side pocket and carefully opened the first and smallest

package. A small metallic creature fell onto the bed. It looked like some quilled small mammal. It was matte yellow and black with a pointed snout, sharp teeth, and a faint yellow glow between its metal panels. It pulled its spikes into itself. Everyone stared at it. Hawk put his hand out and it happily crawled into it. Teegle looked like they were about to explode.

“Amino gave you a Synthetic!” Teegle’s voice was momentarily loud. Their hands were pulling at their horns and hair. “I’ll never meet someone I’m as jealous of!” Teegle fell off Lozen’s bed. they sat up on the floor and stared at the strange thing clinging to Hawk’s shirt.

“Hawk. You broke Teegle. You shouldn’t break people.” Lozen leaned over from her bed to look at the small thing that sat on Hawk’s shoulder. It slowly wrapped itself up to mimic sleeping in a powered down state. Hawk gently set it down on the bed, Teegle got up and looked at it from every angle without touching it. “What are you going to call it?” Lozen asked.

“There’s a note. *‘Many aerial predators feed on insects and small rodents. This will not be a problem for this one, or you. It is a survivor, like all life that is preyed upon. I have called it Ruaidrí.’* Hawk looked down at Ruaidrí and repeated the name.

“It’s so impossibly delicate. I think it’s intaking air for cooling, but it looks like it’s breathing.” Teegle grabbed her camera and started to take photos of the small little machine. “Amino Datum must have all sorts of Synths like these planned, ready to be built.”

“What are the other two gifts?” Lozen looked at the two bigger packages. She was in the middle of very carefully putting away the hologram projector safely in her luggage. Hawk quickly opened the second package, He pulled out three rectangular mobile computers. Hawk picked one up and held it up looking at it. ‘Teegle Moelains-Caco-Alta’ was engraved on the back of it. Hawk handed it over to Teegle who was still filming the small Ruaidrí. Teegle took it slightly confused. Hawk handed over the rectangle marked ‘Lozen Apache’ and held on to his own marked simply ‘Hawk’.

They powered on once held by their respective owner. They were simply a mobile computer, but an extremely nice one. Hawk forgot about the one in his bag instantly. There were instruction manuals, and a note explaining, this would be a gift everyone would get before the next trip, but they were getting it early. Hawk was in the middle of admiring his new mobile when a thought occurred to him.

“How fast does Amino Datum change things? Did Amino already assume we’d want to bunk together? I asked for us to be bunking

together, but these are already packed together. It's nice, but a little creepy...." Hawk looked suspiciously at the mobile.

"Probably just moves fast, I'd say this Starship is very almost as much Amino's body as the body we saw. I mean that's how that rogue S.I works, it's hard to know if The Aegean's body, or the Monolith ship is the actual S.I. Pretty hard not to be unsettling when you are that aware of the world around you." Lozen said, half distracted by the mobile.

"I think Amino knew. They're an extreme expert on life and people after so many years. Amino probably tries to not make people unsettled but makes mistakes. The S.I aren't perfect. I mean we all know about Vorian Sohl, and everyone knows Vorian has made a lot of mistakes." Teegle returned to their bed. "I mean the only way Amino would know I use my parent-name and not my actual-name, or that I never had make-up would be by knowing all of my searches on the net. It might be impossible for Amino to not know everything we put online. It'd be like if we tried to not smell something, you can only do that after you've smelt it."

"I'm a bit less excited about this mobile now..." Lozen almost put it down. "...but it is a really nice mobile."

"Why is your actual name a bit secret?" Hawk turned around to Teegle. Hawk like most terraformers just had his one name, and a numerical identifier for official purposes.

“The actual name isn’t secret really, it’s just not public. My parent-name is just my name and my biological parents’ names. It was only published once when I won a planetary wrestling competition. My family was furious it was used instead of my actual name. I don’t really care, but it’s meant to be used in the family, made sure the same mistake wasn’t made again. My actual name is much more of an almost spiritual thing. I find it a bit embarrassing really. The family name is just so people in our family know who my parents are. Which actually makes putting it on this mobile a mistake that Amino made! My family will hate this mobile.” Teegle smiled and started to delicately eat again from the platter of food.

“That sounds complicated.” Lozen put her phone down. “My name is just some old historical figure from Earth and where they were born. Lozen comes from....”

“Wait you have three parents?” Hawk interrupted. Lozen flung a spiral shell at his head.

“Of course.” Teegle responded confused, they pointed to their striped and spiralled brown and white fur and their horns one swept back the other curled forward. “I have two different horns on my head and two different fur patterns. Diarmpf only have differing horns if they have more than two parents. It’s not uncommon. Like a reverse version of twins.”

“So, that’s something to grow up knowing about your mother...”  
Hawk said unthinkingly.

“Everyone has parents, and all those parents have had sex.” Teegle shrugged.

“I don’t have parents! No sex needed when you’re designed perfectly!” Lozen cheerfully announced to the room. Then pointed at her legs. “Mistakes were still made. Even a team of geneticists don’t get things right the first time.” Lozen reached out for her acquired wine. “So, two important questions. First who drinks? Second, what’s in the box Hawk? I’ve never seen someone open gifts so slowly it’s torture!”

“I don’t get many gifts; our tradition is to draw out opening them. I’m opening these two days faster than I would at home!” Hawk reached for and opened the last box. It contained a rather small and thin foldable picture. It was metal, and when unfolded one side was a slightly stylised picture of Hawk fleeing the colossal bird the metal coloured to create the image.

“That’s a bit of a mean gift compared to the rest.” Lozen leaned as far as she could on the bed to look.

Hawk turned it over to the other side which had an inscription. It read ‘*The Haytae Great Raptor’s vision is movement based and can be escaped often by not moving. Sometimes inaction is the best course of action. In this case it was not as the NochtzotyI vision is not based on movement. However, it is worth remembering for life in general.*’. Each sentence was on a different panel of

the folding picture. Hawk handed it to Lozen, Teegle wandered over to have a look.

“So, the S.I have some strange ways of giving gifts, but I am not complaining.” Hawk put his hand down to Ruaidrí. The delicate machine slowly woke and scrambled up Hawk’s arm to rest on his shoulder where it clung to his shirt and returned to rest.

“I’m not sure whether to toast us getting more gifts or us having a safe trip now.” As Lozen poured the wine into three short round glasses, she discovered her new friends wanted a much smaller glass than she was used to pouring for the veterans from home. “I’ve never done makeup on someone with patterned fur with more than an olive colour, but I’m willing to learn!” Lozen clinked glasses with her friends before pulling Teegle to sit down.

“We are all of age, right?” Teegle looked around seriously. “I know I’m 20, which is adulthood for unmodified Diarmpf, but eighteen for humans, and Genesis?”

“Turned eighteen three months ago, had a drink with my parents on my birthday. What I learned was, don’t drink anything terraformers make in an unused part of the lab. Enjoyed a beer on the transport ship’s observation deck though.” Hawk said to Teegle’s approval

“It’s sixteen for Genesis, you guys take way too long to grow up, but I’m seventeen. Anyway, I got the bottle. Amino would know better than you!” Lozen said, Teegle reluctantly nodded.

They ate, set up their new mobile computers, and worked out the intricacies of Diarmpf makeup. Hawk had grown up understanding that makeup was for events of major importance, especially those involving outsiders. Men and women both used it to simultaneously hide the effects of living in a harsh environment and to highlight a single good feature they had. Lozen understood makeup primarily as something to apply to the eyes and claws, very carefully. An olive skin and fur tone did not allow for many options. Makeup was to be personally expressive, to design and show off what could be done within their natural constraints. Teegle’s family simply never used it. There was no particular reason as far as they could learn. Just in their micro-culture of a vast family unit no one showed much interest.

This meant makeup allowed for two things Teegle enjoyed and one they excelled at. Teegle enjoyed the idea of being able to enhance oneself, from Lozen’s cybernetic legs down to the cosmetic enhancements of makeup. Teegle enjoyed the social aspect of Lozen helping her figure out the makeup and Hawk trying to confirm if they had succeeded in their aims. Teegle excelled at the research.

As a species the Diarmpf were extremely diverse. Wohulain largely had feather-like crests and scaled skin, with males having duller colours and females having more 'aggressive' claws and teeth. Humans had a broad range of skin colours and different sexes, but to other people they were often hard to distinguish from each other despite that without a notable haircut or hat. The Oohaytae species, the species that was from the environment they had just visited, despite their insectoid appearance were incredibly easy for people to distinguish with wildly different carapace colours and designs. The Diarmpf had them all beat.

Some were shorter than a Wohulain, some were among the largest creatures that could comfortably live in Mahi-Kahd society. Some had long elaborate horns, others had none. Some had narrow snouts and short sharp teeth, others had broad faces and blunted teeth. Some had more fluff than they had body, and others had short fur that barely hid their skin. Some species on first encountering the Diarmpf assumed they were multiple species and not one highly diverse one. Then they usually assumed the diversity was due to an abundance of genders, where there was no sex or gender for the Diarmpf. They had cultures in abundance to match the physical diversity.

Some grew up in small family units like Hawk did, others grew up like Lozen raised by a community that didn't care for pairing off. Teegle

grew up in a highly complex extended family that most cultures would consider a village. As they all delved into learning about makeup, the complexity became broader. Some cultures considered someone without jewellery more naked than someone without clothes, others communicated a lot of who they were through piercings. There were cultures that shaved their fur into patterns, using powders to discourage the fur regrowing. The more Hawk found videos, the more he realised that Teegle's parentage and chimerism was the least interesting thing the species had going on. Hawk only knew these things abstractly before tonight.

It took a while, but eventually they had found a look Teegle took a deep quiet pleasure in. Millenia ago there was a culture of diplomats and explorers who dyed their hands, cheeks, and chest fur red, they purpled the fur under their eyes on their ears. Hawk wasn't a fan but gave a thumbs up as Lozen and Teegle had finally done it perfectly. Teegle went into the bathroom to properly appreciate their new look.

"That was surprisingly difficult. I hadn't really considered you'd have to use different pastes to get a consistent look across different fur colours. Live and learn." Lozen took out a sanding strip from her bag and began to rub it on the rounded off-white mounds that were her bone spurs.

“That must really suck to have to do daily.” Hawk laid back holding a roll that contained vegetables almost no one had tasted in centuries and debated if he could eat it, or if it was going to be the vegetable roll that would push his limits. He decided against it after the small glass of wine.

“It’s not too bad, I’m only sanding them today since that climb down stressed me out. You know it’s not really bone; it’s a chitin and keratin mix that incorporates a bone like lattice structure. Stress makes it grow, and eventually it does separate so you can remove the plates. It’s pretty amazing genetic engineering, even if it was for some pretty evil reasons.” Lozen’s voice trailed as she parted her dreadlocked hair to shave down the spur on the back of her head.

“I can’t even imagine.” Hawk eventually said. It was honest and didn’t ruin the evening.

“I can’t imagine growing up on an ice planet no one has ever heard of, we all got different shit. Hey, look we aren’t gonna finish off what’s left of this food, and I think Teegle is going to be gone a while, so do you mind throwing the stuff away? I’m going to be at this another few minutes and it’s not really something I’m enjoying doing in front of someone who isn’t sanding parts of their body down, you get me?”

“No problem!” Hawk found himself up out of the bed and gathering their rubbish up faster than he thought was possible. At home chores were always a good way not to be in the way of other people in the cramped living situation.

The door opened automatically for Hawk. He stepped out into a busier hallway than he'd expected. There were small clusters of other visitors chatting. Hawk passed without issue, but he did notice a few stares at Ruaidrí. It was only as he approached the end of the hall that an actual issue was unavoidable.

Khoudia and Dara were verbally tearing into each other. Khoudia stood calm and cool, her eyes betrayed no passion, her stance was that of a stone pillar. Dara was a river, he moved with his words, there was nothing that would stop him. Both had their hangers on, Dara with the adventurous guests and Khoudia with the strange but confident guests. They thought they were arguing over the most important things. Hawk thought they were arguing over absolutely nothing. As Hawk approached, he listened.

“We could have moved faster, but you kept going back to help those who slowed us down. If you'd kept moving, they would have to move faster too. We help the vulnerable, not the lazy.” Khoudia spoke slow and steady and stood like the universe had to adjust for her beliefs.

“If you had slowed, we all could have moved faster together! If you’d come back to help, everyone’s moral would have stayed high and kept them moving. We just had the decency to keep everyone together. We moved slower because you left people behind.” Dara moved and emphasized with his hands while he spoke, clearly accusing Khoudia specifically

For a moment Hawk wondered should he walk through. He didn’t want either Dara’s attention or Khoudia’s irritation. He thought back to a small piece of advice his mother had once given him. Hawk walked between the two groups without looking at anyone. Hawk was moments from shaking and ruining the impression. For some reason he remembered the hologram of Napoleon Francé and simply walked between them and handed the platters to the bot at the hallway entrance.

“Thank you for returning.... The Event will occur in twelve...your plates.” It spoke calmly. The bot’s many limbs took the platters and went away, completely uncaring that it misspoke for a moment, but it had burned itself into Hawk’s mind. It was not special. Its voice had not changed as it spoke. Hawk felt haunted. Hawk turned back.

Hawk turned around and almost ran back, but the moment was wrong. Something hit his cheek, and he hit something hard, and the

corridor became quiet. In a daze Hawk rolled over. Dara leaned over; Hawk didn't hear what his lips were saying. Khoudia's group looked down at him and returned to their rooms. Khoudia was fumbling through a first aid kit, Hawk kept trying to take Dara's proffered hand, but he just couldn't make it happen. He was looking at his hand as his hearing returned.

"Go to your room." A voice rang out. "Go back to your rooms and sleep." Hawk shook his head and tried to get up. Hawk stumbled and struggled, but he did manage to get to his knees. Where he met Lozen who was checking Hawk over. Her face was not one of anger, it was deeply concerned. She checked Hawk over and began leading him home hobbling on one attached leg.

Hawk looked up at the source of the commanding voice. Teegle stood with every inch of their body ready for anyone to start trouble. Teegle was no longer hunched, and their eyes looked directly. Teegle was the inescapable reality of the corridor. Hawk was pulled back to their room by Lozen, Teegle never shrank in size. Lozen sat Hawk on the floor, and her hands checked over every inch of his head while Hawk's hearing returned.

"What happened?" Hawk asked.

“I think you walked into that big human’s fist.” Lozen replied. “You probably saved that one Khoudia. You’re okay, it’s just that it was a hell of a hit to take! I’m impressed! Full body momentum behind that fist.”

The door to the room opened. Teegle walked in as the door closed, Teegle shrank. When Teegle stepped through the door there was a towering and powerful creature that very few would challenge, as they moved to Hawk’s side Teegle almost shrank, their face softening and returning to what people usually saw. Teegle’s arms went under Hawk and carried him onto his bed. Hawk froze in genuine shock until Teegle set him down.

“Teegle. Please ask in future.” Hawk was still almost frozen, but locked eyes with a quite annoyed Lozen. Hawk figured it out looking at the shrinking figure of Teegle. “Thank you for saving me, Teegle.” Hawk struggled to say.

“I don’t like bullies. I like you.” Teegle said while pulling her bed from the wall to be next to Hawk. Teegle did the same for Lozen’s bed.

“Two small things, one Hawk your robot thing is spitting on your wounds, it’s weird. Secondly Teegle, I’m pretty sure Hawk is used to having a bed to himself, so may not appreciate the beds being all together.” Lozen said as she pulled herself up onto her bed.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Teegle moved to separate the beds. “It’s just what I always did for my siblings.”

Hawk reached out and grabbed Teegle’s arm. His head was still ringing, and the world was still throbbing and shaking. It’s not every day that a cute guy accidentally punches you full force in the face and Hawk thought maybe he could do with the comfort. Teegle moved the beds back together.

“I’d just like to not be in the middle.” Hawk muddled through the words. Teegle and Lozen took a moment while Hawk fell asleep. They were moments from leaving the room for help when their mobiles shook with a message. *‘Hawk is okay, no significant injury, Amino’*.

Lozen crawled into bed, Teegle fell in the middle, Hawk was curled up on the far end. Teegle pulled stiff Lozen closer and rolled next to Hawk. It was like Teegle was at home with their siblings.

Hawk was asleep.

Lozen pretended to be asleep. Lozen felt like this might be what having a family was like. When Teegle was asleep, Lozen hugged Hawk and Teegle.