

Awakening

Chapter 1

The End

A shrill, persistent beep pulls me out of what feels like an agonisingly long sleep. Something feels wrong though. My eyes feel like they're fused open, I can't even close them. I can't move. I can't even trigger the sensation of trying to move, it's like my body doesn't exist any more. I feel disconnected from everything.

Everything is blurry, but I can tell I'm in a brightly lit room. Blurred shapes move around what I think is a table. It feels like I'm floating underwater, looking at something through privacy glass at the same time. The longer the sound lasts, the more frantically the shapes move and mumble around the table.

The shrill beep turns into a steady, gentler beeping again, I hear several sighs of relief from the surrounding shapes. Two or three of them walk away from the table, one approaches me. It doesn't unblur as they get closer though. Its arms get closer to where my chest should have been, and the my vision starts to focus a bit better.

"Let me know when you see clearly" it says.

It has a deep, coarse sounding voice. Not quite gravelly sandpaper, but still with a bit of a roughness.

I can't recognise the language it's speaking, but the meaning comes through into my head clearly. I've never learned a language other than English, with small splatterings of European languages I never kept up with, but this sounds nothing like that.

My vision continues to clear up, and I can see everything clearly. I try to move my mouth, but the sensation isn't there, but my voice comes out anyway.

"That's clear--" I cut myself off mid sentence.

It took a few seconds for me to process, but the shapes had cleared up. The table was surrounded by... dogs? No.. It was difficult to describe them. They were tall, fairly slender, but they were covered in.. fur? Their chests looked quite pronounced but a few seconds looking at one of them – it was quite fluffy neck and chest fur. Their faces had long-ish muzzles, like wolves, but their ears were quite long, easily taller than their heads. Each of them had colourful markings in their fur in different patterns. I wasn't sure if they were natural markings or dyes or painted. I'm stunned into silence.

A few nervous-looking glances are shared between them all. The one who had approached me and helped me focus turned to them and said

“It’s fine, give them a minute, the connection is solid”

The one closest to me was covered in a light brown fur, with patches of black on their chest, arms and shoulders. They have bright red irises but their eyes give a gentle presence despite the piercing colour of them.

“I’m not sure how much you remember of what happened, but we found you in a bad way. We’ve got you stabilised, but..” They had a concerned look, and they trailed off for a moment before coming back to it. “What’s your name? I’m Tah’lihn” The course voice was somehow gentle to me, pronouncing their name Tah-Leen.

“I-I’m..” I’m still taken aback, I struggle to get my words out. “I’m... Robyn”

“Hello, Robyn. I imagine this is going to be a difficult one for you to answer, but how are you feeling right now?”

I go silent again. How do I answer that honestly? I look around the room nervously. I realised I never looked properly at the table because when my eyes drift over to look, I see myself on the table, below me. It’s covered in lacerations and burns, and my skin is deathly pale. I see quite a large scar on my face, digging into my left eye. It’s hooked up to all kinds of machines and drips, a ventilator shoved into my throat. Time feels like it stops when I see myself.

Was this an out of body experience? No – they’re talking to me?

“What’s happening? What happened to me? Why can I see myself?”

“... Do you not know?” Tah’lihn says, eventually. However, they don’t seem entirely surprised.

The helpers around the room look away sheepishly, their ears tucking back. Tah’lihn’s head drops. They mutter something under their breath, and starts to explain what happened.

In short – Nuclear war. Major cities around the world were targeted. Pieces are still being put together at who did what, but Earth was effectively decimated. Billions were dead, Millions more in critical conditions. Millions had died since they – The Can’ir – Had arrived.

A Can’ir scout had found me in a last scouting run, they thought I was dead at first, but I had the faintest pulse, and the shallowest breath they’d seen. They carefully bundled me into their scout ship and dragged me back to their World Ship. They knew of a project that might have a chance in saving me and it was onboard. But they didn’t want to undergo it without my consent, so I was hooked into what they called a “Consciousness Transfer Unit”.

“So that’s about the gist of things.” They say.

It was definitely a rushed explanation, and lots of things were omitted, but for good reason. My body was a wreck, it wasn’t going to last much longer. I’d been down on Earth for days, bleeding out and infected in most areas of my body. It would be a miracle if I pulled through this, even with medical assistance.

While I was in this unit, I’m still in my body, it just allows my mind to be “awake”, so to speak, while my body remains in coma-like conditions. Tah’lihn and the others were nervous, glancing at the monitoring systems attached to my body.

“So, Robyn” Tah’lihn starts “I understand you’re probably feeling a lot of things right now, but there’s a few options you have here. I hate to rush such a huge decision, but we don’t have the time to allow you to think it over.”

They list a few options.

“Option 1 – We allow you to attempt to make a recovery as normal.” They shake their head. “But right now you might die in the next 2 hours, even with our best docs on you.”

“Option 2 – We try to use augmentations and replacements to get you back up to speed and recover like that.” They look unsure on this one. “We’ve only known humanity about a week at this point though. Humans with the required knowledge to help us out are in short supply, or in similar conditions to yourself. Chances are we’ll hinder more than help you.”

“Option 3 – The project I mentioned - Project Recover - I’m in charge, so I’m naturally a little biased here. Using this unit you’re in right now, we facilitate a link to move your consciousness over to a ‘blank’”

They use their fingers around the word blank. “Our blank is a Can’ir, though. It’s not a 100% guarantee it’d work, even for one of us. We’d like to offer you the chance to see if it might work. Honestly, it’s quite the miracle the CTU is working with you, it bodes well.”

They grimace though, before offering the next.

“Option 4 – We grant you mercy, and let you die here, right now.” The other Can’ir around the room look equally disturbed by the option. They’ve been surrounded by death for a week at this point, and actively granting it sounds a step too far for them. “Obviously, this is not one we’d like to grant.”

They pause for a moment, I think.

“We’ll leave you to it for now, we’ll be outside for 10 minutes. That’s all we’re comfortable with leaving you alone for.”

They all shuffle out of the doors, and I’m left alone with the periodic beeping. Looking over my own dying body. The options bounce around in my head. I’m on the cusp of death and everything seems like more gambling.

The moments before I became unconscious flood back to the front of my mind. I was driving. There was a flash in the distance, and a fireball raised up to the sky, it looked... close. I felt the rumbling, and everything went black.

Fuck.

This was a dream, right? It had to be. I was dead and this was the wild fantastic dream I’m experiencing as I slowly fade. I couldn’t pinch myself to test that. I willed myself to try and wake up. But no matter what I tried, I remained “awake”.

I think I cried, though not being awake, the machine I was experiencing my current state couldn’t effectively cry. I wasn’t sure if the teardrops coming out of my good eye on my body below me were because of the emotions or just my body reacting to extreme physical trauma.

I decided.

Tah'lihn and the others came in the room, 3 of them quickly surrounded my body, replacing bandages and wiping pus-bleeding sores clean.

“Option 3. Do it.”

I don't even give Tah'lihn the opportunity to ask. I couldn't go into the dark without knowing more. Humanity was ripped apart, the remnants saved by visitors from beyond the system. They have amazing technologies, that can do *this!* I had to know what happened. Who survived. What else was out there. I had to *live*. Even if I had to shed my humanity, I needed the best chance to survive, if this was even real.

Tah'lihn nods, and hearing my choice, several other Can'ir scramble out of the doors.

“Thank you, Robyn” Tah'lihn says. The quickly expand on this, knowing how it probably sounded. “I know it sounds odd to say thank you when you've chosen to abandon your body, but as scientists, you're helping us test our projects to help others in the future.”

About 10 minutes later, the other Can'ir that left the room earlier burst through the door again with a Gurney covered in a sheet. Presumably the body I would be soon to inhabit.

They roll it up next to the table I'm on, and uncover it. The Can'ir under the sheet had black and white fur. The front of its torso was white furred, leading up the front of its neck and under its chin. The rest of it was black furred. The inside of their ears had tufts of white fur. The lower half was still hidden by the sheet. But it lacked any colourful markings that the rest of the Can'ir had, which seemed to answer my earlier observation. The markings were artificial.

“It's a real one – it was created using adapted cloning technologies.” Tah'lihn mentioned as they and the assistant Can'ir were hooking wires up to the blank. “Don't worry about appearing as a cloned Can'ir though – the DNA was modified to make it – you – unique.”

They chuckled a bit. “You won't be clocked as a clone, we've tested”

Tah'lihn stood back up straight, and fiddled with the machine I was looking out of. I guess there was some kind of interface just underneath me, outside of my vision.

“Okay, this might tingle a little bit, I'll see you on the other side.”

A click. And then everything went black.

Chapter 2

A New Beginning

I wake with a start. Gasping and sitting up. I howl a little in pain, the sudden sitting up caused my back to feel like it got lit on fire. I lay back down. My eyes aren't open, and it takes some effort to open them. The light stings when I get them open, and I squint, trying to lift my arm to cover my face, but it feels heavy.

"What a dream.." I try to say out loud.

My mouth feels weird, I couldn't say words right. I try to adjust my lower jaw but it doesn't move like I expect.

A thud from the side of me, I turn my head slowly, my eyes slowly focusing and adjusting to the bright light. "You're awake! You're actually awake!" a familiar voice calls out, that coarse voice from the dream.

"Tah.. Tah'lihn?"

It rolls off my tongue much easier than before. When my eyes eventually adjust, Tah'lihn is stood – no, crouched - beside me, grinning.

"Wh—" I tilt my head to look down. My arm was covered in fur. I turn my wrist. My hand had paw pads, similar to Tah'lin's. My body ached with every movement I made. It hurt.

It wasn't a dream.

"Try not to move too much, the body you're in hasn't been moved except to move from storage to Gurney, the muscles need to be woken up. It's going to hurt a lot otherwise."

I can see tears forming in their eyes, and they press their face into me as they hug me. "It took so long.. but it worked!"

They lean back, and compose themselves, wiping their eyes. A few more Can'ir filter into the room, panting. It looks like Tah'lihn sprinted here and their assistants could barely keep up

"I just want to check – Can you let me know your name?"

"Robyn." My jaw still feels weird. Tah'lihn grins.

"Robyn, do you know how you got here?"

"... --almost dead. --found me, moved me --to this body." I was still trying to speak English, my new jaws were not made for this.

Tah'lihn could barely hold back their tears. The assistants cheered. I couldn't help but smile a little. Their joy was infectious, and I danced with death, and emerged a victor. Barely, but I did. Tah'lihn inhaled sharply and held it for a second, composing themselves again.

“You’ve been out cold for months, you’ve barely moved a muscle but you’ve been mostly stable. We had to have you on a ventilator for a few weeks, but you eventually started breathing by yourself. We weren’t sure if you were going to be comatose for good or not for a while there.”

One of the assistants moved towards us. Tah’lihn nodded, and the assistant slowly pulled me up, and placed a support behind me, letting me sit upright without straining anything. I breathe carefully, hissing lightly at straining a few muscles. I imagine this would be much better than the alternative though, and I grit my teeth.

“We’re going to need to get those muscles working properly. Rather than force you through agonising walking after years of this body being stationary, we’ll get massages going on your legs, back, and arms to try and stimulate them. You’ll still need the rehabilitation, of course. You humans--”

They cut themselves off, coughing a little.

“Humans walk on flat foot, we Can’ir walk quite differently, and it may take a fair bit of practice for you to get used to it. We need to get you talking in Cant too.”

They chuckle.

“Your English doesn’t really work well with our jaws, as you can probably tell. At least the CTU process helped implant the language in your mind so you can understand us.”

The next 2 months are like watching a toddler learn to walk and talk from the point of view of the toddler.

The first few weeks are spent massaging muscles in my legs, back, and arms. Every knead in my muscles feels like a thousand needles being shimmied around my body.

I lie in the hospital bed, feeling helpless as the assistants raise and lower my legs, hissing when they stretch it just a bit further than the previous time. Bending my knees and feet, It feels so unusual when I notice the first time that the Can’ir have digitigrade legs, bending at the knee feels odd, bending at the ankle even moreso.

Eventually I’m moving my own limbs ever so slightly without agonising pain racking me like on the first day awake. I hold my fur-covered arm out in front of me, and turn my wrist, bringing the pawpads face up. I wiggle my fingers, and scrunch the hand into a fist.

The assistants encourage me to try and sit up on my own, and even swing my legs out to rest my feet on the floor, to sit on the edge of the bed. It takes a few minutes, little parts of the muscles that hadn’t been massaged properly or used twinged, but I was sat up. I brace my arms on the bed, and with a light hiss from twisting my waist, I dangle my legs off the side of the bed, my digitigrade legs and feet in obvious view, the cool yet comfortable metal floor pressing into my pawpads.

A few days of progress, and with a bit of assistance, I’m standing up. I can’t walk, but I’m standing up, Assistants flank my sides as I wobble in place, getting used to the narrower paws I have, my tail spinning around wildly to try and balance, but hell if I know how to use it. I can only stand for a moment, before almost collapsing, my legs not used to supporting any kind of weight.

A few days later, I'm wheeled around, and taken to a pool. Normally a recreational pool. But today, and for a few more months it's here to help me get used to standing up and supporting myself. The assistants help me get out of the wheelchair, and help me sit poolside, my paws dipping into the warm water.

In my previous human form, I was a pretty strong swimmer. Hopefully the instinct carries over. I huff a little as I gently lower myself into the water fully, my arms holding my weight for a moment or two. I float a little in the pool, treading water and testing my arms out, before lowering my paws to the floor of the pool. The assistant that helped me here – I only need one now - gets into the pool as well, instructing me to stretch my legs out as far as I could, pushing more of my torso out of the water.

My legs wobble, and I lower myself again.
"Good! You're doing really well! Keep doing that"

My fur is completely drenched, but rather than looking like, well, a wet dog, the Can'ir fur seems to almost resist drooping heavily. It helps not dragging even more weight onto my legs at least. After about 20 minutes or so, the assistant has me gently wading around the pool, getting me to raise my body as much as I feel comfortable doing.

Chapter 3

A Walk

It's been a few months. My Cant is mostly fluent at this point. A couple of slips and I revert to the English word, or just revert to English to start a sentence before realising just how awkward it is to talk it as a Can'ir. I'll get there eventually.

I'm still a little wobbly on my feet, but I'm walking mostly unaided. Using my tail was starting to come naturally as a balancing aid. Sometimes I find myself standing in a position where a muscle hasn't been used properly and there's a twinge of pain and I stumble over.

Tah'lihn has been visiting me daily, making sure I'm okay. They've been asking me questions about my old life. What I did, where I'm from, all that stuff. It hurts a little, knowing it's all gone. I talk about my family and friends, what I loved doing, what I worked as. Tah'lihn is taking notes when I do talk about it. I don't even know if my friends and family are still alive. They were quite close to one of the bigger cities. I lived fairly close to rural areas. I tell them the majesty of some old forests of England. The breathtaking views of the coasts. The vibrant cultures scattered over the planet.

They can tell I'm getting restless though. I want to go on a walk. I've been walking around the rehabilitation facility for months now, I have the place mapped out to the smallest detail.

Eventually Tah'lihn relents. They insist on accompanying me, though.

They insist on taking me to the nearby nature area, presumably my love for natural spaces coming through in our earlier conversations. The trees are definitely alien in origin, pink broad leaves on a red barked tree trunk and branches. We walk in mostly silence, surrounded by other Can'ir, and the few humans who are well enough to walk around. We didn't want to tip anyone off yet that I was formerly human, if at all.

I'm looking around in awe. A World Ship – they weren't kidding when they said this thing can hold a planet. This forest was easily twice as large as my favourite walking spot. The city seemed to stretch out for miles on all sides of the forest otherwise. It'd be easy to forget you were on a starship. A true marvel of engineering.

We do have to take a few breaks, sitting on benches, watching other Can'ir walk by, Humans walking by completely bewildered by the sights. Several humans walking by have visible scars on their faces, arms..

We eventually reach forest's edge, and Tah'lihn takes me to their favourite open air café-bar.

"You a sweet tooth?" They ask, sitting at the counter, looking up at the screens displaying the menu.

I take a seat next to them, taking a look up at it as well. A couple of offerings have hastily added notes next to them - Human friendly!

"A bit of a sweet tooth, yeah. What do you recommend?"

"The Captain's Grace – It's made with a tonne of fruits native to the homeworld. Quite toxic to humans but quite sweet to Can'ir tongues! They're trying to work out which ones are causing the humans to break out into hives though."

I nod, "I'll take that, then!"

Tah'lihn turns to the proprietor. "Two Graces, please, Ri'hen!"

"Coming up" He says, grabbing two glasses. "Who's the new guy?"

We both look at each other. I don't have a very Can'ir name at all.

"Ra'bhin" Tah'lihn quickly says. "He's started at the facility a few months ago, just showing him around the area!"

Ri'hen nods, grabbing a shaker and throwing a few berries and fruits into what looks like a cocktail shaker, a faint whirring can be heard as he starts to shake the container.

"Rare to see a Can'ir with no markings these days." he quips. "Thought you folks kept yourself to the homeworld?"

Tah'lihn interjects again "We just got done cleaning up the old markings, right? Gonna get you painted up some point this moon!"

I nod. "It's been quite the move, felt I was due some new markings."

Tah'lihn had explained the importance of the 'tattoos' that Can'ir have. Very few actually keep their fur undyed and they usually keep to the homeworld, keeping a more traditional natural lifestyle. We did plan to get my fur dyed at some point, but there was no immediate plans to get that underway any time soon. Tah'lihn wanted to run it by someone with some authority first before we started anything.

Ri'hen pops open the cap of the shaker, and pours the contents into the 2 glasses in front of him, a light red colour filling them. He places them in front of us. "Fair enough. Enjoy!"

I bring the drink up, and Tah'lihn clanks theirs against mine. I sip at the drink at first. Initially a faint sweet taste, and then a tangy burst at the back of my tongue. I shake my head. "Woah! That's a sweet taste, you weren't kidding"

Tah'lihn chuckles, taking a sip of theirs too. "Yeah, it's pretty sweet. Captain of the ship is a hell of a sweet tooth, it's nice as a treat every so often but it's a little too much to have too often"

We spend about 20 minutes talking and sipping the drinks, before heading back to the rehab facility.

Chapter 4

Onwards

“Docking at the Citadel. All passengers disembarking at the citadel or moving onto other destinations please disembark within 28 cycles” the inter-ship tannoy announces. “This is an extended docking session due to extreme circumstances.”

Tah’lihn comes in on their visit, but at this point it’s been 4 months, and they’re not worried about me suddenly collapsing because either body or mind is rejecting the other. But they ask if I’d be willing to travel to the homeworld. We’d come back to the Citadel at some point when the dust had settled, and travelling in lighter ships won’t take several months to get around like it does with World Ships.

We take steps onto the Citadel. Diplomatic centre of the Galaxy. With the arrival of a World Ship, activity is abuzz at the docks. Smaller transport ships coming and going to drop off passengers on either side. Even more abuzz when word around the docks that a new race is aboard. There’s been no real progress on what happened back on Earth – a lot of leaders of earth are hiding in shame, or dead. The remaining humans are trying to piece together what happened and prioritising finding their friends and families.

A few Can’ir are guiding Humans around the docks, preparing them for processing. A few had volunteered as ambassadors, talking to dock officials with World Ship officials helping them navigate this new bureaucracy and get “registered”, so to speak.

“I guess I got a little lucky, huh?” I mention to Tah’lihn.

“I guess, in a morbid way – though technically right now you officially don’t exist. You’re not going to be able to get past customs. A quick tour will have to wait. We ideally need to get you to the homeworld. We should be able to just embark a ship heading there without doing any documentation though.”

They lead me through the docks, into Bay 84. A relatively small ship awaits, able to hold about 20-30 people at most. Tah’lihn ushers me inside, into a small 5 seater cabin within. “Should only be a few hours at most to get us there, these things are pretty quick.”

Hidden lights backlight the room, giving it an ethereal blue-white glow. A silver-steel coloured table hinged to the wall separates two long black leather-like covered benches. Tah’lihn takes a seat on one side, and I slip on the other side, sitting opposite.

“So” Tah’lihn starts. “I gotta give you the rundown on the way there. It might be a bit much, so don’t hesitate to ask questions. I won’t overload you, I’ll just give you the basics of the Can’ir and who I’m going to take you to see.”

Tah’lihn waves their hand in an arc over the table, and it lights up and flickers to life as if it was a display. I sit back, slightly taken aback. “Oh right, The World Ship is a little rough around the edges, it’s pretty hard to get them upgraded to current standards. These things are everywhere.”

There’s a small glowing bracelet on their arm, presumably assisting in controlling this display.

Photos of distant worlds appear on the display. Tah’lihn flicks their wrist upwards, and they project into the air between us. One picture is of a highly technological cityscape. Another in the middle

shows a wide vista, looking over a clifftop. Sprawling forests of reds and greens and pinks can be seen as far as the camera can capture. Another is of a large camp, with semi-permanent looking structures set up around a central square.

“From what we’ve managed to gather from your surviving humans, humanity mostly centred themselves in large cities, not really moving all that much.” They bring the cityscape picture to the focus, overlaying it over the other two.

“You might be a little shocked to know that our biggest city on the homeworld is fairly small to your standards.”

They raise their hands, and slowly close them together. The picture zooms out slowly as they do this, showing the city framed by sprawling wilderness everywhere.

“We have very concentrated living spaces, letting nature sprawl everywhere else otherwise. We’re quite a nature-connected species. Our cities are largely automated with just a few maintenance workers in case the automation gets funny.”

They swipe down, dismissing the hologrammed picture back to the desk.

“Time for a history lesson” they say, bringing the campground picture to the fore.

I’d been a little absorbed in the explanation thus far, I hadn’t even noticed the ship undock and take off. It wasn’t until it banked left and tipped my stomach a little that I noticed. Tah’lihn noticed my sudden hurk.

“But first, a drink of water.”

They stood up, and slipped out of the door, leaving me alone for a few moments. I look around the room. It was so.. stereotypically sci-fi. Glowing blue lights, holograms.. I loved it. There was only faint humming filling the room. I look at the holograms floating in front of me, the magnificent views evoking a sense of wonder in me. I’d definitely love to visit these places.

The door slides open again, and Tah’lihn appears with two tall tumblers with lids. They place one of them down in front of me. The table adjusts, the section where the tumbler sat depressed a little.

“Neat, huh?” Tah’lihn grins. “These things are fairly new, adaptive desks are quite the engineering feat. It’ll hold onto the it if the ship starts banking too hard.”

I pick up the tumbler, and take a sip. Definitely water. The table’s surface re-levelled as I held it in my hands instead. Tah’lihn sits back down, setting their drink down after taking quite the gulp.

“Okay, so, a brief history on Can’ir”

The Can’ir are still a nomadic peoples, but were even moreso in the distant past. Can’ir don’t tend to stay in the same place for too long, but they don’t tend to move as a whole clan, they moved around in smaller groups – 3 or 4 people. The encampments they arrived that, they’d stay for a while. It wasn’t entirely concrete. Some would stay a few days before moving on, some stayed years, but it was usually somewhere in between.

The encampments would stay where they were, with the coming and going of small groups, the camps got bigger, better maintained, and they’d leave it as they found it, or better.

These camps grew into small towns, and even cities eventually. Technology developed and over time, they grew sprawling metropolises. These metropolises were downsized again over time to “compress” them, growing upwards rather than outwards.

“And that’s all you’ll generally need, unless you want a full history of our technological advancements!” Tah’lihn smiles, taking another sip of their drink. “Any questions?”

I shake my head. “Not yet, anyway”

“And now the final part” Tah’lihn cheerfully chirps. “A nice slideshow of the views of the homeworld! No more lecturing from me!”

Tah’lihn sits back, twirling their hand, and the last remaining photo expands across the table. After a few minutes, it crumbles away, and re-forms with another scene, a long coastline. Some odd structures are almost clambering upwards out of the ocean. Odd looking creatures scramble up them, some diving into the water.

“So, I never really asked, I suppose.” They lean in on the table. “It was all a bit manic back on the other ship, you were thrust into a pretty traumatic situation, your life flipped upside down and your identity has been upheaved and thrown to the seven stars. There was so much to work on before we docked, we barely had time, and the privacy”

They look a little serious, and sad at the same time.

“I’m so sorry that you had to go through that. You, and all of humanity. We’ve never had such an event requiring intervention before.” they rock their drink around a little. “The most important thing right now though, is.. How are you feeling?”

I look down at my drink for a moment, it’s cupped in my hands, resting on the table again. I lean in a bit. My brain racks.

How did I feel, though? I look up at the scrolling vistas.

Excited? Depressed? Refreshed? Completely defeated? Was I even Robyn any more? It was all swirling around inside me.

“I’ll be honest.” I eventually mutter. “I don’t entirely know. I’m feeling a lot of things.”

I look up at Tah’lihn again though and smile, a little pained. “But mostly an appreciation for you and the team for giving me a second chance. It’s been fascinating, and I’m sure the rest of humanity are thankful for being pulled from the literal frying pan.”

Tah’lihn smiles back. “It was the least we could do. We’d been casually monitoring signals coming out of Sol, but nothing in depth, then we noticed it went quiet. Then a large blast of noise hit us. We had to investigate, even if it involved us breaking protocol.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I dipped my head down again. Tah’lihn gets up, and scoots into the seat next to me, wrapping their arm around my shoulders, tugging me close. They don’t say anything. They just let me sob quietly.

I press my face into their shoulder. Their fur was soft.

I cried for a while.

Chapter 5

A New Life

My first gate jump was a surprise, for sure. Hopping mind-boggling galactic distances in mere minutes. I was expecting some serious G-Forces, but there was just little shudders when engaging and disengaging.

“How does it feel to be the first human – albeit not as a human – to come to Deoruta, the homeworld of the Can’ir?”

My tail wags a little, giving away my feelings – I’ll admit, a little excited. Why I was chosen to live like this and not someone else, I’m not sure, but I’ll sure as hell make the most of it.

“It’s not often non-Can’ir come to the planet, but there’s someone I need to talk to about you, and the project. It’d be best if you were there, if you’d be okay to come along? I’d understand if not, though.”

I nod. “Of course.”

Psshhttt. CLANK.

We’d docked on Deoruta. Tah’lihn gets up and peeps their head out of the door. “Guess we were one of the few on board today, c’mon, let’s get going.”

Stepping on the docks again, a pleasant smell wafts through the air. Deoruta had outdoor docks at the edge of the capital, the scent coming in from the wildlands was sweet like honey, with a faint scent of cinnamon.

We walk down the docks, and into a building. The clerks inside nod and wave us through. The docks here were pretty basic, no major lighting and mostly open sided and topped to allow air to flow naturally through the spaces. We navigate a few corridors, side passages leading to other docking bays, presumably. We reach the end of the corridor, and take a flight of stairs or two down to ground level, and step out into the city’s edge.

“Alright, first things first, I need to take you to my clan elder. I’ve been itching to get you dyed up but I don’t want to overstep any boundaries. The clan elder and the chief medical officer are going to be the only two people we tell about you – for now anyway.”

They lead me out towards a shelter on the edge of the city, and we take a seat. Tah’lihn swiped the air with their left hand over their bracelet, bringing up a small interface. The written language was odd, but again, the CTU had seen to it that I could read it – “Call Transport” – Tah’lihn pushed the button, and swiped down again to close down the bracelet interface.

“I’d really wish the world ships would get the networks for these things to work properly, they’re a damn sight more useful than hard interfaces”.

We sit there for a moment, presumably waiting for whatever transport this may be. The city proper looms in the distance, the buildings twice as high as any skyscraper I'd seen on earth, it was almost dizzying. I turn around to see the wilderness sprawling off on the other side of me. If I hadn't been in pain a lot over the last several months getting used to this body, I'd be certain this was a dream at this point.

I didn't notice the vehicle pull up until Tah'lihn tugged at my arm. "C'mon daydreamer! We got places to be."

The vehicle was sleek, and quite narrow. The side opened up vertically, showing a quite spacious interior. I took a seat on the passenger side, and Tah'lihn scooted around the side, and sat in the seat where the driver's wheel was.

"No driv—?" Of course there was no driver. Tah'lihn told me the cities were largely automated. "Stupid question, sorry."

Tah'lihn was fidgeting with the holographic display in the vehicle, typing in co-ordinates of a destination. The doors closed, and the vehicle hovered a bit, before lifting off into the sky.

"Wheel's here just in case the automation gets iffy. You gotta have a license for this type of transport – there's ones where you don't need one, it's manned by a maintenance worker though!"

We sit back, and I stare in awe out of the window as we float over expanses of forests. After around half an hour or so, the vehicle makes a bank down towards a small-ish town, parking up at a similar shelter and the doors hiss open again. We clamber out, and the scent is so much sweeter and cinnamon-y out here. My nose twitches in delight, and my ears wiggle happily. My tail is wagging ever so slightly.

Tah'lihn smiles watching my reaction to the scents. Can'ir noses were much more sensitive than humans', and I was experiencing it properly for the first time. Scents in spaceships and space stations were always a little bit muted, but down here where nature grows, oh man, my nose was practically tingling. I wanted to run into the trees for a bit, smell the flowers. Where was that sweet scent coming from? Which tree was it? What smelled like cinnamon?

I restrain myself from bolting into the woods, and follow Tah'lihn into the town. It's a vibrant array of smaller buildings stretching out maybe a mile in all directions at most from a large centre square in the centre. Lots of market stalls dot the area, a café or two behind all the stalls, with lots of housing or other unspecified buildings framing the town square. A larger building sits opposite the town square. I say larger, it's probably the size of a large house back on Earth, nothing like the metropolis we just came from. We walk towards it, while Tah'lihn gives me the rundown on her clan.

Relatively modern, though still hesitant to adopt the extremely automated systems that the larger towns and cities have adopted, lots of folks hustle and bustle to and fro between buildings, floating crates behind them as they dash about.

"Ah, it's market day." Tah'lihn says. "Busier than usual too! Stay close, last thing I want you doing is getting tugged away into the crowd."

Savoury scents waft around as we walk past several stalls boasting their homemade goods. I was so tempted to ask Tah'lihn if we could just stop a sec while I took a look at something, but they were walking with purpose. I guess they had an appointment to keep.

We take a step into the front doors of the building, and greeted by a Can'ir at a desk, tapping away under a holographic display. They look up and beam. "Tah'lihn! You're back!" They dart from behind the desk and hug Tah'lihn tightly, Tah'lihn returns the gesture. "Welcome back, Sister!"

"Thanks, Gi'rhen" Tah'lihn warmly says. "Is the Elder available?"

Gi'rhen nods, tapping a device attached to the inner side of their ear. "Tah'lihn is here with someone, should I send them through?... Will do." They move their hands from the device. "Head on through, she's waiting."

Gi'rhen smiles at me as we walk past him, I smile back, still unsure of proper etiquette right now. We walk a few yards before Tah'lihn knocks at a door. A sweet sounding voice calls out for us to enter, and we open the door and walk in.

There's a few wooden benches positioned around a circular room. The elder – a white-furred Can'ir sits on one of the benches. She gestures for us to sit on the benches directly opposite her, and we do so. I'm fidgeting a little nervously. The room is decorated with wooden sculptures, painted all kinds of vibrant colours. Incense of some kind burns in a device I'd never though could burn incense, a calming scent washing over us it reminds me of Jasmine. The floor was covered in a more natural sandy material, feeling soft on the paws, yet sturdy enough to walk on without slipping, a total contrast to the modern look of the rest of the inside of the building.

Tah'lihn looks a little bit more nervous than I'd seen them before, excluding that time when I was on the operating table, moments from death.

The elder gets up, and walks over to a cabinet, taking out 3 glossy wooden drinking vessels, and a flask. "So, Tah'lihn – what brings you back to Celestis?" The elder breaks the nervous silence. "I thought you were on a long journey through the stars to see all you could see? We weren't expecting you back for a few more years yet." She smiles though, happy to see Tah'lihn regardless. She gives the flask a little shake, and pours the contents out into the cups, sprinkling over a few pink blossoms into the cups

Tah'lihn nervously rubs their arm. "It's a bit of a long story.."

"And we have all the time we could ever want. Share your story, Tah'lihn." she brings the drinks over to us and placing them into our hands. It's filled with a light-pink fluid, and it smells sweet and flowery, but not too sweet like the Grace back on the World Ship. She sits back down, and takes a sip of the drink, and lets out a satisfied sigh.

Tah'lihn takes a sip of the drink, and their shoulders relax. I follow suit, the drink tasting flowery like I expected. The local flora brewed into a pleasant tea, most likely. Soothing.

They start to explain everything. They were on the world ship as part of a long journey to the edge of the galaxy where a lot of crews hadn't been before. While travel in these things was much slower, they were entirely self-sustaining, so they could voyage for decades, or even hundreds of years if need be. They happened to be near the sol system when all hell broke loose on Earth, and they scrambled into action to save humanity from living a nuclear hell.

The elder looks sad when she hears about the fate of our planet, and I can't hide my own displeasure at hearing the story again, I sip at the drink, soothing my nerves. My part in this story is coming up soon.

They mention the project that they were in charge of – Project Recover. How it planned to help a Can'ir recover from near death by simply transplanting their consciousness into a “clone”. Testing phases meant that actual clones couldn't be used, and a custom 'blank' was built for a possible test in the future. And they got that chance on the expedition

The elder looks at me, I guess she's twigged on that I'm part of this project, the 'blank'. I sheepishly sip my tea again, averting my eyes.

“Except.. we didn't test it with a Can'ir” they say, definitely nervous now.

“Oh?” The elder enquires. She's probably put two and two together at this point, but she's letting Tah'lihn say it in their own words.

“This Can'ir here.. was Human. They've been in the Can'ir body now for several moons, and they've progressed well. They've learned our language, and are eager to learn more about our way of life and culture. They—”

The Elder raised her hand, and Tah'lihn stopped talking. She puts her drink down to the side of her on the bench, and she stands up, walking towards us. I nervously do the same, the satisfying *clonk* of wood against wood. The elder places a long finger under my chin, and lifts my head up to look directly into my eyes. My tail points straight out, and my fur stands on end. I struggle to look away, her jade green eyes feeling like they're piercing into my very soul. She closes her eyes after a moment.

“Robyn” She starts.

My eyes widen. My name was never mentioned during the story. How did she--

“I can sense a curious nature in you, wanderer. One with the natural environment, yet adept with technology. A caring, considerate soul, with an intense passion for creativity. Left to burn and bleed alone on a dying planet” She says, quite intensely.

Tah'lihn hadn't mentioned my condition either through the story. Just that I was in a bad way.

“Your soul is colourful. Warm.” She tilts her head back, placing both her hands on my shoulders.

“Yes.” She exhales. She brings her head back down, opening her eyes to look at me again.

“You are Can'ir. You always were.”

Tah'lihn looked about as dumbstruck as I did, our mouths slightly open as she walked back to her seat, picking the cup back up, and taking a sip. My tail and ears twitched. Was I just... accepted?

Tah'lihn and the elder spent a while talking. I was in shock somewhat. Everything sounded muffled. My tail alternated between wagging and pointing straight out. At some point, my cup was taken from me, and filled again with the same floral tea.

Tah'lihn and the elder look at me, warm expressions on their faces. “You okay?” Tah'lihn asks. “You've just been spacing out there for the last few minutes. We were just talking about your name. It's obviously not very Can'ir..”

“Y-yeah, it is pretty human, I suppose.”

“We were mostly talking about what the elder divined when she peered into your soul. She was honestly surprised when I told her I really wasn’t pulling her tail, and that you were human.”

The elder nods. “Something like this has never happened in all the thousands of years we’ve been wandering the stars. It has been a pleasure divining such a young soul such as yourself.”

Snapped back to reality, we start talking names. The elder was almost insistent that I take a name based on the “water-attuned” soul I had.

Ji’hyn (Jee-hin) was the name we—I settled on. In Cant, it means “Water Seeker”

For now, before I was to go out, I was accepted into the clan here by the elder – the clan Celestis. From here, I was to be referred to by my new name, with a clan name to be specified if requested. “Celestis Ji’hyn” - Stars-Blessed Water Seeker.

“I must also insist that you experience a traditional name ceremony here before you leave again. We shall prepare things here, but I understand you must go see someone else too. Come back here before you return to the Citadel, at least.” she says.

Tah’lihn and I nod. “Of course, elder.” Tah’lihn says. “I wouldn’t let them off planet until we got some kind of ceremony for them.”. They both chuckle.

It was getting quite late. Tah’lihn made a call to someone that sounded important. They smiled and said “See you first thing tomorrow, then” and hung up.

“I don’t know about you, but after all that talking and sipping tea, I’m starving. Let’s get a bite to eat” they say, patting me on the shoulder. They make for a nearby food cart. The sun was starting to set, and the air was still warm, and a chill breeze was starting to come through. My fur did a fine job at keeping the chill off though, it was almost pleasant.

I follow along behind. The spicy-savoury scent wafting from the cart was tantalising, my nose was getting overloaded today, in a good way. As I get closer, I hear the sizzling of frying meat and vegetables. “How were you for spicy things before, Ji’hyn?” Tah’lihn asks, turning around to face me while walking backward towards the cart.

“Huh? Oh! Loved the stuff.” I beam. “Though with a new body.. let’s find out, I guess?” It did take me a moment to realise they were talking to me though, already using my new name. It’s gonna take some adjusting for sure. Though I already changed my name once before, I’m sure I’ll quickly adapt.

“Attaboy. Not sure how humans did spicy food back on Earth, but we can cook up a mean spice-mix!”

We approach the counter. This stand only sold one dish, conveniently, ‘Spice-mix’

“Two bowls please!” Tah’lihn cheerfully asks.
“Comin’ up”

I watched the cook grab a large pan that was sat sizzling for a few minutes, tossing the contents into the air and throwing some powders and dried leaves into the pan. The vegetables were mixes of reds, greens and blues, being tossed in a light orange coloured oil. Chunks of meat are stirred in. It smells absolutely divine, it tingles the back of my throat as I smell it. Or maybe I was just hungry.

Two cardboard-like bowls filled with the mixture are placed on the counter. I'm surprised when the cook doesn't take payment. Now that I think on it, Everywhere we'd eaten or had a drink, we'd not paid. I don't question it, though. Maybe there was some automated system charging?

Tah'lihn hands me what looks like a single chopstick. They grab their bowl and pierce a bit of food, and quickly pop it in their mouth. I grab the bowl from the counter, thanking the cook and doing as Tah'lihn does.

The spiciness doesn't hit for a few seconds, at first you just taste the flavours. Peppery and meaty, I toss it around my mouth and start to chew, and you start to feel the burn. It's a slow, almost pleasant burn, and as you swallow, it warms your chest.

Tah'lihn looks at me expectantly, while eating away at their food. I give them a thumbs up. They grin, cheeks full of food, and we continue to eat in silence at the side of the stall. Once finished, my whole body feels warm, despite the cold breeze blowing through the square as the sun finishes setting. We place the containers into a nearby bin, and walk between the buildings to shelter from the wind.

As we walk down the streets, gentle music can be heard coming from a few buildings. But we press on, trying to find a hostel. We round a corner, and we see a holographic sign peeking out.
Rooms available

"Perfect, like it was reading our minds. Head on in. I'll meet you outside here first thing in the morning. I can stay at a Clanmate's for the night, but she only has one bed available."

I stand there a little awkwardly at first. "Do.. Do I not have to pay?"

"Oh!" Tah'lihn is shocked, and then laughs. "I completely forgot. On the homeworld, we don't pay for the basics. The smaller towns down here get a lot of community work going on. As long as you keep it tidy and clean up after yourself, and help our your fellow Can'ir, a lot of things are covered. And if not, give me a shout. Be brave!" She smiles cheekily. "Good night, Ji'hyn"

They walk off, leaving me in front of the hostel. I stay stood there for a few moments, a little baffled and nervous.

I step inside and wave down the clerk. "Just yourself tonight--? Oh! A new person!" The clerk has an almost sing-songy voice, leaning underneath the counter to get a device. "Just put your paw over this, it'll sign you in here."

I dutifully do as told, and a little chirp emerges from the device.

"Huh, not registered?"

"It's a long story" I say. "I'm.. not sure how everything works here, I'll admit."

"Oh! That's okay!" She notices the lack of dyes in my fur. Probably a new wanderer in town from the traditional clans. "Just let me know your name, and I can manually get you signed in for now."

“Ji’hyn”

“Beautiful name..” She pauses as she finishes typing in my name to the system, humming a gentle song. “And that’s you signed in. You’re in the room at the very back and to the left. Have a good night!” She hands me a pile of bedding and a pillow or two.

I walk down the corridor, and into the room that was mentioned. I close the door behind me, and then sit on the bed. Comfortable.. And quiet. And lonely, for the first time in a long time. My mind drifts.

The last few days have been a total whirlwind. The last few months even moreso. Even now, I’ve lived in this body for at least 5 months, I spent 4 months before that completely comatose inside it. My human form died on that operating table when the switch was flicked.

In less than a year, I’ve gone from living a normal human life, to being on some end of the Milky Way, inhabiting an alien body, inducted into a new clan and way of life.. It was exhilarating, sure.. But.. Who am I?

Did Robyn, the human even exist any more? Of course they did. They’re me.

But I’m also Celestis Ji’hyn, a Can’ir.

Where did the lines blur? Did they even blur? Or are they one in the same? Has Ji’hyn pushed out Robyn, to be consigned to the back of a mind?

I tell myself I did it to survive, but there was some part of me seeking a fresh start for a long time before Earth fell. This was the opportunity of a lifetime. I had to take it, both as a personal journey and a survival tactic.

Travelling and seeing new cultures was always a dream of mine, here I am living it to an extreme. But why do I feel so uneasy?

Survivor’s guilt?

Billions of humans were dead, a hell of a lot of them way more important, and useful than me. And here I am, getting a VIP survival package. Pure fuckin’ luck. I need to get back to the Citadel as soon as I can. I need to help everyone I can. I can’t waste this opportunity.

I lie back on the bed, and close my eyes. I was out like a light. I really was tired.

Chapter 6

Revelation

I wake up. I'd gotten an okay amount of sleep, but my mind wandering last night had me dreaming of my old life. My friends and family. I missed them dearly. Did they survive? I had to know. I wipe a stray tear from the eye and sit on the edge of the bed again.

I shake my head and stand up. Bundling up my bedding into my arms and exiting the room. I bundle the bedding into the washer, thank the clerk at the counter, and exit the building. I look around, Tah'lihn isn't anywhere at the moment. Guess I was up early? I lean against the wall opposite the hostel, and wait.

Eventually, Tah'lihn rounds the corner holding 2 large buns and thrusts one into my hands.

"Morning! Was worried I was gonna have to come knocking, C'mon, we gotta head back to the city. It's time for a boring meeting, you can stay quiet mostly on this one, I promise, no existential panicking this time"

We walk towards the outside of town, silently eating our buns. A bread like bun, a little like a Bao back on earth, but definitely breadier and tougher. Ripping through into the centre, a paste that had a savoury taste but I couldn't place if it was vegetables of meat or a mix, but it was tasty, and definitely filling a grumbling, empty belly.

We repeat the journey back to the city, Tah'lihn explains during the trip in the cab that the meeting we're doing today is essentially their report into the tech that gave me second chance. They needed to report the success, and the non-standard "configuration" that has been used. They weren't going to get into any trouble as it was their project, but it was a proof of concept that worked and there was potential here for a wider scale disaster recovery. They'd like to "show me off" so to speak, if that was okay.

How could I say no to a little more nervousness when I've been given a literal second life?

We walk through a tall office-looking building, and meander into an empty office, we take a seat on a couch by the window, and we're both somewhat nervously fidgeting a little. Someone walks in with glasses of water, and places them onto the table before us. "The Director will be down soon"

We both simultaneously pick up the glasses and sip. Tah'lihn had way more reason to be nervous than I did, I was just *The Body* so to speak, this was Tah'lihn's life work and she was about to present it as a life-changing advancement.

The Director entered, completely black-furred with white ear tips, quite a bit shorter than most Can'ir we'd seen so far, but still taller than any human. We stand up and perform a typical formal greeting. I'd never done it before, so laying both hands on the other's shoulders and bumping heads lightly was certainly something when I've been used to handshakes. It felt a bit over the top.. But I was new to this. I'd get used to things in time.

"Tah'lihn, I see you bring me good tidings regarding your project!" She grins while talking. Her voice is quite commanding and gruff. Not quite as rough as Tah'lihn's, though.

She looks at me after greeting Tah'lihn. "I'm Iri'hn, it's a pleasure meeting you...?" She leads her question.

"Ji'hyn!" I finish. "A pleasure to meet you too, Director"

She smiles, and she ushers us to sit. As promised, I get to sit mostly silent in this one. However I do hear the details of what happened after the switch was flicked, and my human form was abandoned. However, the detail that I was human is omitted for now, as Tah'lihn details the technology around the consciousness transfer and how it works. Iri'hn is recording the talk and watching Tah'lihn talk, enraptured.

"Fascinating! This truly is quite the work of art, and a medical miracle, Tah'lihn! This truly could do wonders in disaster recovery on the frontiers, or even on long-term discovery missions!"

Tah'lihn did have one request to make of the director, though it was probably already gleaned by the way that they talked about the technology. They'd like it so that it isn't used for any vanity projects – defeating ageing, designing looks, that kind of thing. The Director agrees, while it was a miracle that it worked, it was still quite a bit too risky to be offering it to people who just want to modify their aesthetics.

Iri'hn stops the recording, satisfied with the report given

"There.. is one thing I neglected to mention." Tah'lihn starts. "And why it took me a little while to get word back of a success, as we succeeded around 8 moons ago." Iri'hn went to turn the recorder back on, but Tah'lihn interjected before she could. "I'd like this to stay off the record – for now at least."

Iri'hn's ears twitch, and her head tilts. "Oh?"

"Ji'hyn... used to be Human."

"Human--?" Iri'hn's eyes widen. "Those peoples who were rescued by the World Ship and docked up at the citadel a few days ago?!"

News travels fast, it seems. I sheepishly avert my eyes, rubbing my arm nervously. Iri'hn looks over at me. Tah'lihn taps me on the arm and smiles. "It's okay"

I look back up, and Iri'hn has a look of wonder on her face. "Truly?"

I nod. Not really first contact, humanity had been on the Citadel a few days at this point, but I was the first one a non-medical person was probably talking to.

Tah'lihn resumes their explanation of the disaster back on Earth, why they intervened to save us, and the trauma my body was under when I was offered *this*. The rehabilitation I underwent, the learning I did, and a mention that we went to the Celestis elder for blessings.

"I did wonder why you didn't have any paints on you if you succeeded 8 moons ago! Fascinating! So it could potentially work on different peoples too!"

She looks back at me, almost sparkles in her eyes. "I could ask you so much, but I could sit here and talk to you for days on end. But I'm sure a lot of things are hurting right now and I wouldn't want to subject you to painful memories quite so soon after quite the journey you've been on."

Chapter 7

A New Home

Two days pass, and I've been learning a little about the culture of the Can'ir homeworld, how it differs from the Can'ir out in the galaxy somewhat. Deorutan Can'ir pride themselves on their connection to nature, and their sustainability.

The planet was at least 70% just wilderness and natural spaces. They have a very communal society, living and working together to keep things up and running without the promise of reimbursement, as the reward was keeping everything ticking over.

I try so many new foods and drinks, which my Can'ir tongue is suited for, and I'm overwhelmed with so many new flavours, I'd struggle to even describe. You know when you eat something new for the first time, and you *love* it? It's been like that, over and over. Spices are everywhere, even the simplest of dishes carries a lot of spice. Food vendors litter the Celestis clanship, unique spins on buns, kebabs, mix-bowls.. I could stay here for weeks and not experience everything!

Today was the naming ceremony. Normally they celebrate several namings together, but the Elder has insisted this was a special occasion. She hadn't told anyone of my nature, but I was "quite important" – I guess I understood in a way, but I certainly felt the love coming from the Can'ir and their curious, generous spirit.

Tah'lihn leads me to the town square, and the drums start to thunder in the distance as we approach. My stomach turns in nervousness.

"Normally the naming ceremonies are for the pups" Tah'lihn giggles. "But sometimes we throw them for adults who change their names!"

We stand at the edge of the square, watching the drummers on the town hall stairs play rhythmically, members of the clan in the square dancing to the beat. I'd eaten my weight in street food over the last 2 days of exploring.. But the smells wafting through were making my stomach rumble. I could really go for another Spice-Mix right now.

Anyone not dancing was eating, talking, or talking to crafts vendors.. It really was a huge deal, huh?

The elder steps out of the town hall, arms spread wide, and stands behind the drummers. They stop their playing, and the square goes silent. "Newcomer!" She calls out.

Tah'lihn gives me a gentle shove from behind. "Go on!"

I walk out into the square, towards the steps. The drumming starts again, lower and quieter. Everyone's looking. They're smiling. Some throw flowers and leaves over me. Some rush out and drape beads around my neck, gift me jewellery that they put on my wrists.

I arrive at the bottom of the steps as the elder does as well. I'm absolutely covered in beads, flowers, and leaves. She brushes off the leaves and flowers that didn't fall as I walked, and she places her hands on my shoulders, pressing her forehead to mine. She whispers a few things into my ear, that the crowd wouldn't be able to hear. "I do hope our way of life is a welcoming, breath of

fresh air for you, child. The torment I witnessed in your soul that day was truly overwhelming, and I would be honoured if you could truly call yourself Can'ir some day. You are most certainly one of us."

She beckons two Can'ir over, both carrying matching wooden bowls, decorated with an ornate pattern. One carries a small amount of red powder, the other a blue powder.

She pours water into both from a bottle on a leather strap on her waist, using two different brushes to mix the powders into the water. Dyes.

She starts with the red dye first, The brush poking into my forehead, and she gives the brush a twirl or five, spinning it in place. She moves behind me, and paints more into the backs of my long ears. She's smiling as she returns to my front, placing the brush with the red dye back into its bowl, and picking up the brush with the blue dye. She returns to my forehead, and with a careful sweeping motion, she paints a crescent moon around the red circle she painted. She moves around to my back again, painting above the circles drawn on my ears with more crescent sweeping shapes.

"There!" She exclaims. "He is now one of us. Celestis – Stars-Blessed!" She smiles, placing her hands on my shoulders again. "I name you Ji'hyn!" She embraces me, squeezing me tightly.

The square goes deathly silent for a moment before the drummers are joined by players of wind instruments, a high-pitched joyous tone piercing through the rumbling of drums. The crowd erupts into dancing and throwing their remaining flowers into the air. For the first time in about 5 moons... I felt welcomed. Home, even. Tears well up into my eyes as I return the hug with the Elder.

"Thank you.. Thank you so much, from the bottom of my heart. I've never so welcome in all my life, and I've only known you all for a few days.. I'm truly blessed to be here." I say to her, trying to hide the overwhelming emotion threatening to spill out.

"Now, my child, Tah'lihn brought you to us. We can't have you out there clanless now, can we? And the trauma.. The hardship.. the learning I saw.. You deserve a hero's welcome."

I squint my eyes closed, tears starting to roll down my face at this point. My face presses into her shoulder, and I sob. One arm wraps around my middle, the other gently pets the top of my head from behind. She embraces me for a moment, before pulling back, and wiping the tears from my eyes.

"Now go and celebrate with everyone else. I won't have you crying up here." She smiles.

We walk down the steps together, and join the crowd, tears still in my eyes. I spend the rest of the day dancing, eating, drinking and talking, even into the night. My clanmates are welcoming as they see me. Embracing me, forehead bumping, welcoming me to the clan, introducing me to others, showing me their favourite places..

I had a new home. I was home.

Chapter 8

Colours

The next day, Tah'lihn takes me to their favourite Celestis dye artist.

“The markings the Elder gives you are alright for a few days but they’re not applied quite as well as they could be, ceremony thing and all that.”

A jingle occurs when the door to the studio opens, and the artist looks up from their current canvas. “Oh, Tah'lihn! And Ji'hyn! A pleasure to meet you! Give me a sec!”

He dusts down his hands and cleans them. He’s been working on a landscape painting by the looks of things, with some interesting techniques involving his fingers. After his hands are dried, he embraces Tah'lihn first, and then me. I’d gotten used to it after meeting half the clan yesterday, and I hug him back.

“What can I do you for?” He asks, though I’m pretty sure he knows what’s coming.

“I was wondering if you’d apply some dyes on me? I ask. “Tah'lihn here recommends you highly”

He grins at me. “A willing canvas!” He’s almost giddy with excitement as he gathers up his dyes, almost tripping over scattered boxes. “Most Can’ir self-apply the markings these days so its not often I get asked. Take a seat, take a seat!” He gestures at the bed at the side of the studio.

“I’ll leave you boys to it” Tah'lihn says, as they leave. “I’ll be in the town square when you’re done!”

He pulls along a little trolley full of powders, inks and water. And sits on a chair next to me. “So, what’re you thinking? Pointy stuff? Swirly stuff?”

I think back to Tah'lihn’s markings, the elder’s markings, and all the other Can’ir I’d run into on my journey, there was lots of different styles, all with different meanings. Swirly stuff usually meant you felt kind of stuck in a rut, spinning and spinning until you find yourself again. Pointy stuff means progress. Going forwards.

“Pointy Stuff. I’m feeling good!”

“I’d hope so, after that ceremony yesterday! Which was beautiful, by the way.” He smiles. “The Elder went all out for you, you must be something special. Anywhere in particular you want the markings?”

I hadn’t really thought about it in fairness. I decide that trusting the artist would probably be the best choice.

“Keep the head markings the same I guess, but otherwise go wild, I’m happy to let you have fun adding ‘em!”

His tail wags, and he picks up the brushes and powders. Faint clinks as he stirs powders and inks into bowls.

About 3 hours later, I emerge from the studio, painted up from head to toe. My shins, thighs, forearms and upper arms have large chevrons, a red on underneath a blue one. My knees have the Celestis clan marking – a solid red circle with a blue crescent shape wrapping around the top.

Just below my ribs, and wrapping around my sides and around my back a little are blue and red stripes. My wrist also has the chevrons on them as well.

A small addition has been placed onto the back of my head, the long fluff there now sports two inverted chevrons, in addition to the large hollow red circles with the blue sweep on the back of my ears.

My calves also have the inverted chevrons, lower down compared to the higher position on my shins.

I don't stick out like a sore thumb any more! We spent the session talking about my journey. From learning how to walk on the World Ship - I didn't mention I was human, just that I was badly injured - the travel from the citadel, my first time on Deoruta, my talk with the elder (omitting key details, of course). He was almost fascinated that I'd never been to the homeworld until now.

"Ji'hyn, that is an absolutely fascinating journey you've been on.. No wonder the Elder wanted to give you a hell of a party." he says, finishing up a last few brushstrokes, before using a hot-air blower to dry the markings

"I'm sure you've been shown around the place well enough by Tah'lihn and the others, but you ever need someone to talk to or show you a nice spot, you come to me anytime, brother"

He claps me on the back indicating he's all done. "It's been an honour to get you painted up, you know where to come if you fancy a change! Now you get gone, I'm sure Tah'lihn is pacing around out there and getting bored. That, and you've given me some ideas, and I gotta get to doodling!"

I thank him for his time again, and wave as I step out of the door back into the street, heading back towards the town square to meet up with Tah'lihn.

They grin as they see me crossing the square with my markings, The Celestis markings on my legs, covered in chevrons.. I was looking forward with positivity. They dash across the square and basically tackle me into a hug. It looks like the markings are quite important to how a Can'ir is feeling when they get those markings put on. I guess Tah'lihn might have been worried that I wasn't handling the upheaval all that well, but the appearance of the chevrons and clan markings told everyone that I was feeling good and brimming with love for the clan.

Chapter 9

Procession

A few days later, Myself and Tah'lihn are back at the World Ship. I'm looking around at the hustle and bustle of the docks. Can'ir. Feln. Chron. A couple of scarred humans limping around. I'd gotten registered as a Can'ir citizen back on the homeworld after the naming ceremony, so I'd be able to get through customs with no problems now.

Stepping through embarking, and taking a small elevator up a few levels, the doors open up to a walkway, with a hell of a view of a long parkway. Glittering buildings line the sides of the parkway, cabs flitting to and fro across it.

Tah'lihn had set their assistants to work in helping humanity get through the bureaucracy, becoming registered, and it was quite the monumental effort. They were barely a half done, even with the whole dock and surrounding districts being dedicated to processing people.

Posters, photos, and handwritten notices litter the walls, people looking for family, friends, and lost loved ones lost in the hellfire of Earth. I only briefly glance as we pass them, heading towards one of the major processing centres, the reality of everything coming back to hit me in the chest. We were here to help, even if we were only two more agents processing and directing humans, the more the merrier.

After a quick rundown of where we were sending folks, where to send depending on injury levels and former earth locations, we're put to work in the largest processing hall. I'm handed an earpiece for translating, and Tah'lihn exchanges device IDs with me to get in contact easier later. We separate and take different booths.

I have to take frequent breaks. The suffering of my people-- my former people, I guess, is a little too much at times. I've not seen anyone I recognise yet, but I wasn't expecting to. I don't know how I'd react if I did. We were still keeping my status as "Former-Human" under wraps for now. We weren't sure if we'd ever reveal it. Was there any need, if we couldn't find my loved ones?

Humans shuffle through the room. I'm sitting at a desk, and beckon a human over, and he's surrounded by 3 kids. They're holding onto his jacket and he winces as he walks. He sits, looking a little confused.

I reach under my desk, and pull out 4 earpieces. I demonstrate how it works by taking mine off, showing off the clip on the back of it. I pull it back, and slip it on at the base of my ear. I take the earbud that's attached to the clip, and push it into my ear. I tap the metallic surface of the earpiece that's clipped onto my ear, and it lights up blue, indicating it's ready to use.

I watch the human do the same, struggling a little wondering where to put it. I reach over a little, tapping lightly at the top of his ear. He taps the metallic surface, and it blinks blue.

"Is it working?" I ask in Cant.

"I.. I understand you--!" he says.

I gesture to the kids, and then motion to the earpieces. "Might want to put it on for the rest of them" I smile warmly. The kids look a little confused. Cant when not being translated or understood can sound like growling and yapping. Their father could understand it?

They're all only around three, four and five years old. The human starts to clip the earpieces on them, tapping to wake up the devices.

"Okay, test two. Can you understand me?" I ask.

The kids are shocked, they suddenly understand the talking wolf-man in front of them. They nod, though.

"Good, good." I smile again. "Let's get started, shall we?"

I start to explain a summary of what's to come during this registration process, where they'll be staying during the the registration process, and what we might expect happens after everyone is processed. The kids are a little fidgety, but they're fascinated by the tall wolf-man talking in growls, yet still being able to understand him.

"Can I take your names?"

The older human is called David. His youngest daughter is Alice, his middle Son is Josh, and his eldest son is Robert. The tell me where they're from – the USA – and the small town they're from. He asks if I've processed anyone from the same town. I shake my head.

"But before we get you to your accommodation, we need to get you checked out medically, just to make sure you're not too injured or the like. Follow me"

I stand up and move around my desk, offering my arm to the human as a support. He winces as he reaches out and pulls himself up. The kids are still holding onto him as we walk out of the hall, and into a medical room. I gesture for them all to take a seat. "Wait right here, I'll be back with a medic"

I step out of the room, and go to fetch a medic. I catch one in the hallway. A burly Feln, even taller than us Can'ir. He follows me into the medical room. They look a little more nervous at the presence of the more animalistic looking presence.

Feln are a peoples who also lost their homeworld, thus a disproportionate number of volunteers of the processing are Feln, sympathetic to the humans' plight. While they may be around 7 and a half feet tall on average, barrel chested, hunched posture and long claws about the length of their forearm (that they can thankfully retract), it's understandable that the already tense humans might react nervously.

However, their speaking voices are naturally calmer, and melodic compared to the barking and growling Can'ir. They're not entirely at ease, but not running out of the room in fear, so that's good.

While the medic attends to David, my earpiece chirps. It's a quick pre-recorded message from Tah'lihn. "Give me a buzz when you're free, I'm starving and I've come across something you might be interested in, can chat over some food."

Good point. We'd not eaten since early in the cycle and it'd been a good half-cycle since then.

I approach the medic, asking if there was anything I could do to help – he asks me to mind the kids for a moment while he re-dresses this bandage. David had a pretty hefty wound on his side, the cause of his hobbling. The kids were looking on, slightly worried. I wave at them to catch their attention. They didn't seem terribly injured, if at all.

I crouch down beside them, just a little above eye level with them. While not as tall as Feln, Can'ir were still quite tall, averaging 7 foot 5 (226cm) . I was 7 feet and 2 inches tall.

“Hey” I smile at them. “What’s been your favourite thing about the ship so far?”

They all nervously look at each other a little.

“Mine’s that forest with all the pink trees!” I say, encouraging them.

“M-mine too” says Robert.

“I-- I liked the food, the wolf-men made everything very carefully for us” Alice says.

Josh has a little think for a moment. “Miss... Mister? Where do you all come from? We never saw you back at home!”

I chuckle a little. “you don’t have to call me Mister, you can call me...” I think for a second. “Ji! I’m not from your home – I’m from a long, long way away. My home is called Deoruta. It’s a very beautiful place.” I think back to the few days at Celestis – the food, the sights, the smells..

Josh pipes up again. “Can you tell me about.. Dee.... Rute?”

“Of course I can, pup” I grin.

I tell them of the views of the forests as you fly into Celestis, the sprawling reds, greens and pinks of the trees growing around the settlements. When you land outside town, the cinnamon sweet air blowing in off the forest. When you step into town, about the smooth cobblestones lining all the streets, and all the street vendors offering the tastiest food I’d ever eaten. The smells tingling every part of your nose. The narrow streets with pleasant music coming out of the buildings as you walk by.

“When someone has a birthday, the whole town comes to celebrate in the town centre. There’s drummers, and other musicians. Everyone dances in the town and the birthday Can’ir gets a special ceremony!”

The kids are hooked on my every word.

“Mister Ji, I want to visit Dee-rute!”

“Me too!”

I chuckle at them as they beg for more information. The medic taps me on the shoulder, he’s done cleaning up David’s wound and re-bandaging it for now.

“Alright kids, your turn. Don’t be scared now, the doc just needs to give you a quick look over.”

I slide over to sit by David while the kids try and quiz the medic about his home now.

“You doin’ alright?” I ask.

“I’m still here, ain’t I?” he replied, wincing as he adjusts in the seat. “Thanks for distractin’ ‘em at least. They get panicky when they see my wound.” He goes quiet for a bit. “Dee-o-rutah sounds nice, I’d.. love to see it.”

I chuckle as he tries to pronounce Deoruta. “Hopefully you can, it’s truly as beautiful as I say.”

We sit in silence as the doc checks over the kids, but they’re fine. I thank the doc, and let him get back to the rounds.

I beckon them to follow me for the final steps, becoming “official”, so to speak. We join a group heading for shuttles to take them off the World Ship.

Landing at the docks, I usher them into a room where a clerk awaits to get them officially registered as galactic citizens.

“David, Alice, Josh, Robert. It has been a pleasure meeting you. I wish you the best” I bow, and then wave at the kids as I leave them with the Clerk.

I sigh as I close the door. “It’s not getting any easier” I mumble at myself under my breath.

I tap my earpiece, enabling the viewer mode. A holographic visor appears before my eyes. I swipe the air in front of me, scrolling to find Tah’lihn’s contact, and tap “Call”.

“I’m at the docks, where we eating?”

Chapter 10

Reconnection

I sit in a stunned silence.

Tah'lihn had run into my partner briefly. They'd been processed and were guided to the accommodation by Tah'lihn.

They'd asked Tah'lihn if they'd seen or heard from me at all. Tah'lihn, sworn to keeping quiet about my actual nature had to say no at the time, but.. They couldn't not tell me.

They're alive..

"Ji'hyn, don't forget, we have to keep your status somewhat secret. At least for now. We can't go barging in there straight away. Let me put a few words in a few ears, I can get a meeting arranged--"

"Believe me, my partner can keep a secret."

"And I'm not saying I don't believe you, but I have to play it safe."

I slowly start to eat again, thoughts rushing through my mind. Sure I was still alive.. but would they accept me as a non-human? I'd like to believe they would but.. for real? Would they even believe us? *Here's your boyfriend, he's a 7 foot 2 Can'ir now but it's definitely him we promise.*

That sounds absolutely ridiculous. But it was reality. It's been 10 moons since I'd even heard off them, my heart ached the more I thought about them.

"Yeah. I just.. I miss them a lot. It's been 10 moons since.. well, everything."

We sit and discuss a little more. About the times we had back on Earth. How we met. How much I trusted them, and how I can definitely trust them with this information – about me.

Tah'lihn talks about how she can try and explain it so that I'm not just suddenly introduced as a Can'ir but without giving the false hope that I was still human. We had to make it critical that they didn't tell anyone else about me still being alive, without coming across suspicious and plotting something nefarious.

We come up with a plan, and it involves telling them something important about an unspecified friend at first. As far as we're aware, they're alone for the time being. Which just makes my heart hurt even more. But we run off the assumption they're keeping to themselves for the time being while the dust settles.

Tah'lihn has an office here on the Citadel, and it's where we decided to reveal myself to my partner. Tah'lihn makes the call, and asks for them to come up. One of Tah'lihn's assistants meets them at their apartment, and brings them to the office. I sit in the corner nervously as the elevator signals arrival.

My partner – Diesel – arrives in the office, just behind the assistant. They look quite nervous. It's taking every ounce of restraint I have to not run up and hug them. They didn't look too worse for wear. A few scratches here or there..

Tah'lihn introduces themselves, and gives a polite bow, and gestures for Diesel to take a seat. I'm sat in a couch at the side of the room for now, observing.

"My friend over here is Ji'hyn. He's another of my assistants." I bow my head. They raise a hand in greeting at me.

They're right there. Just run over and hug them. Kiss them. It's been so long.

No. That would only utterly freak them out. I clench my hand into a fist, restraining myself.

I can see the translator device in Diesel's ear blinking away. Tah'lihn coughs nervously before leaning on their desk.

"I called you up here as we had a bit of information on one of your missing friends. Normally, such things aren't kept secret, but there's some.. need for discretion in this case."

Diesel asks who it's about, and what the problem is.

"It's... Robyn." Tah'lihn says.

Diesel's eyes widen. They stand up. "Where is he? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong – technically" Tah'lihn quickly tries to calm them down. "Right now, he's fine. But we need to explain some things first."

Diesel sits back down, as Tah'lihn starts to explain the state of my human body when it was brought aboard. How they did everything they could to stabilise it. They talked to me through a machine that could reach through a coma.

Diesel's eyes well up with tears. "How is that—?"

Tah'lihn quickly holds up a hand. "As I said, right now, he's fine. He's more than fine, but this is probably going to be a shock to you, and I want you to be sat down and calm."

Tah'lihn passes over a mug of the pink tea, and they take a sip.

"I know how it sounds. *He's fine, but it's going to be a shock.* It sounds a little contradictory" she says, finger quoting.

"We gave Robyn a few choices while we were talking to him through the coma. The damage rendered was just too much, even for us to fix at the time. And he chose... he chose.." They choked up, struggling to describe the option. They didn't want to upset Diesel.

Diesel's eyes were fixed on Tah'lihn. Tah'lihn could barely look at Diesel out of nervousness. It was tense. I stand up. Tah'lihn and Diesel both looked over at me.

"I chose to lose my body."

I take a single step forwards towards them.

"I... didn't have much choice, Diesel. I'm sorry. Everything else was basically a death sentence in varying timescales. This was my best chance of living."

Diesel stands up. "Robyn.. is that you? Is that really you?"

“Yeah.”

I chuckle a little, trying to lighten the mood. “Though officially I’m Ji’hyn now.”

I recall a moment only we’d know happened. Our first date. It was more of a stay at theirs kind of date, but it was still a date. Their eyes well up, and they run across the room and basically tackle me. Their arms barely wrap around my lower back, and their face presses into my torso, sobbing. I crouch a little, and wrap my arms around them, holding them close, and resting my chin on their head.

“I’m here.. It’s okay.” I give them a small kiss on the top of their head, brushing their hair back. “I won’t lose you again. I can’t lose you again. The last 10 moons have been agonising.”

Tah’lihn and I explain everything. The choices I was offered. The choice I made. The slow rebuilding of a second chance. The rebirth of becoming Can’ir, of getting a clan.

Of losing my humanity.

It had been 10 moons since I became Can’ir, and it felt... right. I’ve never felt better. Like it was meant to be. Like the elder said – I’ve always been Can’ir. I’ve not been human for a while.

Robyn was still there, of course. But Ji’hyn was to carry on where Robyn left off. An ambassador where one was needed. But not until the dust settled.

Chapter Eleven

Reminisce

You know when you have a quiet moment to yourself, and your mind starts to wander? I've not had too many of those. Ever since docking at the Citadel, it's been kind of go, go, go for a month straight. I've been heading to Diesel's and passing out, or they've been coming to my apartment, and I've promptly passed out on them. But now everything's processed and now it's just a case of getting settled? I have time to think.

It's been.. unnerving, in a way. Now everything is settling down, it's really starting to sink in – I'm no longer human.

This wasn't just a temporary jaunt while my body was in for repairs or what have you. This was for-real-permanent. There was no turning back. I was asked what I'd like to do with my human remains. They obviously didn't know human burial practices at the time. My old body was cremated, and the ashes scattered in a memorial garden on the Citadel.

I'm sitting here now in my apartment. And I think back to Earth.

It all happened so suddenly. One moment everything was fine.

A blink.

We're obliterated.

Billions of lives. Billions of stories, hundreds of cultures. Just... gone. For what? What purpose could any military power on earth have decided that ending all life on earth was the best outcome?

I'm simultaneously confused and furious. But the grief is keeping my temper at bay. No-one on the citadel is at fault, there's no-one alive that we know of to be angry at. If there is anyone alive, they're probably hiding in shame with false names. There's been no reports of any senior government officials or military personnel spotted, so the general consensus is that they perished in the war. Either that or they sealed themselves into vaults knowing it was coming, but wasn't expecting anything like *this* to happen on the surface.

Either way, Earth is now abandoned. Anyone there now has been killed or abandoned in undetectable bunkers. The only peoples authorised to visit would be sanctioned visits from the Citadel leadership, with only good reasons permitted. The surface is toxic, burned, or covered in craters. Nothing really remains.

I remember telling Tah'lihn about all the wonderful places on Earth that I'd been to. That I remember fondly. The travels I took. The places I always wanted to visit. The kindness of people I'd never spoken to in my life before. It was all gone. I'm still grieving now. The homeworld – Deoruta – is fantastic, sure. But..

Nothing quite matches walking through Shibuya, Tokyo at night. The lights stretching for miles around, the scramble outside the station.

The peaceful walks through Sherwood Forest. Birds chirping, leaves rustling in autumn as creatures scamper around. Trees as far as you can see in all directions. The majesty of Major Oak.

The quirky shops in Manchester. Specialist food shops wafting delicious scents against a backdrop of industrial England.

It was all gone. The actions and words of about 30 greedy, selfish people led to the obliteration of so much good. So much life. So much potential. It was hard to not be angry. But there's no-one left to be angry *at*. And I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not.

Humanity has started again. A hard reset, so to speak. Leaderless and lacking a homeworld, they're learning how the rest of Galaxy works and integrating as best they can. They and the Fel'n are fast friends, both peoples having lost their homeworlds, albeit under extremely different circumstances.

With about a month passing since the Humans arrived at the Citadel, they were slowly integrating into the systems and culture here, and enriching it with their own cultures. Things are looking up, even if roughly 96% of them were wiped out. There is grief, angry outbursts (of course, not aimed at anyone on the Citadel), and other consequences of what could rightfully be called an extinction event, had the Can'ir not intervened.

I think back to the operating table 11 moons ago. The choices I was given. And how it could have gone so very differently. That day, several miracles happened. I count myself utterly blessed to have been given this chance. Even now, it still doesn't feel real.

But of course, it's me. In my previous life, a ball of anxiety and depression. While my new peoples are welcoming and friendly, there's a little part of me deep down that feels I wasn't worthy of this set of miracles. Why was I the person saved? They could have gotten literally anyone else.

Sure, I was messed up and basically a corpse, but there's others out there who were alive and breathing and even now, 11 moons in, still recovering. They could have benefited so much more. There's people out there recovering who held more useful positions and had more applicable skills than I do. Who have more experience in disaster recovery, leadership, morale building.. But they got me. Just... some guy.

I've been doing what I can to make up for it. An occasional all-nighter here or there to help some humans get some documentation filled out correctly. Running myself ragged trying to re-connect families and friends. Directing humans around the citadel. Talking and listening to those struggling with it all. While I'm doing this, I'm learning how Galactic life operates while I'm 'on the job' too. I've always had a bit of a knack for winging it, but I did need to learn eventually.

Though Tah'lihn tells me I'm working too hard and has forbidden me from trying to help any more for now. "I didn't save you to watch you burn metaphorically too!"

So this is why you're getting this thing. My story, and my new life.

Of course, this is just for me, Just a thing to get my words out for now. No-one can really know I was human before. At this point it would be too weird to announce it. But now I think on it, the Celestis elder was right. While I'm sat here getting all mopey about not being worthy of being saved.. I've never felt better about who – and what I am, than I am right now.

I was always Can'ir.

Just in the wrong place.