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## The Portal of Orion

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## The Portal of Orion

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The Portal of Orion

By

LAUREN ELIZABETH OWENS, Bachelor of Mass Communication

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2021

The Portal of Orion

By

LAUREN ELIZABETH OWENS, Bachelor of Mass Communication

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## ABSTRACT

*The Portal of Orion* is a science fiction novel that centers on Rigel Barnard, a novice inventor who has been in self-isolation for years after a failed college presentation caused his friend and work partner, Jericho Slate, to be transported into another universe. Rigel is currently trying to bring his friend back by recreating the device that went awry and sent Jericho into an unknown dimension. Along the way, Rigel teams up with Archer, a mysterious stranger he finds floating in space, and Lyra, a teenage girl with an interest in magical studies. They aim to help him as much as they possibly can. At the same time, unbeknownst to Rigel, Jericho, still stuck in that alternate dimension, is trying against all odds to return home. It is a story with science fiction elements as well as fantasy and serves as both a cautionary tale and an adventure.

## Table of Contents

<i>Table of Contents</i> .....	<i>ii</i>
<i>Prologue</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>Chapter 1</i> .....	<i>12</i>
<i>Chapter 2</i> .....	<i>26</i>
<i>Chapter 3</i> .....	<i>37</i>
<i>Chapter 4</i> .....	<i>45</i>
<i>Chapter 5</i> .....	<i>58</i>
<i>Chapter 6</i> .....	<i>67</i>
<i>Chapter 7</i> .....	<i>11</i>
<i>Chapter 8</i> .....	<i>23</i>
<i>Chapter 9</i> .....	<i>30</i>
<i>Chapter 10</i> .....	<i>44</i>
<i>Chapter 11</i> .....	<i>66</i>
<i>Chapter 12</i> .....	<i>74</i>
<i>Chapter 13</i> .....	<i>78</i>
<i>Chapter 14</i> .....	<i>88</i>
<i>Chapter 15</i> .....	<i>98</i>
<i>Epilogue</i> .....	<i>104</i>

## Prologue

In the vast ocean of starlight and celestial bodies floats a crimson vessel, crafted with the finest aluminum composite. It's an older model, as most would see if they approached it, one built before the birth of many including yourself. The spacecraft is alone, wandering across the cosmos aimlessly at a speed so slow that it doesn't even appear to be moving, no destination in sight. It is in complete and utter solitude, as are you, its sole passenger.

You sit at the control station, planted firmly in a maroon leather chair. Although it may appear to onlookers that you are steering the ship, its cruise control has been activated. You sit there because it provides the clearest view of the abyss, your home since five revolutions ago. But instead of gazing at the stars and comets that zoom past your window, your only company, your gaze is focused elsewhere. There is something in your hands, small and gray and made of metal. Your calloused thumb rubs against its surface until it makes its way to a button at its top. Then, you press down and listen closely to the sound of your own voice.

*“Phase one. This is Rigel Barnard. It is five days away from my eighteenth revolution around the sun. Today marks phase one of my latest and most ambitious project to date: the continuation of multidimensional travel. To those who are listening, you might be aware of the studies conducted many revolutions ago by renowned scientist*

*Aeros Orion. I consider myself well-versed in his work, taking interest ever since I was young. Although I never had the pleasure of meeting Orion myself, my departed father was his assistant before his passing and introduced me to many of the heirlooms his friend left behind, such as a crimson model of his famous warship, the Orion AstroCraft.*

*But Orion was known for more than just ship-making. Before his untimely disappearance, he was well on his way to creating a gateway to other dimensions that have yet to be discovered. His Multidimensional Theory stated that several parallel dimensions, some similar to ours and some wildly different, exist in which we live double lives without even realizing it. It was Orion's dream to travel to these dimensions, studying them and reporting back with the first evidence of their existence. Unfortunately, he disappeared before he had a chance to complete his work, and his machine was destroyed as mysteriously.*

*However, after revolutions of being enthralled with these studies, the blueprints of the machine found their way into my hands. I've been hiding the notebook of multidimensional studies I discovered in my father's office, and now, it's time for me to begin rebuilding the machine Orion left behind. I consider myself, in a way, his prodigy even if he isn't aware of my existence.*

*I will start this project as part of my capstone at Blue Moon University, the top technology-based university on the planet. And I will also not be working alone. My trusted work partner and closest friend, Jericho Slate, will be assisting me."*

*"That's me!"*

You smile upon hearing the voice of your friend.

*“Capstone requirements state that we must keep a recorded log of our progress. This will be mine. While the idea has yet to be approved by the board of superiors, I wish to start as soon as possible. Such a large task will surely take more time than the average project. The recreation of Orion’s Multidimensional Portal will take four phases, each about the length of one revolution. I will report back once the first is complete. Hopefully, the road from here is smooth and without trouble.*

*Until next time, Rigel Barnard, signing off.”*

The timid beep of the old recorder silences your voice, and you sit there for a moment. You wonder if you should rewind and listen again, eager to hear a particular section. But you don’t. Instead, your finger wanders to the button marked with a right-facing arrow, telling the small machine to play the next recording.

*“Phase two. Rigel Barnard again. It is five days from my nineteenth revolution around the sun. An update on the state of my invention is due.*

*Unfortunately, I did not get permission from the Blue Moon board of superiors to continue this invention. In fact, they were rather cross at me for suggesting it in the first place, claiming I was in over my head. At first, I agreed with them and chalked up some less ambitious ideas that might replace this project. But after a conversation with my partner, we have decided to continue while working on a smaller background project to pass as what we’re really creating. Jericho will be making that, while I work on the portal. We have yet to decide what that may be, but in time, I suppose we will.*

*As for the portal, I successfully completed the first phase of its creation two nights ago. It took many sleepless nights and sustenance on my part, but nonetheless, it’s ready*

*to move into its second phase. The framework of the portals is finished. The controls come next, as well as planning exactly how I will present it. It will surely be a shock to anyone expecting us to come on stage with a mere drink-making device or something trivial of the sort, but as Orion himself said in one of his many biographies, what's the point of presenting your work if not with a "bang?"*

*I know for sure that no real beings will be used when it comes to the presentation. I've had Jericho design a small test bot, one that will hopefully travel to another dimension and return with something to prove is success. Its completion will also play into phase two, so phase three can be all about troubleshooting and tying up loose ends. Then, phase four will begin the testing up until my machine is ready for presentation.*

*As far as I can tell, Jericho's work on the test bot is going well. He is currently..."*

A loud crash is heard, as well as your gasp. You can't help but chuckle at it now, knowing the outcome is not severe. There is a pause. Then, you pick up again, but this time you are whispering.

*"My apologies. Jericho's work on the bot seems to have tripped the power in the lab. And possibly all of Blue Moon. Others are angry, and we're doing all we can to avoid suspicion. Therefore, I will have to wrap up my log now. But I will be back in another revolution, and I am expecting big things.*

*Rigel Barnard, signing off once more."*

At this point, a smile is spread across your face as you stare at the object in your hand. Such a small device is capable of holding so much power, so many memories. For

a moment, your thoughts begin to veer toward the existential side. Then, you bounce back and curse yourself for thinking of life and death at a time like this. Not wanting to dwell on the passing of time but wanting to go back before your current plans unfold, your finger finds the right-facing arrow again and presses into it.

*“Phase three. Rigel Barnard. It is five days from my twentieth revolution around the sun. The news is satisfactory.*

*I have completed phase three of my invention. If only I could tell the world and not just a tape recorder and Jericho, for everyone else believes us to be underperforming. My partner’s progress on the backup invention has been slacking, which is frustrating. I’ve tried to be patient with him, but surely he should be able to create something as simple as a housekeeping bot for a coverup? I could do that with my eyes taped shut.”*

You want to go back in time and slap yourself.

*“No matter. The actual invention I will be presenting is going wonderfully, which I pride myself in. Jericho completed the testing bot about a half-revolution ago, and I have been troubleshooting ever since. Now, I suppose I should ramble a bit about how this particular portal-based machine works, if only to calm my nerves about the rigorous testing that will come with phase four.*

*Orion’s Multidimensional Portal is made up of two portals: an entrance portal designed to transport someone into another dimension and an exit one meant to bring them back. The traveler will wear a bracelet to signal their return to our dimension. Once the subject is done exploring, one press of the bracelet’s center will take them back from whence they came without any harm. It is vital for the bracelet to be functioning*

*before travel, as one can easily become stranded in an unfamiliar dimension if this is not handled with care.*

*The testing bot will travel throughout the dimension we have chosen for it to travel to until it finds some sort of small, local matter to bring into ours. Then, it will press the button on the bracelet and return through the exit portal with proof that parallel universes are out there and ready for our exploration right in its small, metal hand!”*

The excitement in your past voice is causing a chill of dread to run through your bloodstream.

*“Phase four is next, the most exciting yet rigorous phase in the machine’s creation. I’m rigid with anticipation and fear. Hopefully, my studies will continue to be kept under wraps. I know I can count on Jericho to do so, but if we’re discovered and the project gets shut down, I don’t know what I’ll do.”*

There is a pause. Your stomach twists.

*“The next time I report here, it will be five days until my twenty-first revolution is complete. My invention’s showcase will take place on the first day of that revolution.*

*Until next time, Rigel Barnard.”*

As your voice fades out, you know you should stop here if you value your mental health. It’s been so long since you’ve listened through all four recordings, and the last one will surely awaken a feeling you’ve been repressing. But you have to face this if you want to move on. Finger hovering above the familiar arrow, you hesitate briefly before

swallowing bile and shutting your eyes. You ready yourself to hear your past-self's eager voice for the last time.

*“Phase four. Rigel Barnard. It is five days from my twenty-first revolution around the sun, and I have successfully recreated Orion's Multidimensional Portal.*

*I have no words to describe how happy the results of yesterday's test have made me. After several failed tests, the testing bot successfully traveled to another dimension and brought back a small pebble about the size of my fingernail. A quick scan determined that this specimen is undetermined. This can only mean that it is not of this dimension but of another one, somewhere in another universe separate from ours.*

*Both my partner and I are thrilled at this. I will admit that I found myself lost for a moment, unsure of where to go. But something powered me through everything despite this, and it's that something which will get me through the presentation tomorrow. I still have my doubts and concerns, but I need to push them to the side. I'm...”*

You cringe.

*“I'm certain I've gone further than Orion himself.”*

A pause. You were crying, you remember.

*“Well, enough of that. My apologies for keeping my final log short, but I will report back after the presentation with news. Hopefully on the positive side.*

*Thank you for accompanying me on this journey. Rigel Barnard, signing off.”*

The recording stops, signaling the end of the final message. If anyone were to find this tape after your demise and listened to it for a recollection of what you might have gone through, they would have assumed that was it. Perhaps they would believe the

presentation went well, just as you had expected. Perhaps they would believe you forgot to give an update, too busy being showered by the opportunities and praise you sought out back then. Perhaps they would believe otherwise, that the presentation had resulted in your death, and that is why you were no longer able to finish the story. Perhaps they wouldn't think anything of it and would find your studies boring. But would they ever guess what really happened?

You wish you didn't know. The only recording you have to remind you is a mental image that plays in your head when you're alone too long with your thoughts, which has become every second of your existence for the past five revolutions.

*The board of superiors tried to shut it down. That you assumed would happen, but you made plans to keep going. However, their guards were closing in on you the moment you revealed the machine, and you didn't have much time left to test your work. It was functional, you knew this. You had to show them.*

*You remember the urgency in your voice when you called to Jericho, "Now! Do it now!" but you cannot recall your tone. Was it more angry than urgent? You hoped not, but knowing you, it very well could have been. If only you could recall his face at the moment for any kind of recollection on how to read your own, now suppressed emotions.*

*You remember turning away for what seemed like a fraction of a second as your partner readied to test the invention, too afraid to look at the results. Instead, you focused on the crowd. Their faces were stark with fear, eagerly anticipating what was to come, knowing it could either end very well or very badly.*

*You remember when everyone's eyes went wide and their mouths agape as soon as the zap of the machine sounded behind you and the guards slacking in their chase, dropping anything they held meant to restrain you. At first, you assumed it was their reaction to the invention itself until the scream that haunts you every night when you close your eyes filled your senses like a jolt of electricity to your spine, and you flipped around, beholding the horrid sight of your friend's body rigid with light blue electricity coursing through its veins. Fear froze you solid, and any vocal reply caught in your throat as you were forced to stare, wondering what went wrong, why the testing bot wasn't there instead, what he was doing. You assumed it was an accident, a horrible accident that you had to fix as quickly as possible. But you couldn't.*

*You remember noticing the bracelet fastened around his arm and the way he zapped out of your reality with an ambitious smile on his face, one that reminded you way too much of yourself. And then, the explosion that followed and destroyed your creation.*

*Everything after is a blur now. You suppose you should remember what happened, what they said to you when you were expelled, what caused you to flee in your AirCraft so soon, what made you decide to live a life on your own, separate from anyone else in fear of hurting them. But some things you were luckily able to forget.*

The present returns. You are sitting in the leather chair still, tape recorder in one hand and the other clutching the side of your face, digging claws into skin. You do not cry, for you feel that every tear has been wrung from your body throughout isolation, leaving you dry and stoic. But the aching feeling in your chest that would have signaled a

cry otherwise is somehow much more painful than the flow of tears. The hand on your face then moves downward, allowing you to get a grip on yourself one last time before it reaches its destination, something inside of your pants pocket. Sighing, you pull out a small pebble the size of your fingernail and look at it, letting it shoot the last sweet shot of motivation through you. Collecting your bearings enough to ascend from the chair, you walk down to the ship's cockpit.

When you enter the room shrouded mostly by darkness, a light switch to the right of you is flipped by your finger. Then, the room's contents are revealed. Along with the essentials, you can see several parts of machinery littered around, organized carefully as if you have a plan for them. That is because you do have a plan. One that's been in the works for as long as you can remember, taking revolutions after revolutions to gather the required materials for.

And today, you will finally begin.

You walk to the side, revealing an old desk made of rotted wood. It isn't fancy, but you don't need fancy. In that desk is a book, one that you haven't picked up in a while. Mentally preparing yourself, you suck in a deep breath and turn the cover over to reveal the first page. The face of your hero, Aeros Orion, looks at you. It's the first eye contact you've made in revolutions and the first time you've managed to look at him since your horrific failure. A bittersweet grin spreads across your features for a moment, but then you remind yourself that this isn't for Orion. He's lived his life, passed his legacy on. He is not in need of your help.

Removing the pebble from your pocket, you carefully roll it around in your fingers and feel how fragile it has become. You're surprised when it doesn't fall apart at even the gentlest touch. You remind yourself of the testing bot that brought it back. It was unscathed, looking like it did the day it was invented. The machine clearly couldn't handle anything bigger at the time. You know this is why it exploded when Jericho made his exit into wherever he is now. But did he know that?

The clear memory of the bracelet fastened safely around his wrist and his determined grin play in your brain for a moment, something that let you know his actions were planned. He didn't want to disappear. He planned to return. The only thing you don't know is what motivated him, why he chose to be the test subject himself. You do, however, know you'll never stop blaming yourself for what happened to him until you find out why. Today, you are tired of blaming yourself.

Discarding the pebble to the side of the book, you turn around and survey the machinery in front of you. You haven't let go of the tape recorder yet. It still resides between your fingers. Bringing it close to your mouth, you press the bright red button in its middle. Coughing to regain a voice that's hardly used, you speak.

“Phase one. This is Rigel Barnard. I've survived roughly twenty-six revolutions around the sun at this rate. But that's not important.”

For the first time in revolutions, you have a purpose.

## Chapter 1

Droplets of sweat clung to the cosmic vagabond's eyebrow as he finished fastening the bolt to the platform. He took a step back, wiping his forehead and letting out a deep breath of satisfaction. It had been quite some time since he'd begun the repeat of his greatest project, and while he was nowhere near done, Rigel was rather proud of what he'd managed to do so far.

Not having anything to keep time but his brain, he assumed it had been about half a revolution since he'd finally started on the portal. While he had been trying to work a little faster this time around, it was bound to take him longer since this run of the machine had to be able to transport more than a measly testing bot. Upon that thought, Rigel began to wonder if he should make a testing bot himself for well, testing purposes. Or he could probably find one in a dumpster somewhere behind a lab, do a few fixes on it and make it good as new. Either method would work, but the second would take less time.

It was also worth taking into consideration that he'd be completing this version of Orion's portal alone. Putting a hand down to lean against his desk, Rigel spared a brief moment of consideration for why he was recreating this thing in the first place. Sullen green eyes falling upon the pebble still sitting there, its consistency closer to that of sand now, his lips curled into a melancholy smile. For a moment, he considered saying something to himself like "I'm coming, Jericho" or "I'll get you out of there soon" but

when he opened his mouth to speak, he realized that was too tropey for his liking.

Instead, a simple nod of acknowledgement did the trick.

Grasping the bottle of water, he'd sat at his desk and taking a long sip from it, Rigel figured it was probably time for him to return to his makeshift cot for a moment of rest. He'd been hard at work for as long as he could remember and knew he was much too exhausted to get anything else done for the time being. Stretching until he heard the bones in his back reply with a loud pop, the inventor lumbered toward his sleeping quarters with a satisfying yawn.

Rigel had positioned the small makeshift bed in a room that used to serve as a lounging area. It was located above one of its top windows, so he could watch the wonders of the galaxy float by until it eventually lulled him to sleep. After setting aside his water bottle, crawling underneath the tattered blanket and placing his arms directly underneath his head, he began to do just that. He was used to the sight of stars, swirls of violet throughout the vastness and sometimes even a distant comet or two. But mostly the stars. Sometimes, he would mentally count them as he rode amongst them, as if they provided him company. Already feeling his eyelids close, he began to point out each distant ball of energy in the back of his mind.

*One...two...three...four...five...six...wait.*

Rigel shot upward. He blinked a few times to cast the sleep-produced blurriness away from his sight and fixated closer on the sixth star he'd counted. Something wasn't entirely right. Its luminous body was dull, and instead of staying secured in the vast blanket of space, it seemed to be floating, almost toward him as if it were some sort of

invasive object. Panic surged through Rigel at the thought of it being a meteor or security bot set to destroy his spacecraft, but upon a closer look, it didn't appear to be that either. Rigel didn't dare to move his gaze as the object drew closer and closer to the top of his ship, crossing his fingers in hopes that it wasn't anything destructive. Luckily, when it finally drew close enough for him to make out its basic outline, he realized it wasn't at all. But what he thought he saw confused him. Surely, there was no way that a living being of his exact species was drifting unconscious throughout the depths of space?

When the object was right against the top window, Rigel realized that indeed, it was. His empathetic instincts kicking in before he could question himself, he grabbed for the evacuation vest sat draping across a nearby rack consisting of various essentials for space travel, including a few weapons and drew it over his shoulders. Pulling the cord behind him to make sure it was secure and giving a nod when he found that it was, the inventor opened the top window at which the being was directly headed toward and took a breath of preparation before swimming out after it. Upon close contact, Rigel came to realize that the floating stranger appeared to be about his age. He was on the stouter side, with curly hair that had been tousled about, and his clothes were tattered in most places. Rigel's eyes then moved toward his neck, where a black string hung. Looking down even further, he noticed that the stranger seemed to be clutching something at the end of the string. His hand obscured the object on the other end, engulfing it so that Rigel had no idea what this stranger was aiming to protect.

When the body finally drifted close to Rigel, he didn't hesitate when it came to grabbing it. Grunting and fighting against gravity, he struggled until the two of them were

safely inside, gently dropping the stranger onto the floor. He then pressed the same button he had earlier in order to shut the window, sighing as he removed his evacuation vest and placed it carefully back on the rack. Once everything was done, the previous panic seized him once more as he looked down upon the unconscious stranger.

What was he going to do with this guy? Was he even alive? Well, yes. He was breathing. Of course he was alive. But where did he come from? It had to have been several revolutions since Rigel took to a life of isolation in deep space, and not once did he ever see a living thing out there in the open! Not to mention that he wasn't equipped to deal with this at all. He was an inventor, not a doctor. What was he supposed to give him for sustenance? He only had enough for himself and wasn't sure when his next stop would be. And, most importantly, where did he even come from, and why did he wind up here of all places?

After a few moments of panicking, Rigel finally decided to save all those questions for when the stranger could actually speak to him. Lifting him once more, he plopped his motionless body down onto the makeshift cot he'd previously been sleeping on. Rigel knew he wouldn't be getting rest any time soon, and whoever this mysterious floater was needed it a lot more than he did. For now, he would pull up a chair and stare at the stranger's face, waiting for him to wake so he could properly question him.

But then, fear and impatience grasped Rigel once more, and in an act of impulse, he grabbed for the water bottle he'd left by his bed and threw its remains in the stranger's face. While not well thought-out and instantly regretted, the plan worked, for as if like

clockwork the stranger came to life, sputtering and sitting upright in a sudden panic that almost made Rigel fall backwards.

“Wh-What!?” the stranger cried, looking around with dilated eyes. “I...”  
Blinking, he began to survey his surroundings. It was obvious he detected something unfamiliar. “I don’t understand.”

Clearing his throat, Rigel stood. It had been a while since he’d used his voice in the presence of someone else, and he figured that would show. “Well, I’m just as confused as you are.”

The stranger gasped and entered another momentary state of panic. “Wait! Where’d it go? Wh- oh!”

He sighed as soon as he felt whatever he was holding brush against his palm, confirming this was what he was looking for. Rigel tried not to stare as he slowly removed his hand from the object, revealing a round, indigo amulet. His eyes widened, and unable to stop the words from flowing, he pointed at it.

“What’s that?”

“Huh?” The stranger became agitated once he caught on and quickly shoved the amulet underneath his shirt. “It’s nothing! Don’t worry about it.”

“I see.” Rigel narrowed his eyes.

“So,” the stranger spoke again, before squinting at Rigel, “why are you blurry?”

Rigel cocked his head to the side. “Blurry?”

“Yeah...actually, the whole ship’s kinda blurry.” He looked around, until realization seemed to dawn on him. “Uh oh.”

A little concerned, Rigel blinked. “What does that mean?”

The stranger shook his head. “I appear to have lost my glasses.”

“Your glasses?”

“Yeah.” He groaned. “Did you see them floating around out there or...?”

Rigel rolled his eyes, desperate to cut to the chase. “Listen,” he said, voice stern, “why don’t we start this off with you telling me what in the universe you were even doing out there?”

Instantly becoming rigid, the stranger looked to the side and shifted awkwardly.

“My ship blew up.”

“Really? When?”

The stranger tapped his chin in thought. “A few days ago? I think. I’m not quite sure when I conked out either, but I’m here now! Thanks for saving me, by the way.”

Rigel was getting a peculiar feeling. His odd mannerisms, his stuttered speech, his confusion, really everything about him made him feel uneasy. He also wasn’t so sure how he felt about sharing the space he solely occupied for multiple revolutions with someone he’d just met.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, unease dripping from his tone. “Now where should I take you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t stay here. Where do you want me to drop you off?”

The stranger began to fidget. “I’m not sure, if we’re being honest.”

“Where were you going before your ship blew up?”

He seemed to think for a moment before answering. “Nowhere? I tend to do my own thing.”

The uncomfortable stab in Rigel’s gut only grew. He sat in silence with the other for a moment, both of them not sure where to take the conversation. “In that case, I’ll just drop you off at the next planet. It might take a while to actually get there, but hopefully not too long. Can you stay here until then?”

The stranger frowned. “Aw, no exploring? This is a really nice place you got-”

“Do you want me to throw you back out there?”

“Yep! I’ll stay right here!”

Rigel got to his feet, slowly making his way toward the main room so he could check out the map. “Good. And don’t touch anything.”

As he walked away, the stranger spoke one more time. “I’m Archer, by the way. In case you were wondering.”

Rigel stopped in his tracks for a moment, wondering how much information he should give to this guy. He decided to keep it minimal.

“That’s nice.”

Trying to swallow down his paranoia, he finally made his way toward the control room in order to map out their next stop. Luckily, it wasn’t too far. Doing some research on the planet determined that it was one with a friendly and livable atmosphere. Archer would be fine there doing whatever it was he did. Maybe he could find a ship and some new glasses or a case for that amulet thing he was always clutching as if it were some sort

of priceless family heirloom. And Rigel would be left alone once more, without a soul to bother him.

Still antsy about leaving the passenger alone, Rigel snuck back toward his sleeping quarters. Exhaustion pricked at him, and he longed to slide underneath the covers and drift off into a peaceful sleep, but the idea of letting his guard down for a second with this stranger on his ship seemed absurd. Maybe if he was able to get just a little more information out of Archer, he could sleep soundly in his chair until they got to the next stop. But for now, not knowing how to go about such a conversation after spending the past several revolutions in complete isolation, he would just have to lurk out of sight and watch him.

Rigel sneakily hid behind one of the columns leading up to the doorway and sat down, peeking his head around so he could see what Archer was up to. He was right where he'd left him, sitting on the cot with his legs dangling off and a concentrated look on his face. His hand was idly running over the amulet that hung from his neck. Rigel squinted, focusing on it. What even was that thing, and why was he so protective of it?

Of course, there was the fear that he'd been sent after Rigel. He wasn't exactly sure how wanted he was, having fled before anyone could say much of anything to him. But why would they have done that now? Surely Blue Moon or anyone else who might have some qualms with him would have sent someone much sooner. That was, unless they'd somehow realized what he was doing. Or maybe Archer was really bad at his job, and it just took him this long to find him. Based on their interactions so far, Rigel would honestly believe that.

He glanced backwards in the direction of the cockpit. Part of him wanted to go back down and resume his work, but doing so with Archer here would be a risk. Even if he wasn't out to get him, this guy seemed like a grade-A loudmouth. He couldn't let him know his intentions. The portal was something Rigel had to do alone and would continue to do alone.

Hours passed, and Archer still hadn't done much of anything but sit there and try to survey his surroundings. He definitely hadn't been lying about his glasses. The passenger would ever so often squint as he looked at the various objects Rigel placed in sleeping quarters, and it appeared to take him a while to discover what some of them were. Despite this, he seemed to be listening and not even trying to touch anything.

Growing bored, Rigel stifled a yawn as he realized his eyelids were growing heavier. As if on cue with his tiredness, he noticed Archer beginning to settle down in his bed. Part of him wanted to storm into the room and demand the other sleep on the floor, but Rigel's mind was too bogged down with exhaustion to do much of anything. He felt himself slipping into a state of slumber almost without knowing it.

After dozing off, he was eventually greeted with was a sharp poke to the side. Rigel gradually began to open his eyelids, letting a low groan escape his throat as if begging for just a few more moments of rest. When he opened them wide enough to see someone staring directly into his face, Rigel gasped in horror and shoved the stranger as hard as he could, sending him tumbling backwards. Once he'd gained his bearings, the inventor stood and saw Archer lying in a heap on the floor, rubbing his forehead.

“Sorry! I-I couldn't tell if you were dead or asleep.”

Rigel frowned, putting a hand on his hip. “What are you doing outside your room?”

Archer rubbed the back of his head. “I was trying to find you! You never came back.”

“I never said I was coming back, did I?”

“Yeah but...” His voice trailed off when he realized Rigel had a point. “That, I did not think about.”

Rigel’s suspicions began to form once more. “You didn’t, now did you?”

“Nope!” Archer laughed. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll just go right back in there!” The stranger tried to awkwardly walk back through the doorway but tripped on his way inside, shakily getting to his knees. “Sorry. No glasses.”

But after this, Rigel wasn’t going to let this guy sit around unsupervised until their next stop. And he wanted him to know he was being watched.

“Do you mind if I sit in here with you?”

“Huh?” Archer seemed confused for a moment, but then shook his head. “Oh, no! Not at all! It is your ship after all, um...what’s your name?”

“That’s not important.”

Rigel took a seat in the small chair set up next to the rack containing the weapons and his evacuation vest. Archer sat back down on the cot. For several moments, the two of them sat there in complete silence as if waiting for the other to break it. Frustrated after too long, Rigel decided to begin his questioning.

“So,” he asked, “Archer, right?”

Archer whipped his head around and perked up upon being addressed. “Yeah!”

“What exactly is it you were doing before that ship of yours blew up?”

The passenger shrunk back a little, body language growing more nervous. “You know, just hanging around. I don’t really do much. I’m a bit of an uhhh, free spirit?”

Rigel arched his eyebrows. “I can relate to that I suppose, but why did it even blow up in the first place? I mean, I’ve worked with ships my whole life almost, and I know those things don’t explode for no reason.”

Archer chuckled, and Rigel could see small beads of sweat forming on his forehead as if he were being set underneath a large heat lamp. “There was a toxic gas leak.”

“Oh, really?” Realizing he was getting somewhere, Rigel slowly began to stand. “And you didn’t notice? Surely the fumes would have alerted you that something was wrong.”

“I was asleep!” Archer almost cut in frantically as soon as he realized where this was going. “I’m a very heavy sleeper.”

“Sure you are,” Rigel said with a nod, slowly starting to edge toward a vibrant red dagger on top of the weaponry rack. “And that would explain why you’re still here, despite the fact that the combination of gas and debris from the explosion would definitely have blown a fellow like you into bits?” He gripped the weapon in his hand, unsheathing it with stealth.

Archer backed away more frantically, struggling to form words. “I said I was asleep!”

“Then you didn’t evacuate at all?” Rigel asked, gripping the dagger and beginning to edge toward his passenger who was now quaking in fear. “That’s even a higher chance of death for you! How did you ever survive?”

Clutching onto the amulet, Archer was trying to get to his feet while staring at the weapon Rigel held. “I...um, I...I’m lucky?”

Having heard enough, Rigel aimed the dagger directly at Archer. Yelping, the passenger missed the blade by just an inch because he fell to the floor while trying to escape, hindered again by his lack of eyewear.

“Listen!” he pleaded, clumsily getting to his feet as Rigel swung again, knocking him back down and barely missing his shoulder. “I’m not gonna hurt you!”

“Stop the lying!” Rigel spat, swinging and hardly missing Archer once more. The guy was as evasive as liquid solely because of his clumsy stature. “I know exactly why you’re here!”

“No you don’t, I swear! I’m innocent!”

“You are not, and we both know that, just admit it already!” Rigel swung and missed again, noticing that Archer was just about out the doorway at this point.

Gulping, Archer seemed to surrender. However, instead of going to cover his throat or any other vital part of his body, his hands went straight for the amulet hung around his neck. Noticing this as odd and finding yet another way to get the guy to admit to what he was doing, Rigel smirked and let the dagger hang by his side.

“Fine,” he said, free hand reaching toward the amulet while Archer’s eyes were shut, “if that won’t get you to talk, then perhaps maybe you will if I take this thing off your-”

“Don’t touch that!”

Suddenly coming alive with more vigor than Rigel had ever seen in him since he’d arrived, Archer removed his hand from the amulet and used it to knock Rigel in the chest. Dagger flying onto the ground as he was hurled backwards, the inventor gasped breathlessly, not expecting the harsh reaction at all. For a few beats, the two stood staring at each other with awestruck expressions, and Archer’s hand moved from the amulet to his mouth.

“I-I am so sorry,” he stammered, “I didn’t-”

Before he could finish his apology, a sudden thumping noise caused him to stop. He looked around. This prompted Rigel to do the same, equally as bewildered by what it could be as the other.

“Is that normal?” Archer asked.

“No...”

The noise was heard again, this time even louder and closer.

“It sounds like it’s coming from outside the ship,” he observed, tapping a finger to his chin.

As if on some sort of cue, Archer leapt to his feet. Before Rigel even had a chance to ask what made him so frantic, he found his arm in the other’s grasp and was roughly pulled from his spot on the floor. Archer sped out the door toward the ship’s corridor as

the tapping continued with Rigel behind him, trying his hardest to break free of the grip that clung like an iron handcuff to his wrist.

## Chapter 2

Before he could protest, the walls of Rigel's ship were moving past him in a blur, and everything seemed to bleed together as he was thrust throughout the corridor like a limp ragdoll. He screeched, struggling to free himself from Archer's iron grip.

"What are you doing!?"

"No time to explain; we gotta hide!" Archer said with urgency, showing no signs of letting the other free.

Thoughts moving a million miles per hour, Rigel finally managed to shove himself away. "What did you bring to my ship!?"

The knocking was heard again, this time even more forceful than before. It sounded as if something was crashing into the ship repeatedly in an attempt to upset it. Rigel's heart was thudding against his chest, and he was unable to process everything happening all at once until Archer's voice distracted him.

"Perfect, the cockpit!"

Realization hitting him, Rigel clambered over to where Archer stood and blocked his path, chest heaving up and down. "The cockpit's no good; don't go in there! Follow me!"

Archer seemed confused but willing to comply. Rigel grabbed for his arm and led him into a nearby supplies closet. When they were safely inside, he pushed a large waste

bin against the door and locked it in case whatever it was out there somehow managed to find a way inside. Once they had caught their breaths, Rigel grabbed Archer by the collar of his shirt in fury.

“Listen, you,” he snarled, “I didn’t spend five revolutions of my life out here alone to let in one passenger and have him ruin everything I’ve built for myself. You are going to tell me what that thing is out there, and then I am going to let you outside to face it, and whatever happens is none of my business whatsoever. Do you understand?”

Archer gulped, eyes dilating in fear. “No! Don’t do that! I’m sorry, I don’t know how she even found me!”

“How *who* found you!? Who in the universe are you!?”

For a moment, Archer didn’t say anything. Rigel continued to burn him with his gaze, grip tightening on his shirt until the other finally let out a defeated sigh. Assuming he was about to get what he wanted from the passenger, Rigel loosened his grip to let him speak.

“Okay, fine. I’ll tell you,” Archer began. “It’s because of this thing.” He carefully held up the amulet.

“I figured,” he answered, looking down at the artifact.

Archer blinked. “Oh, so you know?”

“Know what exactly?”

“What it is?”

Rigel shook his head. “No.”

“It’s called the Metamorphyst,” Archer explained, flipping the shining rock around in his hands as he spoke. “It was created over fifty revolutions ago by Amaris Mulberry.”

“Who?”

“A scientist who worked with dark magic. Her lab was secluded in a cave on Mysticus because she didn’t want others to know what she was doing.”

“The alchemy planet,” Rigel noted with a blink, familiar with the location but never having gone there himself.

“Apparently, she wanted to become so powerful that she could wipe out all who defied her, which is why she made the amulet. It’s a stone that lets the wearer take on their most desired form. Not just outwardly either. It can change your entire genetic makeup!” His voice dropped, almost to a whisper. “But then, she was found out by the authorities and frozen in time as a punishment, the amulet still in her hands.”

Rigel listened to the story intently, screwing up his face. “Are you sure that’s real? I mean, not to doubt you, but I’ve done my fair share of scientific endeavors, and I’ve never heard anything about this.”

“It’s because nobody wants you to know! Think about how power-crazy everyone would go if they found out about this thing. It was covered up for a reason!”

He raised an eyebrow, silently observing the hypocrisy of Archer’s statement.

“Then how do you know?”

The passenger looked to the side. “My dad was one of the people who dealt with the situation.”

A slight smile fell on Rigel's face, wondering if there might be some truth to this. Although he was pretty sure it was ridiculous, he was willing to give Archer the benefit of the doubt for a few seconds.

"Anyway," Archer continued, "I'm not sure if it works because nothing about me changed when I put it on, but it was something my dad used to tell me about all the time! Oh man, he told me so many stories about this thing. Ever since I was a kid...it was as if it was something he wanted but knew he couldn't have, y'know?"

Archer sighed happily, and Rigel could tell he was trying not to get too sentimental. It arguably tugged at his heartstrings.

"After he died, I didn't have much else to do, so I made it my life's goal to find the amulet. And I did!" He held it out to Rigel once more. Then, his expression faltered. "But...then something really bad happened, and now I gotta hide for the rest of my life."

Temporarily enthralled by the story, Rigel was dumbfounded by the sudden shift. "What do you mean?"

Archer looked to the side, guilt clear in his expression. "Well...someone unfroze Amaris, and she's really mad at me."

Rigel's mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?"

Before Archer could say anything else, the noise was heard again, this time directly overhead. A sharp yelp left Rigel's throat.

"You're joking, right?"

"No! She took my ship!"

"Are you sure it wasn't just a pirate or something?"

Archer shook his head frantically.

Fury and fear grasped Rigel again, and he shook Archer's shoulders. "So now my ship will be blown to smithereens by an eldritch witch who's been frozen in time for revolutions?"

The passenger paused before letting out a hopeful squeak. "Hopefully not?"

Dropping Archer, Rigel got to his feet and dusted off his knees. He wasn't sure how much he was buying this particular story, but something needed to be done. "Okay, you are getting out there and returning that thing right now."

Archer gasped. "No, I can't! You have no clue what she'd do with this thing, man. The whole universe could be wiped out!"

"It can't be that bad. Most people who study magic nowadays don't even know what they're doing. You said yourself that it doesn't even work."

"I said I wasn't *sure* if it worked."

"It doesn't work."

"Maybe it does!" The passenger held his arms up defensively.

"Why did you even take it in the first place?"

When Archer only looked away and clearly found himself unable to form an answer that wouldn't embarrass him, a sense of familiarity started to creep over Rigel. He looked at Archer's terrified face, and down at his own hands, clenching them into fists. Feeling a strange kinship with the passenger, Rigel heaved a sigh.

"Okay," he replied, holding out a hand. "I'll help you. As long as you promise to stay as far away from me as possible when this is over, got it?"

As soon as he felt his hand lock with Archer's, Rigel took it and led the other outside. They walked down the corridor, making their way to the rack in his sleeping quarters. He pulled out a small blaster and urged Archer to take the identical one next to it. Once they were equipped with their weapons, Rigel heard the crashing again and located it: against the ship's hatch. Whatever that thing was wanted inside, and it was his and Archer's job to make sure it never reached its goal, evil sorceress or not.

"You ready?" he asked, preparing to press the button that would open the door. Archer replied with a nod and gulp.

Shutting his eyes and trying not to freeze in terror, Rigel's finger shakily pressed against the red dot on the wall. He heard the opening of the hatch and held his breath, but once it actually revealed the source of the noise, his fear subsided greatly. There, standing in the doorway of the ship, wasn't an evil practitioner of dark magic or anything even intimidating. It was a testing bot.

Rigel picked up the bot and shut the hatch, bringing it inside. A large crack ran through its head, and the screen on its stomach seemed to be non-functioning, only displaying a fuzzy number: 365. It was also making a quiet, static noise, as if words were trying to come through its speakers, but it was so damaged that they refused to work. Other than that, it would seem relatively harmless to just about anything. That is, except for Rigel, who began to wish he'd had a run-in with the witch instead as he pieced everything about the situation together.

"What is that thing?" Archer asked, noticing how pale in the face Rigel had become.

The inventor gulped. “A Blue Moon University testing bot.”

Archer sighed in relief. “Whew! So, it’s just cosmic waste from a stuck-up university? Thank goodness! I thought I was a goner there for a sec.”

“Yeah...” Rigel’s voice trailed off, only able to stare at the bot he held.

“So, what are we doing now?”

Rigel cleared his throat. “Actually, would it be alright if we skipped the next stop? I’ve got some business to tend to.”

Archer seemed confused. “But you said-”

“I know what I said,” Rigel said, waving him off, “but don’t worry about it. Just go back to your room for now. And don’t touch anything, okay?”

After a moment, Archer shrugged. “You got it!”

When Archer’s shape had finally disappeared in the distance, the inventor wasted no time in heading back toward the cockpit and slamming the testing bot down on his desk. He flipped the bot over and located where its information card was stored. Then, he took it out, threw it down and crushed it under his boot, letting out a deep sigh when it had been reduced to shards. He looked down at the empty husk before him, and a sudden sensation of guilt overtook him. Rubbing a hand against the robot’s side, Rigel sighed.

“I’m sorry, little guy,” he spoke to it, tone gentle as if he were speaking to a child. There was something about dismantling the little bot, even if it was something meant to harm him, that made him feel as if he were doing something wrong. It’s not like it was the robot’s fault someone had chosen to use it for such a purpose.

Then, an idea sparked into his head. He gave the inactive machine a pat on the head, mentally promising himself to reprogram it into a testing bot he could use specifically for his project. Smiling at his moment of genius, it soon fell when he realized the inevitable: he had been caught. Even though this attempt hopefully failed, he expected another bot to show up at his ship any day now. And who knows how enact the next one would be.

Rigel's vision moved away from the defected robot and toward the portal. If he wanted to pull this off, he needed to work harder and faster. In other words, he couldn't do it alone. The realization made him curse underneath his breath. After Jericho, it was the last thing he wanted to do, but his rational thinking kicked in and reminded him that it was better than rotting in jail for trying to right his wrongs. For this task to be completed to its best ability, Rigel knew the kind of person he needed. His new assistant had to be someone just as ambitious, impulsive and fearless as he was. Someone who wasn't scared to take risks no matter how impossible they seemed. Someone who he already knew. There was literally only one choice. Luckily, by what he'd observed throughout the last day, it was the perfect one.

Leaving the testing bot in his lab to tend to later, Rigel walked out of the cockpit and locked the door behind him. Wiping his brow, he slowly made his way back toward his quarters. Archer was there, staring up at the skylight as Rigel did so many times while he was trying to rest. The sight made the inventor smile, and he didn't even notice that Archer saw him until the other spoke.

“Hi again!”

“Hello,” Rigel answered, coughing. “Um...can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure thing!” Archer sounded cheery as ever and patted the spot next to him on the bed, directing Rigel to sit there. He did, awkwardly tucking his hands between his knees as he continued.

“I’ll cut to the chase: do you know me?”

“Huh?” Archer asked, confused. “Do I know you?”

“Yeah,” Rigel repeated. “Are you aware of who I am, and why I’m out here?”

Archer thought for a moment. “You won’t tell me your name, so I guess not.”

“It’s Rigel. Rigel Barnard.”

The passenger thought for a moment, then shut his eyes and shrugged with a hum.

“Nope. Never heard of you.”

“Right...”

There was an awkward silence as the two sat in each other’s company. Rigel found it easier to stare into the abyss of space as well instead of making direct eye contact as he spoke to the stranger. Part of him wondered if he was making a mistake, if maybe somehow this guy was lying to him, but he hadn’t taken a risk in five revolutions, and it felt about time he did so.

“Archer, I’ve been out here by myself for a long time,” he finally spoke, “and I’ll say, meeting someone else and actually being social for the first time in forever...it’s not as terrifying as I thought it would be. I mean, it still is, but I’m...I wouldn’t say enjoying your company, but-”

“So, I can stay?”

Rigel's pointed ears flattened back at the sudden enthusiastic response. "I was getting at that actually. You don't have a place to stay, do you?"

"Sure don't!"

He tried to grin. "Well, now you do."

There was another beat of silence before Rigel picked up again.

"And that thing you said about your dad...is that true? Or were you giving me a sob story so I wouldn't kick you out?"

Archer smiled solemnly. "It is."

"I see," Rigel responded, hands shaking. "I also lost my father."

A gasp left Archer's throat. "Oh no! I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. I was a child when it happened, but I suppose your story still resonated with me in a way that makes it hard for me to shake you off."

"Ah..." Archer looked as if he had more to say but sufficed for a warm stare. Rigel met it.

"The thing is," Rigel took a deep breath before continuing, "I made a similar promise to my father. Well, mentally if anything, but I still made it. And I'm trying to finish, but I don't think I can do it alone."

It took a while for the gears to turn in the other's head, but once they did, Rigel observed as his mouth began to drop open like a drawbridge, and his expression became gradually more and more enthusiastic until a squeak of joy left his throat. "You mean...?"

"How good are you at building things?"

Archer scratched his chin. “It’s been a while, so probably a little past decent. But I will need a new pair of glasses.”

Rigel chuckled. “We’ll find that for you.”

And the two continued to stare deep into the thousands of stars laid out in front of them, sparkling yet uncertain as the future they’d decided to impulsively build.

## Chapter 3

Entry One,

Thank the stars I found this thing lying around! I'd been going a bit out of my mind trying to find something to do ever since I landed myself in this strange place. My biggest regret was not taking a device with me to log my adventures. Never thought I'd get stranded in the first place. Perhaps I should have planned ahead, but whatever.

My name is Jericho Slate. I'm a student at Blue Moon University. For those of you other dimensional beings who don't know what that is, let me clarify for you: a place of intellectual talent, something that I have a lot of if I might say so myself. My dad actually founded the place! That's right, I'm kind of a big deal. You might want to save this journal if you ever find it and tell my story. But that's assuming I die, and I'll have it be known that I am not going to die.

I've been stuck in another dimension for a few days or maybe weeks or something like that at this point. Crazy, right? I have no clue where this is, if anything is still alive here, what's safe to eat (luckily I haven't gotten sick yet) or how I got here! Wait, no. That's a lie. I know how I got here. I wanted to help my best friend back home with his invention! Rigel Barnard, great guy. I'll probably talk about him a lot. Where was I...oh yeah! How I got here. Sorry, it's just been so long since I've used my voice; I don't really know what to say!

So basically, Rigel was building this really cool portal, which I oh-so-graciously helped him with and planned on sending a testing bot to another dimension. Only, here's the thing. He wanted this project to be big, right? He wanted it to be so big that he didn't even tell anyone he was making it! And what better way to surprise an audience than to send a whole person through instead of just a tiny little robot? That's where I stepped in!

Of course, I perhaps underestimated the machine's ability, hence why I'm stuck here. The bracelet doohickey thing that was supposed to get me back kind of broke, and now, I'm stranded in another dimension! But no worries. I can have this thing fixed in no time! That is, if I find equipment. And anything. I'm lucky I even found this tape recorder just lying around. All I've seen so far here are a lot of empty buildings and dirt. Lots and lots of dirt.

But it's fine! Rigel's definitely coming for me. There's no way he'd ever give up on me, and he has the machine and everything. I'm just gonna wait it out until he gets here because if there's one person who's never let me down, it's him.

Anyway, I guess that's it for now. What's the thing Rigel always said at the end of his recordings? I can't remember. Bye!

Entry Two,

It has been a few more months since I've arrived in these uncharted lands. So far, I haven't seen much else. I've been exploring various buildings, all abandoned. There's no signs of life except for some vegetation, but even that's scarce. Food is even scarcer.

But I've been living off what little I can actually find like nuts and berries and stuff like that.

I need to look for a permanent shelter. My dad used to talk to me about these things when I was a kid, but I never really listened to him because I didn't think I'd ever be in this situation. News flash, you should listen to your parents. Or at least you should sometimes. I don't know what I'm saying.

Anyway, if I do starve to death or get eaten by some weird alien lifeform, hopefully this tape recorder survives! I don't think I will though. I'm not sure what's been taking Rigel so long. Hopefully, I didn't break the machine. That would not be good. If I could find the materials to fix this bracelet, then maybe I could try to go back myself! There's got to be a surviving laboratory around here somewhere, and I've been on the lookout for anything resembling one. It's been hard, trust me, but I'm not giving up. Luck's gotta be on my side just this once.

That's all I really wanted to say in this entry. Don't have a very eventful life right now despite being stranded in a totally new dimension. Anyway, talk to you later!

Entry Three,

You'll never believe it: I found a lab! That's right. It wasn't too far out of my way either. I was just exploring buildings, found a trapdoor, went through a full tunnel and bam! Here it is. And this thing is huge. There's even a bunker in it filled with this weird stuff in cans that tastes really good. It's like red? I think. I don't know how they perceive

color here, but that's not important. What's important is now I might be able to get back to Rigel before he can get to me! Won't he be impressed?

I've got the tools I need to fix the bracelet. They weren't even that hard to find! Who even just leaves a screwdriver lying around their lab? Weird, right? Anyway, I'm gonna start fiddling with this thing. I think I'll be able to get it done. You know, my dad always told me I was best at the little things in life, like fixing a small broken bracelet. He said I wasn't meant for bigger things, and maybe that's okay, but I think I am! I built a whole testing bot for Rigel, and he was so proud of me!

Ugh, he's probably worried sick though. I gotta get this thing to work, so he'll know his best friend is A-okay. If you find this without another entry, it means I either made it back or perished. Let's hope you don't ever hear my voice again! I mean, for the first reason. I don't want to die.

Entry Four,

Well, this isn't exactly what I had in mind. Hello again. It's me, Jericho Slate. I know I said in the last one of these that if you heard back from me, the news was not good. I was right. I am unable to fix the bracelet. No matter what I tweak or mess around with, it won't work! And I thought I had it too!

At this point, the only thing I can do is sit around here and wait for Rigel to get here. I know he's coming, but part of me just wanted to do something without his help for once. Not to go off on a tangent, but I have been riding his coattails for quite some time. If I could do one thing without his help, I thought maybe he'd see me as a bit more...I

don't know, capable? Something like that. But it's clear now that he will not. He's going to come and pick me up and find me in the state he expected me to be in: alone in a bunker-slash-lab with this red stuff I've been eating all over my shirt, having accomplished nothing.

Sorry for such a downer entry. I'm not normally like this! It's just frustrating, y'know? Having accomplished nothing...couldn't even get the bracelet fixed...it's fine. It's all fine. Rigel is coming, and I am not going to die here. Anyway, I don't really know what else to say for the time being, so...bye!

Entry Five,

Never mind. I think I'm going to die here.

Entry Six,

Okay, now that last entry was...short. I know. But I'm...better. Something I found just kind of took a huge toll on me, and right now, I'm not so sure what to do or who to go to about it.

I was starting to get a bit cold at night. I've still be pretty much sleeping on the floor whenever my body feels like powering down, and I didn't have anything to cover me. Then, I started thinking and realized that I thought I found a bunch of blankets stacked against the wall of the bunker where all the food was located. After realizing that, I decided to go and get one of them to use.

Sure enough, there they were, but I noticed they were on top of something. I...moved them, thinking it would just be a few boxes or something small, but it...

It was a skeleton. A charred skeleton, one that looked like *me*. I might not be the best at what I do, sure, but I know basic bone structure and no doubt about it, that wasn't just an alien lifeform. I have no idea how it got there, who it was, anything about it but...I think it's whoever owns this lab.

What was someone else like me doing here? Is this dimension just like ours but only with some minor changes and by minor changes, I mean after some sort of doomsday wiped out most of the population? And most importantly...what's gonna happen to me here? I don't know what to do, I have nobody to turn to and I'm stuck. Rigel hasn't come for me still. I'm starting to wonder if they might have shut the machine down.

I didn't think I would die. I had hope, for once in my life I had hope, and now I have some charred remains of a guy's skeleton a few rooms away from me! Ugh! What to do, what to do, what to do...

I'll give it a rest for a few days. Maybe some answer will just magically appear, or I don't know. But at least I have you, tape recorder. Until you run out of batteries I guess. Unless I can find some in here, which I might be able to. But until then...I guess this is all I've got.

Entry Seven,

Okay. It's been a while. A few weeks or months, still can't really tell but I can't believe it. I actually can't believe it. I...wait for it...I found a way home! I actually found a way home! Buckle in because I have another long story, but this time, I'm totally serious!

So, after finding the skeleton in the bunker and calming down from that whole ordeal, I decided to poke around for evidence. The whole thing really shook me up, but somehow that just made me want to learn more. I went back to the bunker and poked around, found a few things. Something in particular I noticed were pictures of...things. They were all a bit messed up, but I could tell they were of bipedal creatures that didn't exactly look like me. I kept a few of them with me, but they're still rather hard to make out. I'm not sure of what to make of that, especially paired with the whole skeleton thing, but that's not important.

While I was doing some snooping, I noticed a button on the side of the shelf that had all the cans of red stuff. Or one of them at least. The one on the wall. Not gonna lie, it took me about a day to finally muster up the courage to press it, but I did. And boy, I sure am glad that I did that because let me tell you what I found: a whole section of the lab that had been completely blocked off to me! I went inside and looked around, and I found a lot of stuff. There were all sorts of figures and knickknacks of weird little creatures, and it's basically an absolute goldmine. I can't wait to show Rigel all of it, and I will be able to because right in the middle of all of that?

A portal. That's right, a portal, and one exactly like I arrived from! It's so crazy, how one second I thought I was going to die like the skeleton guy back there, and now I

found myself a portal? The only downside here is that it's busted. Like totally busted. I'm gonna have to fix it, but I think I can. I've never done something like this before in my life, but there's no other way I'm gonna be able to get home.

I'm so relieved I don't even know what to say. I really miss home and my bed and Rigel...but hey, he's going to be so shocked when I tell him how I singlehandedly survived in another dimension for revolutions! Maybe even dad will be proud me. So, I guess this is my phase one, as Rigel always called it? That's right, I remembered. Maybe I should start talking like him when I do these things...we'll think about it.

## Chapter 4

Putting down the small torch he'd just extinguished, Rigel removed the wielding mask from his face. He wiped a strand of sweat from his brow and stood upright, away from the stool he'd been sitting at, to study his work: welded metal that had previously been crushed, almost mutilated. It was a small, almost good-as-new testing bot.

After some thinking and research and mapping out of new blueprints, Rigel had come to the conclusion that he could repurpose the small robot initially sent to track him down to help him out. Once he was positive that the device's memory had been completely erased, he determined to fix it up and give it a new home. If he just threw it out into space again, no telling who could find it and potentially track his whereabouts. It was best to keep it under his control, so he knew it wouldn't cause any further problems for him.

Rigel braced himself after pushing its activation button, located on its back and stepping aside briefly in case it exploded. Luckily, no such thing happened. The testing bot's single optic sprung to life, and it made a small whirring noise, blinking and looking around as if to wonder where it was. This made the inventor smile, an odd sense of pride swelling in his heart as he reached out a finger to the robot who was now curiously studying him.

“There we go, buddy,” he said in a whisper, patting the testing bot on the head. “You’re gonna be my little helper now. How’s that sound?”

As if the robot could understand, it shut its single optic and made a small yet excited whirr. It touched its forehead to Rigel’s palm, and his heart swelled even more. However, the heartwarming scene was soon interrupted by a loud knocking.

“Hey, Rigel! Are you still in there working on the robot? It’s been forever!”

Oh. Right. He’d gotten so caught up on fixing the testing bot, that Rigel had forgotten the other passenger on his ship.

“Give me a moment!” he snarled in response, knowing the other would keep silent if he knew what was good for him. And he did. Most of the time.

Giving the testing bot a pat on the head and a look that asked it to stay still, Rigel got to his feet and exited the lab. Slumped against a column directly across from the door was Archer, looking at him with that doopy, half-lidded smile he so often wore.

“What’s going on?” Rigel asked.

“Oh, nothing really,” Archer replied, looking at the ground. “I just got bored.”

Rigel sighed. He didn’t know what he’d expected. “I thought you were exploring my spacecraft. I gave you permission to do so.”

“I know, but I’ve explored all of it by now! Except...”

The smile on the other’s face made Rigel gasp, and he held a finger up, as if scolding a child. “No! You are not going into my lab.”

Archer frowned. “But why not? You promised me I could soon!”

That he had. But he just wasn't sure if Archer was ready or honestly, if he was ready. Rigel knew the portal's recreation would be sped up exceptionally if he had an extra hand on board, but there was something about opening up and telling Archer everything he'd been through that scared him. What if he somehow was sent to stop him or heard about him elsewhere and doesn't recognize him? The latter seemed likely because, as he realized pretty quickly after meeting him, Archer was frankly a bit of an idiot. He seemed harmless, and Rigel felt like he could trust him, but it still wasn't easy to let him in. A week had passed so far, and he'd worked his hardest to keep what was going on a secret.

"Maybe tomorrow," he promised, knowing his words were empty, and that tomorrow would be no different. Luckily, Archer was a bit of a doormat and took his reply with a smile and a nod.

"Alrighty! I'll just head back to- ahh!"

He was cut off as he turned around and found his face instantly smacked into the pillar. Frowning, Archer rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

Rigel frowned. "We really need to get you some glasses, don't we?"

"It would be nice."

Watching Archer rub at the bridge of his nose, Rigel walked over to the navigator room to look at a map. Their current location wasn't too far from some life-filled planets, so he aimed to take a closer look. Squinting a little to make sure he was reading it correctly, the inventor's eyes lit up as he realized they were close to a place that might assist his passenger.

“Would you like to look for some?” he asked over his shoulder, noticing that Archer had followed him. “We’re not too far from Nebus. I’ve been to their main marketplace before.”

Archer cocked his head to the side.

“Oh, come on!” Rigel said, rolling his eyes playfully. “You’ve most certainly heard of Nebus before. Relatively small planet? Pale purple? Lots of hills? Home of Mt. Nebula, the highest peak in the galaxy? It’s practically an intergalactic tourist haven!”

The passenger’s eyes glowed in excitement upon Rigel’s explanation. Then, he shook his head. “Yeah, yeah! I know uhhhh Nibsy. It’s just been so long since I’ve actually been there.”

Rigel wasn’t buying this, but he decided to play along. “Me too, come to think of it.”

He began to plug in the planet’s quadrants into his ship and sighed in satisfaction as a loud beep signaled that they’d been rerouted. It had indeed been some time since he’d made a trip like this. Sure, he’d stopped for sustenance and other necessities along the way, but glasses were a new one. Rigel wore a pair of spectacles himself, but they’d proven to be sturdy throughout his journey in isolation and hadn’t given him any problems. But he knew the planet was bound to be filled with small shops and other areas for the two to travel to.

Once they’d arrived, Rigel parked his spacecraft in an inconspicuous location that wound up to be right in the midst of a market square. As soon as they’d parked, he

grabbed for a rather long cloak and threw it over himself, hiding just about everything.

Archer noticed this and frowned.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

Rigel froze. “Oh, this? It’s nothing.”

Archer stifled a laugh. “You look like you’re going to the gallows, not shopping.”

The inventor sighed, still unable to bring himself to tell the full truth. “I have a skin condition that makes me sensitive to fresh atmosphere. Would you rather me burn to a crisp?”

“No,” Archer said with a shrug, seeming to buy it.

Rigel made sure the craft was secure and exited, his passenger trailing behind.

Archer almost fell flat on his face exiting the ship in excitement. Although his vision was tampered, Rigel could tell that whatever blurry shapes and sizes he made out pleased him as they shoved past customers and merchants. Seeing the other’s eagerness made Rigel a little uneasy.

He took his stare off of Archer for a few moments, turning his attention to his surroundings. They’d definitely made it to the marketplace he had in mind, for it was just as big and busy as Rigel remembered. He focused his gaze directly ahead of him and made note of the towering structure in the background. Mt. Nebula. It was a pastel mauve color, sticking out amongst the other structures around it that were more pinkish in cover. Its rocky peak protruded so far into the atmosphere, that Rigel began to wonder if there even was a top. While it was still in the distance, he knew the entrance of the mountain was about a day’s walk and an hour or so’s drive or flight, where those travelers brave (or

stupid) enough would begin the rigorous climb to the top. He'd seen it before, but every time he did, it still managed to send a shiver up his spine. Rigel never was a fan of heights or getting anywhere near them (he'd convinced himself space was different as long as he tried not to think too hard on it). It was soon evident that Archer did not feel the same.

“Is that the mountain you were talking about!?” he gasped. “It looks huge!”

“Yes. Mt. Nebula. But we're not going anywhere near...” Rigel's voice trailed off when he realized that Archer was not pointing at the mountain, but at a nearby tent instead. He sighed.

“Alright, it's clear to me now that you have minimal experience with these things, so let me set a few ground rules: don't trust everyone. Some people here are kind, hardworking merchants who are trying to sell goods to make meets end. On the other hand, some of them are swindlers who either want your money or valuables or vital organs more than to give you a nice bargain. Understood?”

Archer nodded, clearly not paying attention as he was eyeing just about every shop they passed with wide-eyed curiosity. Rigel groaned and shook his head, hearing a yelp of surprise that jolted him into motion mere seconds after. He looked to his side to see that Archer had collided with a young merchant, whose goods, consisting mostly of pretty rocks, were now scattered all over the ground. She looked to be about 15 or 16 cycles old, with short, purple hair and ear piercings.

“Hey!” she snapped at them. “Watch where you're...” Her voice seemed to trail away as she got a better look at them, something that made Rigel anxious. Then, she

smiled. “Oh, my bad. I thought you were some rascals who started chasing me back there after I wouldn’t let them steal an amethyst. It’s cool.”

“Oh, no!” Rigel laughed, grabbing Archer and roughly yanking him upwards and away. “I am so sorry about my friend here.”

“Not to worry,” the girl spoke, bending over to pick up the spilled jewels.

Rigel began to help her, noting that Archer was probably too visually impaired in order to do so. Once they were all secured in her baskets, he clasped his hands together.

“It was nice meeting you, but my friend and I’ve got to be on our way.” He gave a quick wave to the girl. “Good luck with whatever you’re selling!”

He motioned for Archer to follow suit, which he did. But before they could even take a step in the opposite direction, the girl called for them.

“Hold up!”

Feeling dread creep up on him, Rigel stopped and turned around. “Yes?”

She held out the basket she was holding. “May I interest you two in any of my jewels?”

Rigel narrowed his eyes in suspicion. Great. A swindler. Probably had parents who set her up to this. Luckily, he wasn’t going to fall for her tricks.

“No, thank you,” Rigel replied. “We’re in a hurry, and I--”

“Whoa! What’s that?”

Gritting his teeth at how stupidly eager Archer was, bounding up to the teenager and peering at what she had in her basket, he clenched his hands into fists. The swindler grinned, a smile that let him know all he needed to.

“That’s a dread ruby,” she spoke, sounding sure of herself. “Look into its core and see your enemy’s worst fear!”

Archer eagerly stared at it and frowned. “I don’t see anything.”

Rigel grabbed him by the back of the shirt. “Very well, it’s broken! Now, if you’ll excuse us--”

“Excuse me!” the teenager snapped. “It’s not broken. I wouldn’t sell faulty jewels. What do you take me for, a crook?”

He raised an eyebrow, biting his tongue. “Do you even know what’s in there, or did your parents just hand it to you and ask you to find some poor suckers on the street?”

“They’re mine,” she replied, sounding sure of herself. “I no longer have parents.”

“Oh, I see! Then you’re too young to know what you’re doing and have no guidance to tell you otherwise.” He yanked at Archer once more. “Let’s go.”

“No!” Archer said, pulling away and causing Rigel’s frustration to grow. “She’s right. It’s probably not working because I don’t have glasses.”

“I’m sure that’s it,” Rigel spoke, clearly sarcastic.

“Wait,” the girl cut in, “are you looking for glasses?”

Archer nodded. “Yu-huh. That’s why we’re here!”

“Oh, then you’re in luck.” She beamed. “I’ve got some back at my store. It’s a bit of a walk, but I’ll take you there, if you don’t mind.”

Rigel shook his head. “We’ve already found a place.”

“We have?” asked Archer, genuinely confused.

The inventor sighed, clearly outnumbered here. “Okay. Sure. Take us to your store, but the moment I see something suspicious, we are out of there. Got it?”

“There’s nothing to worry about.” She motioned for them to follow for a moment, before stopping herself. “I’m Lyra.”

“Ooh, that’s really pretty!” Archer chimed. “I’m Archer.”

“Neat.” Lyra looked to Rigel. “What about you? Plague? Pestilence? Maybe Famine?”

He drew the strings of his hood even closer around his face. “I prefer not to say.”

Lyra nudged Archer’s shoulder. “He seems like a pleasant man.”

Archer clearly didn’t process the sarcasm. “Right?”

“Well, follow me.”

After the two made their way through the crowd of people, Rigel practically holding Archer’s hand, so he doesn’t knock anyone else over, they kept walking for a few miles. Wherever Lyra was taking them had to be pretty far off, for Rigel found himself squinting to get a look at where they were going.

Finally, they reached what appeared to be a shop, but it looked more like an abandoned, tattered building. Rigel screwed up his face and prodded Archer’s side, getting his attention.

“Hey, I don’t think this is a good idea,” he whispered. “We should go.”

“Why?” Archer asked.

He motioned to the state of the shop, not feeling as if he had to explain what he meant.

Archer frowned. “C’mon, Rigel, she’s just a kid! What harm can she do?”

“She can’t do anything, but whatever she’s leading us to most definitely can!”

“Hey!”

Lyra’s voice distracted them, and they turned to look at her, now holding open the door to the cabin-sized shop.

“Are you coming or not?”

“Yeah!”

Before Rigel could speak, Archer shrugged away from him and motioned for the inventor to follow. Realizing he had no choice at this rate even if it meant getting devoured or scammed or both, he sighed and did so.

As the two walked closer, Lyra cracked the door open. It made a creaking squeal that caused Rigel’s blood to freeze, forbidding him from taking another step until Archer gave him a gentle nudge that signaled his support. Lyra was the first to step inside, the floorboards making an almost whining noise underneath her footsteps. Then, she turned on the light, which flickered for a quick second before revealing the cabin’s interior. What Rigel saw almost turned his stomach.

There were gemstones, much like the ones she’d been carrying to the marketplace, scattered around the floor and discarded like wrappers. Along with that were bottles stacked high against the wall which had rotten, peeling wallpaper caked to its side. As he and Archer began to walk through the small space, Rigel found himself nearly tripping over the several items.

He let out a frustrated noise. “You don’t clean much, huh?”

“It’s not normally like this,” Lyra defended herself. “I’ve been rather busy.”

Not completely believing her excuse, Rigel finished making his way through the rubble and toward a small desk. He watched as Lyra walked behind it and rummaged through a drawer there. Squinting his eyes in an attempt to see what she was looking for to no avail, Rigel watched until she finally pulled out a pair of spectacles, beaming with pride in herself as she did so.

“I just picked this pair up a few days ago. Try them!”

Rigel watched as Archer eagerly took the glasses from Lyra’s head and fitted them onto his face. Still squinting, he frowned.

“I don’t think these are gonna work.”

Lyra shook her head. “Oh. What a shame.”

Then, a smile stretched across her mouth, and she reached behind her. Rigel readied himself as he watched her press what seemed to be a button of sorts against the wall. The scream caught in his throat as he heard the creaking of wood and gears and turned to see what looked like a regular shop wall behind them open up into a room filled with what had to be at least a few hundred, maybe even five hundred or more, glasses. Archer’s face lit up as if he were an excited youngster, and Rigel’s collided with his palm once more as he watched his companion rush inside the room without question. For a moment, he considered walking away and leaving him there but ultimately knew that wouldn’t be the best course of action and tried to ignore Lyra’s smug glare burning down his spine as he followed.

“Whoa!” Archer breathed, instantly picking up a pile of glasses and cradling them as he rushed to try them on. “Look at this, Rigel! What do you think of this pair? Or these? Hmmm, these are a bit closer to what I’m looking at, but the right eye feels weird. You don’t think I’d be able to get like a test or anything do you?”

Rigel let the other’s voice drown out around his ears as he began to study his surroundings even more intently. While nothing in this room screamed “it’s a trap,” the idea wouldn’t leave his head. It was that feeling he got when he was sure he was being watched, that danger was lurking around each corner, but it was near impossible to shake.

Before he could voice his concerns, he felt something grab his arm. Startled at first, he sighed in relief when it turned out to be an overly excited Archer, donning a square-frame pair of black glasses.

“Look at these! They’re perfect! They look almost like my old ones, see? Or well, you can’t see because I don’t have them, but-”

Archer’s rambling was cut short by the same gear-turning noise from earlier. The two flipped around to see Lyra, looking at them with the same smug expression she always wore as the doors to the secret room suddenly clamped shut behind them. Rigel felt his heartbeat accelerate as he noticed something off about the teenager, her eyes suddenly glowing a much brighter shade of green than they had previously.

“I knew it!” he snarled, pushing Archer aside dramatically. “I knew you were up to no g- huh?”

The small whimper of surprise slipped from Rigel’s lips as he noticed that Lyra’s eyes were starting to melt. Their electric hue was spilling onto the floor and slowly

changing color, mixing with a shade of purple much like her skin but darker. It was as if her eyes were buckets of paint, but the paint was slowly taking shape into something solid, Rigel noticed, for the melted liquid on the floor swirled together and was thrust upward into a shape. He took note of Archer, frozen in fear much like himself at this display, as the shape slowly became more and more like them, sentient, a being and not just a pile of slop. It continued to shape until a very solid and not much different than them woman stood in front of them, so tall that her head almost bumped the ceiling. Once she had properly taken form, Rigel watched as Lyra's body fell to the ground, motionless.

Although Rigel had never seen her nor did he even believe her to be real, there was no doubt about who this was. A whisper from behind, soft yet fearful, let him know that his suspicions were correct.

“Amaris.”

Rigel watched the witch sneer in response and could hardly process what was to follow before the room clouded in a thick purple smoke, and everything went black.

## Chapter 5

When Rigel woke, all he could see was pitch black darkness. One of the first things he noticed upon coming to was that his cloak had presumably been lifted from his head, for he could no longer feel it shielding his form. Anxiety spiking at this realization, he blinked, attempting to focus. His head was still very groggy from whatever happened back there, and his memory was fuzzy. After a few seconds of recollecting his thoughts, he went over the past hour or so: their trip to the marketplace, running into the odd teenage girl who peddled jewels, coming back to her shop to look for a pair of glasses for Archer...Archer! That idiot had gotten them all in danger, just as Rigel had feared from the moment he agreed to let him stay on the ship. Although he'd been reluctant to believe the tales of Amaris and the amulet's power,

He jolted upright, the rest of the story flooding back as he remembered his adventuring companion, realizing what danger he could be. A strange sense of worry creeping over him, Rigel's head whipped to and fro around the stall, finally settling on the image of the other slumped against the cold wall of their enclosure. The fear subsided when he noticed that his companion was alright. As much as he wanted to tear into him for his reckless behavior, Rigel was smart enough to know that there's a time and place for everything and a prison cell belonging to a maniacal sorceress wasn't the best place for a squabble.

Rigel planned to make his way over to Archer, but noticed that his arms and legs had been chained together, falling onto the floor with a small thump. He winced, squirming upward and rubbing his head, looking back toward Archer in hopes to say something to rouse him from whatever it was he was doing. But before he could, Rigel noticed something.

Though Archer appeared to be awake, something about him seemed off, at least from a distance. At first, Rigel thought it might be a trick of the dark, but no, there was something off-putting about his appearance. His typically pointed ears were a lot rounder, as was his face. It was unlike anything Rigel had ever seen in his life. Perhaps that wasn't Archer? But if it wasn't him, then who was it? These thoughts and several more wracked at Rigel's brain until he had no choice but to make sure.

"Archer!" he called, voice a low whisper but still loud enough to be heard. "That you?"

"Yeah."

He sighed in relief when he heard the response, but the joy he felt was soon replaced with confusion when he picked up on how monotone his companion's tone was. This didn't sound like the Archer he knew and tolerated at all. He honestly expected the guy to think being imprisoned by a crazy dark magician was some sort of fun adventure. Instead, he sounded defeated and almost hurt? Did Amaris hurt him? Rigel worried himself with how the thought made his stomach flip, but he swallowed his emotions down, trying his best to stay calm and collected despite everything.

"What happened back there? Was that--"

“Amaris? Yeah. That was her.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Well, what do we do now?”

“I don’t know.” Archer sighed. “She’s got us cornered, took the amulet, and now we’re in here to be some kind of example of those who cross her when she harnesses its power at the marketplace later tonight.”

“Oh. Why not just kill us both now?”

Archer shrugged. “She’s kind of dramatic.”

Rigel almost wanted to beg Archer to remain as calm and optimistic as he always was just so he could have some sense of sanity as he formulated a plan to break out of this place. He squinted in the darkness, trying to get a better look at what kind of aircraft this was. Finally, he connected a few dots. They were on an unmoving galactic guard ship! That would explain the prison cell and restraints. Somehow, this relieved him more than being on an actual ship controlled by the galactic guard, as that would imply he’d been discovered.

He turned back to Archer. “This is a galactic guard ship.”

“I know,” his companion replied. “It was mine.”

The response threw Rigel completely off-guard and caused him to lose his previous train of thought. “You were a member of the galactic guard?”

Archer shook his bulky head. “Nope. I stole it a few revolutions ago.”

Rigel gasped. “What?”

The other simply shrugged, and Rigel began to feel an odd sense of confusion creep over him as he was slapped in the face with each surprising reveal. It was as if the annoying but cheerful man who fell from the sky had turned into some kind of stone-faced criminal. Unease began to creep over Rigel, and he tried his best to swallow down every thought of this being a ruse of some sort.

His sudden suspicions involving Archer caused him to take a closer look at the other's head. The small sliver of light shining through the cell window was providing a better outline of what Archer, and upon closer inspection, he realized that his companion indeed had much different ears than the last time they'd been face-to-face. Instead of the typical long and pointed stature of the body part, his were now curved and almost rounded. This cause Rigel to focus even closer on the other, a sense of dread creeping upon him as he began to realize even more differences in his friend's form. His skin wasn't the typical smooth texture of his kind but doughier and consisting of small blemishes and hairs. And his eyes, once a bright and full shade of amber, were now almost otherworldly: a shade of white with a black dot in the middle. This was what made Rigel shrink back and cry out in astonishment.

"What are you, and what have you done with Archer?" he hissed, trying to lunge at the other before forgetting that his arms and legs had been shackled together and falling flat against the hard cell floor.

As he struggled to get to his feet, he squeaked in despair as he got a closer look at who was supposed to be his traveling companion, although that clearly wasn't the case anymore. He didn't know who this weird creature who slightly resembled Archer was,

but he couldn't accept that it was him. However, judging by the sympathetic and almost heartbroken glance the odd being was giving him, something told Rigel that maybe it was him after all.

He struggled back upwards and leaned against the wall, now much closer to this other Archer than before. His fear was ebbing away, but his confusion stayed. There were a few moments of uncomfortable silence between the two, until Archer- or whatever, whoever, this was- broke it.

"Rigel," he began, voice shaking, "there are a few things I haven't told you about myself."

"No kidding."

Another beat of silence. Archer sucked in a deep breath.

"The truth is, I'm not from here."

Frustrated with the vague answers, Rigel glared at his companion. "Here as in...?"

"As in this dimension."

The word "dimension" set off an electric shock through Rigel's body, as if he'd been hit with an aircraft and flung into the depths of space. For a second, he wondered if this might be a simulation sent to haunt him for his past mistakes. He tried to form words, anything to get more truth out of this strange being, but instead, his mouth was clasped from awe or surprise or guilt or some emotion he couldn't place. Despite this, Archer continued.

“I’m from dimension 365, inhabitant of a planet called Earth. I’m not sure if it exists here. If it does, I haven’t seen it.”

The words he spoke were foreign to Rigel. A located separate dimension? 365? Earth? Why didn’t he know of this?

“I wound up here, dimension 366, about five revolutions ago after helping my father create a portal-like machine that allows interdimensional travel, but...I got stuck.” He ran a hand over his arm as he spoke. “I needed the amulet because it allowed me to change my form to one similar to the inhabitants of this dimension, at least in the area I wound up in. It’s the only way I could survive here.”

Rigel didn’t know how to respond. Everything that was happening in that moment, these challenges that he was suddenly being faced with, were things that he never imagined ever having to come to terms with. Archer was a scientist just like him? Not only that, but he was specifically an interdimensional studies scientist from another dimension? Something told him that maybe this was a lie, that he was being led into some sort of trap, but the other’s change in physical appearance and sudden knowledge of things Rigel had never heard of drew him in to the other like he never had been before. Sure, they had a few similarities in the past, but this changed everything! Once they escaped the ship and got back to his own, Archer would be of great use to Rigel. He was just who he needed, a savior sent from dimension 365 to help him save his friend and clear his name and conscious.

But first, Rigel had questions. And they all came spilling out very quickly.

“What sparked your interest in interdimensional studies? How did you manage to build a portal strong enough to sustain a living being? Is there any way you could do it again? Oh, and who was your father? I-”

Rigel’s questioning was cut short as he heard the sound of approaching footsteps and a distant voice. Cursing under his breath, he determined it would be best to stay quiet for now, despite having so many questions to ask Archer after the latest reveal. He slumped against the cell wall again, tapping his foot to his best ability as he waited for the footsteps to pass. But instead, they stopped just out of reach of his viewpoint, and he heard the loud, booming voice of Amaris.

“Dinner for the prisoners, Lyra. Give it to them.”

Lyra? Wasn’t that the name of the teenage form Amaris had taken on? Rigel’s ears perked up and listened in closely to the conversation.

“Okay.” A small voice, defenseless. It sounded similar to the one of Amaris’s teenage disguise, but something was different in its tone.

There was an exchange of items and then more footsteps, ones going in the other direction. Then, the smaller voice spoke.

“Amaris?”

The footsteps stopped, and Rigel could practically hear Amaris’s bones creaking as she turned her head.

“That won’t do, dearie. Remember?”

“Right. Lady Amaris.”

“That’s the spirit!”

The smaller voice coughed. “I was just wondering, after you achieve your true form and conquer this planet, maybe you could, I don’t know...teach me a few things? You did promise, after all, and I know you’re very busy, but I’ve been doing everything you’ve asked and...”

Her voice trailed away. The footsteps were back, but somehow they sounded more threatening. Rigel could practically picture the look of fear on the little girl’s face.

“Lyra,” Amaris spoke, voice sickeningly smooth, “my dearest little Lyra. We’re not getting smart, now are we?”

“No ma’am! It’s just, I’ve been waiting, and you told me not to ask, but you said I helped you get the Metamorphyst back when I unfroze you, that I could be your student.”

“And you are, Lyra. You are my student.”

“But...” Lyra sighed. “You’re not actually teaching me anything, y’know? I wanna learn spells and alchemy and- ahh!”

A loud suction pop was heard, similar to the eerie pouring one of Amaris’s form bleeding out through Lyra’s eyes. Then, Lyra spoke again, but her voice sounded like it did before, more confident and boasting.

“Look at me! I’m Lyra! All I care about is learning and knowledge and talking back to my poor, sweet teacher who’s just trying to get revenge on those who deserve it. I’m lucky she hasn’t thrown me into the galaxy to *die* yet!”

The noise was heard again, along with a defeated gasp from Lyra. There was a beat of silence, but as the scene was pictured in Rigel’s head, the teenager was on the

floor, gasping, and Amaris was towering over her, beaming with power. She spoke, voice cruel and slick.

“And she will if you don’t obey her. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Lady Amaris.”

“Good girl. Now give the prisoners their final meal. I have to get ready for my true form’s awakening.”

Rigel heard the sound of Amaris walking away, and Lyra picking up the plate she was handed. As she began to make her way toward their cell, he nudged Archer to make sure they were on the same page. The two shifted positions and looked up, soon greeted by the teenage girl they’d met at the marketplace with green eyes much more sullen and spirit deflated.

## Chapter 6

As he locked eyes with the girl who was complicit in his capture, Rigel couldn't help but bare his teeth. Her expression was unchanging which somehow made it even more infuriating. Rigel didn't want to feel bad for someone who got him in even more trouble after he'd managed to avoid it for so many revolutions, but noticing the change in her stature and remembering how Amaris- her teacher? That something worth bringing up later- had spoken to her made something in the scientist's closed-off heart melt. Not wanting to show that, he continued to burn her with his stare.

She reached in her pocket and pulled out a key, using it to open the cell they inhabited. Then, she slid the dish she held across the floor as if it were some sort of frisbee. Once it had made its way into the room, the teen was quick to close the bars once more and lock it. Rigel looked down at the dish, covered with a silver lid. He frowned.

"Excuse me, but how are we supposed to open that? We're a little tied up here," he commented, using his head to motion to the chains that kept his arms and legs from moving.

"Right."

She sighed, opening the cell door again to remove the lid from the dish, revealing a thick, olive-colored sludge. Rigel's stomach turned at the sight and smell, not wanting to be anywhere near whatever this so-called "food" was. One look at Archer's face let

him know that his companion felt the same way. Nonetheless, he still wanted to challenge his capturer's knowledge.

"You know, even if I wanted to eat that which I most certainly do not, I wouldn't be able to unless I ate it with my mouth like some sort of primitive fellow."

"That's your problem," the girl replied, voice sounding more tired than antagonizing. She then reached for her key, causing Rigel's eyebrow to raise and a laugh to slip from his mouth.

"Why do you even keep shutting us in? We can't move, for the galaxy's sake! Do you really think I'm going to squirm my way out of here like a pathetic worm? Honestly, you-"

"Shut up," she snarled, shutting the door with force enough to make the walls shake a little. "I don't want to hear it."

"Well, maybe if you didn't want to hear us complain, you wouldn't have let that witch imprison and kill us! What would you be doing in our situation, huh? Can you really blame me?"

"Rigel, calm down," Archer piped up from the back of the cell. "She's just a kid."

"A kid who's the reason we're going to be murdered in front of an entire marketplace!"

"Hey, I don't want to do this!" she fought back, voice a whisper so Amaris presumably wouldn't hear her. "I'm doing it to help myself."

"Oh?" Rigel rolled his eyes. "And how does killing two innocent civilians help you?"

She opened her mouth to retort something but seemed to lose her train of thought, sighing and leaning against the bars. “I don’t even know anymore.”

Rigel sighed in annoyance, content with never saying another word to this girl ever again. All he wanted to focus on now was finding an escape, and if she was hanging around, that would be harder. However, as expected, Archer wasn’t done here.

“What do you mean?” he asked, scooting up closer to where Rigel and Lyra argued.

“Are we really doing this?” Rigel hissed, not eager to sympathize with someone who tricked them. As expected, his complaint was ignored.

“I don’t know if I should go into it,” Lyra sighed, facing away.

“Aw, come on!” Archer said. “If you talk about it, you might feel better.”

“I guess...” Lyra took a deep breath, and when she opened her mouth, it was as if a bomb planted deep inside of her exploded. “It’s Amaris! I don’t know what her *deal* is! When I freed her, she promised to teach me magic if I let her possess me to get the amulet back, which I’ve been doing for like an entire revolution. And she hasn’t taught me anything! She keeps promising and promising, but all she does is berate me for every little thing I do wrong and make me feel like an idiot for not knowing anything about magic even though it was banned in my family *because of her!* And now I’m never gonna see them again because she won’t let me free either, and if I ran away, she’d come after me and probably kill me or wipe my mind forever, which is even worse! I’m just...stuck!”

With the last word, Lyra banged her fist against the wall. Rigel could tell it hurt, but she didn't even flinch. Instead, she stood there, and he thought he could see a few tears well up in the corner of her eyes. For a brief moment, he saw the troubled kid Archer was defending a few seconds ago. But then, his brain became overwhelmed with questions from what she'd just spilled.

"Wait, did you just say you freed Amaris yourself? Someone who, as far as I'm concerned, is a known threat to everyone who she crosses? What did you think would happen!? You- ow!"

Rigel was cut off from a sharp nudge in the shoulder from Archer, and he gave him a sour look. Despite this, he decided to let him take the floor.

"Hey," Archer spoke softly. "It's okay. My buddy and I have been trying to think of a way to bust out of here, and if we manage, we can take you with us."

A loud gasp left Rigel's throat, and it was his turn to nudge Archer. "What? You can't be serious about this. She tricked us! How do you know she's not doing that right now?"

"Because she's not possessed."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"Kind of?"

Rigel raised an eyebrow, and before Archer could defend himself, Lyra spoke up.

"No, it's fine. Don't take me." She gave them a weak grin. "But I can help you get out of here if you want. Amaris is gonna find some way to punish me no matter what happens."

Archer opened his mouth, but Rigel pushed him aside.

“We don’t need your help. We can do this by ourselves.”

“Rigel!” Archer snapped, getting more frustrated than he’d ever seen him.

He sighed, facing Lyra again. “Excuse us for a moment.” Rigel scooted a little to the side, motioning for Archer to follow. Once they were a few feet further from Lyra, he spoke. “If you’re really a scientist like myself, then why are you such a moron?”

“Look, I know it’s crazy, but I really think she’s telling the truth this time,” Archer said, glancing back to Lyra who was still forlornly slumped against the cell. “We heard how Amaris talked to her. She’s a kid in a bad situation, and if we’re not going to help her escape, then the least we could do is give her positive reinforcement and let her help us.”

Rigel blinked, still not completely on board with the idea. Perhaps it was because of his revolutions of solitude, but something was holding him back from going along with his companion’s plan. Still, he determined that he should try to be gentler with Archer.

“I understand where you’re coming from,” he said, “but you obviously don’t know how to live out here. I don’t believe this dimension is like your own. Here, we can’t just trust everyone blindly. It will be your biggest downfall.” His expression hardened. “Especially if you’re running away.”

Judging by the way Archer’s mouth slowly dropped, and his eyes wandered to the floor, Rigel could tell that his words reached something inside of him. Despite this, he took a breath to steady himself and looked at Rigel that let him know his decision before he even spoke.

“But she’s not the only one who needs help. We do too. She knows every trap Amaris might have planted in this ship, and I know everything else about it. Maybe it’s a mistake, but any escape we make will be risking our lives.” His stare hardened for a moment as he spit out the last sentence, almost accusatory. “I don’t see what’s so wrong with admitting that you need help.”

Rigel wanted so badly to snap back at Archer and spit vitriol at him until he changed his mind. But he couldn’t because no matter how badly he wanted to be right, he couldn’t feel like he was. Something about the way Archer looked at him and spoke to him made him wonder if maybe he wasn’t. Did the creatures from his companion’s dimension have some sort of mind control powers? He hadn’t been proven wrong in so long, that he forgot if it always felt this strange.

Shaking his head and giving Archer a stern yet understanding glare, Rigel finally spoke. “Fine. But if we die, I’m going to kill you again in the afterlife.”

A steady smile made its way toward the other’s face, and Rigel tried to swallow down any feeling of joy it gave him. “I knew you’d come around.”

Rigel cursed under his breath as he felt his face getting hot. “Yeah, yeah.”

Shaking it off, he scooted back over to where Lyra stood. She was still lounging against the bars, looking at the floor. He faked a cough to get her attention, and she whipped around.

“Alright. We’ll accept your help. But no tricks this time, got it?”

Lyra seemed as if she was trying to hide back just how relieved and excited she was, and Rigel suddenly felt the burden of having a teenage girl in peril rely on him slap him in the face at full force.

“I’ll try,” she replied, clearly joking but somehow it still made Rigel uneasy. “Oh and...thanks, by the way.”

“You’re welcome,” Archer answered. Rigel simply nodded.

After the moment of understanding, Lyra exchanged glances with the two to make sure they were all on the same page and ready to start planning. Once Rigel nodded, followed by Archer, he leaned in closer to where the teenage girl stood, as close as the bars that separated them would allow.

“Alright,” Lyra began, dropping her voice to a whisper, “Amaris is getting ready in her room right now, and that’s gonna take a while. Trust me.”

“Do you know exactly what she has planned for us?” Rigel questioned.

Lyra groaned, letting him know it wasn’t good if she did. “Yeah.”

“That’s important.”

“I know, I know! Let me get there.” She huffed in frustration, then continued.

“Amaris created the amulet so she could harness what she claims is her final form. I got no idea what that looks like, but I know it’s really big and really scary.”

“That’s descriptive.”

Lyra snarled at Rigel. “Do you want to escape or not?”

The inventor shrugged, letting her resume.

“Anyway, did you see that mountain when you flew in?”

“It’s a little hard to miss.”

“That’s Mt. Nebula, the highest point in the galaxy, as well as the region Amaris has chosen as her “palace.” We’re there right now, parked inside of a cave near its peak. She wants to get everyone’s attention by harnessing the Metamorphyst’s power on top of the mountain and then, throw you two off to show the others here what happens when you mess with her.”

A pathetic yelp left Archer’s throat, and Rigel winced, knowing his demise had to play a part in whatever the witch had planned but not expecting falling from an impossible height to be the way she did it.

“Question,” Rigel piped up, “what exactly does Amaris want to accomplish? In general?”

Lyra gritted her teeth. “Short answer since we’re short on time?”

Rigel nodded.

“Take over the galaxy, starting with smaller planets and working her way up to larger ones.”

“Sounds about right.”

“I told you she was a force to be reckoned with,” Archer teased, but Rigel chose to ignore it.

“She’s kind of a big deal where I come from,” Lyra continued. “If anyone saw her before she was ready, they’d take her back to Mysticus and freeze her again. That’s why I’ve been letting her possess me. Nobody’s gonna think suspiciously of a sweet little girl.”

“I see. So, from what I gather, she’s dangerous and pretty much unstoppable once she gets a hold of the Metamorphyst.” He thought for a few beats, until an idea that might lead them somewhere popped into his head. “But she’s not the brightest.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for starters, why hasn’t she put on the Metamorphyst yet?”

Lyra furrowed her brows. “Because she wants to make a scene. She thinks everything has to be perfect. That’s why she’s been in her room trying on dresses for who knows how long.”

“There we go!” Rigel clasped his hands together. “That’s her weak spot. She’s a perfectionist and a drama queen! If her entrance can’t be dramatic, she’d rather not make it at all.”

Thinking for a moment, Lyra finally nodded. “Sounds about right.”

“Alright, so we’ve found her weakness.” Rigel gave a nod, then went back into his planning pose. “Now we need a way to use it to our advantage.” After thinking for a few more beats, he fixated his stare back toward Lyra. “How does she view you?”

“Huh?”

“What’s her general opinion on you? Are you a threat? A nuisance? Anyone she might read for suspicious activity?”

The teenager shrugged. “She doesn’t think that highly of me. If anything, she just thinks I’m a screw-up who doesn’t deserve her time and always gets in her way.”

“That’s the missing piece!” Rigel gave a laugh.

Lyra seemed a little hurt by this. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because in order for this to work, we need you to be exactly what she thinks of you. Where’s the Metamorphyst now?”

“In her room. She’s got it hanging up on the wall with all of her necklaces.”

Archer spoke up. “Question.”

“Yes?”

“How did she get all those dresses and necklaces? Those were not on my ship to begin with.”

Lyra beamed. “I stole them for her! That was kinda fun actually.”

Rigel clapped. “Ahem! Can we please focus on the task at hand?”

“Right.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s better.” He cleared his throat. “Lyra.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re going to be our distraction. I need you to go in there to ask Amaris a question, something basic like…”

“I’m supposed to give her tea before we take off for Mt. Nebula.”

“Even better!” A smirk formed on Rigel’s face as he realized everything was falling into place. He turned to share it with Archer, silently thanking him for getting Lyra on their side.

“Wait,” Lyra piped up, “what do you want me to do again?”

Rigel turned back to her, still smiling. “Be as annoying and inconvenient as you possibly can.”

The request seemed to excite Lyra more than anything in the past conversation had, except maybe the brief mention of her past robberies.

## Chapter 7

“Are you kidding me? I never even used that one, and now she’s running it with her-”

“Shhhhh!”

Rigel shoved Archer as gently as he possibly could as the two looked down at the scene that was to unfold below them. They’d traveled through the vents of the ship, being let out of their cell by Lyra and located to the nearest airway system. Now, they were watching intently as Amaris got ready in her room, which evidently used to be Archer’s judging by the way he was criticizing her use of the objects around that clearly didn’t belong to her. Right now, he was clutching his face in fear and annoyance as he watched her use a brand-new test-tube brush to apply some sort of thick, gooey eye shadow.

They’d lost track of time, but they had been in the vent for a while and the witch had yet to call for Lyra’s assistance. Rigel was becoming restless but knew it was important to wait out and be as quiet as possible to avoid being caught. So far, Amaris was so caught up in her own makeup routine that she hadn’t even bothered to look. But admittedly, it wasn’t the most interesting thing to watch, and Rigel often found himself half-asleep and having to be woken up in order to shush Archer when he almost made a snide comment about her mixing foundation in his test tube.

Suddenly, Amaris looked over her shoulder, causing Rigel's ears to perk in excitement.

"Oh, Lyra!" she called, as loud as she possibly could. "Do come quickly! I need your help with a few things."

The two men straightened themselves up as much as possible, watching intently as the teenager walked into Amaris's room, holding a tray consisting of a cup with a few spoons next to it. Rigel assumed it was the tea they'd discussed.

"I'm here, Lady Amaris," Lyra spoke, voice as soft and defeated as it was when Amaris had been criticizing her earlier. Rigel was impressed with the kid's acting skills. "And I've brought the neblian tea you've requested."

Amaris smiled, sharp teeth glistening in the room's light as she gave Lyra a condescending pat on the head. "What a good girl! And did you add any extra sweetener?"

Lyra shook her head. "No, ma'am."

"Good. Nice and bitter, just how I like it. Now, hand it over, dear."

"Okay."

Rigel could practically feel the half-second smile Lyra gave as she enacted the first stage of their plan. Looking down and pinpointing a believe object to trip on (a book of sorts, probably something belonging to Archer), she practically threw herself onto the ground. Before Amaris could even gasp, the hot drink landed right as planned: directly on her chest and all over the light grey evening gown she had picked out for tonight. She shrieked in reaction to the liquid's temperature and the ruined fabric, giving Lyra a shove

back down as she tried to get up. This made Rigel's neck bristle in fury, and he bared his teeth, his newly found soft spot for the girl getting harder to ignore.

"Lyra, you imbecile! Look what you've done to my conquering dress! You should be absolutely ashamed of yourself! Why, I should--"

"I'm sorry, Lady Amaris!" Lyra squeaked, cowering in front of her. "I tripped over the big ugly book thing."

"Oh. I see." Amaris picked it up, thumbing through its contents. "That lowlife traveler sure has some rubbish taste in literature. What even is a Captain Cosmos? And why are these pictures so colorful and eye-blistering? Where's the bloodshed? Violence? Death?" She closed it. "Bah. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to get this stain out as soon as possible. Also, burn this nuisance of a book."

"No!"

Rigel almost yelled in annoyance at Archer's outburst, and he turned around to slam a hand over his mouth before any more of it could be spilled. When he saw Amaris looking around, his heart dropped.

"What was that?"

Lyra, catching onto what happened, worked hard to come up to an excuse. "I...was going to read it! Captain Crustacean or whatever. It looked really, really cool and totally not something I've outgrown by now."

Amaris gave her a sneer. "Good. Now I'll take even more pride in dropping this wretched thing into the furnace."

Rigel sighed in relief, despite the fact that he could practically feel Archer's heart breaking in the background.

With a flick of her hair, Amaris began to exit the room, the sound of her high-heeled boots clapping against the floor. "While I'm gone, make yourself useful and clean up the mess you've made. I want the area spotless by the time I return, or else I'll throw you off Mt. Nebula too. Understood?"

"Yes, Lady Amaris."

As soon as the coast was clear, Lyra looked to the vent and motioned for them to come out. Rigel managed to get it open after a few tries and skillfully slid down the wall, followed by Archer who would have fallen flat on his face and caused a ruckus once more had Rigel not been there to catch him. Once they'd both entered the room, Archer gave a defeated sigh, walking over to where the book had been.

"Oh, Captain Cosmos," he said, shaking his head, "I'll miss you so."

"Alright," Rigel spoke, "now where's that Metamorphyst?"

"Over there," Lyra whispered, pointing to a mannequin head consisting of several necklaces. Before Rigel could make his way over there, she stopped him. "Wait. Before you grab it, remember not to put it on. If you haven't thought really hard about yourself before wielding it, the amulet can seriously hurt you."

Rigel nodded. "Right. In that case, you grab it, Archer."

He squinted toward the mannequin's head, looking confused. "I can't really tell which one is which."

“Curses! I forgot those glasses,” Rigel muttered, beginning to remember how useless his companion was in terms of sight.

As if equipped for this very moment, Lyra walked toward him and reached into her pocket, pulling out the exact pair he’d picked up at her shop. “Here you go.”

Shocked, Archer picked them up and placed them on his face, grinning once they were seated there. “Whoa! You had them this whole time?”

Lyra shrugged humbly. “I mastered an endless pockets spell on these pants a while back. It’s for beginners, but it’s very useful. I don’t even remember some of the stuff I got in these babies.”

“Neat!” Archer turned toward the mannequin. “Lemme just grab that Metamorphyst…”

He tiptoed closer to it, carefully picking it up and placing it around his neck. Once he did so, the features on his face and skin began to change, swiftly morphing into ones that matched Rigel and Lyra until he was back to looking exactly like he did the night they met.

Rigel’s mouth dropped open like a drawbridge. “Huh. It really does work.”

“Yep.” Lyra was quick to shift back to her more determined stance, looking in both directions. “Now, let’s get outta here before she comes back.”

As if on cue, after a quick nod of agreement from individual, Amaris’s voice was heard down the hallway.

“Lyra! What are you doing in there? Are you talking to yourself again?”

“Quick!” Lyra hissed, motioning for Rigel and Archer to follow her.

The three raced toward the exit of the ship, not even bothering to check if Amaris was following. As far as they were concerned, they needed to get out as soon as possible. After a few twists and turns down each corridor, the ship's exit finally greeted them. Sighing in relief, Rigel made sure the others were in tow before making a run toward it, glad to see that it was open as if it had been waiting for their escape. It appeared that the ship had been parked inside of some sort of cave or alcove.

Right as he was about to take his first step outside, the same sickening purple smoke from earlier clouded his vision as if a bomb went off, and before he could even process it, Amaris stood there, licking her lips and smirking like an animal who had just cornered its prey. Blood running cold, Rigel took a step back, realizing that their flawless escape would be complicated after all, as he should have expected.

“Didn’t think I wouldn’t catch on to your little heist?” Amaris asked, studying her sharp claw-like nails. “Words echo fast around this ship, you know.”

The realization that she knew everything hit Rigel like an aircraft, and he winced, exchanging worried glances with his companions. Amaris seemed to revel in their defeat, extending her hand toward Archer.

“Now, hand me the Metamorphyst.”

Archer grabbed onto the amulet’s necklace, looking Amaris straight in the eyes as he did so. Instead of doing as she asked, he seemed to take advantage of his adrenaline and gave the witch a hard shove, sending her backward and onto the ground.

“Go!” he ordered, and the three were off.

Rigel and Amaris successfully made it off the ship, but before Archer could brace the final step, Amaris grabbed him by the ankle and sent him falling to the ground. Panicked, he removed the Metamorphyst from around his neck and threw it at Rigel. Thankful for his keen eye, the inventor snatched the amulet just in time. Amaris scoffed, letting Archer go and trailing after Rigel. Yelping at this, he ran as fast as he could, realizing that it wouldn't be quick enough. Seeing that Lyra was still in the lead, he called to her.

“Lyra! Catch!”

He threw the Metamorphyst as quickly as he could, hoping the teen heard him. She thankfully did, swiftly grasping the amulet in her hands and rushing forward. Amaris, however, stopped, crossing her arms and watching as Lyra continued to run. Rigel looked ahead, wondering as to why this was until he saw where she was headed.

“Look out!” he called, just in time as the girl stopped dead in her tracks, realizing that below the end of the cave was not only a dead end but the edge of the steepest cliff any of them had ever seen in their lives.

They were nearly on top of Mt. Nebula.

Seeming to realize what would happen if she took one more step further, Lyra had planned to walk back. Unfortunately for her, Amaris was swift on her feet and practically appeared behind her, meeting her stare when the girl flipped around. Almost losing her footing at that moment, Rigel could sense the fear dripping from Lyra and readied himself to attack, making sure Archer was behind him. However, his companion put a hand on his shoulder, as if asking him to look at something.

One more glance at Lyra showed that despite everything, she was starting to calm down. Her eyes were shut, and her mouth had curled into a neutral expression, one that was hard to read but let Rigel and Archer know that she had a plan. This caused him to halt, but he remained poised in case something went wrong and his assistance was needed.

“Isn’t this funny?” Amaris taunted. “You’ve been put in quite the predicament, you frustrating little imp. You can give me the Metamorphyst, so I may harness my true powers and take what should be mine, or you can fall to your demise.”

Gulping, Rigel watched as Lyra shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Then, she opened them, their icy stare fixating on Amaris. Then, a smirk.

“Fine.”

Without hesitation, Rigel and Archer watched as Lyra leapt from the edge of the cliff. Tensing up with fear, he wanted to rush in after her, to go plummeting off the edge as well even though he knew he wouldn’t be alright. But Archer grabbed his arm, keeping him steady. Was this some sort of plan nobody had let Rigel in on?

All questions were halted when a sudden beam of violet light shot upward, and Rigel tilted his head to see what it was. There seemed to be some sort of comet towering over Amaris, light flowing from its form as it levitated in the air albeit a bit shakily. He squinted and adjusted his spectacles, trying to get a better look at whatever it was. When his eyes finally made out what the glowing being ahead of him was, his mouth slowly dropped open.

It was Lyra. She was glowing, especially her eyes which were now an almost neon purple and didn't seem to have pupils, and her hair was billowing out underneath her as if it were being blown by a strong wind. Connecting the dots in his head, Rigel's eyes focused on the girl's neck. The amulet lay around it, glowing just as bright as its wearer.

Clearly not expecting this to happen, Amaris fell backward in shock, speechless by the display. "But...you...how!?"

"Who's the frustrating little imp now?" Lyra spoke, voice dripping with a confidence Rigel had never heard before, even coming from her.

However, that pride began to falter as he watched Lyra summon a thick beam of light from her palm, which ricocheted off one of the nearby rocks and into the sky. She definitely hadn't thought this out.

Seeing her misfire made Amaris a little more sure of herself, and Rigel watched as she curled her lip into a taunting sneer once more. "So you've harnessed the amulet's powers, huh? But you don't know how to use them! Why, you're just as useless as- hey!"

The sorceress was cut off as Lyra suddenly fired a beam directly at her, and she slowly began to levitate into the air. Rigel studied Lyra's expression, realizing this definitely was not what she was intending to happen.

"What are you doing to me?"

"I don't know! Uhhh, defeating you!" Lyra tried to fling Amaris against the side of the cave, but instead, she just shook her to and fro for a few seconds. The sorceress appeared more annoyed than scared.

“Put me down!”

“No!”

“That is an order!”

“I’m not taking orders from you anymore!”

“Are you just going to shake me to death then?”

“Maybe!”

Rigel and Archer looked at each other as the two bickered for what was at least a minute, until Lyra finally managed to lift Amaris off the ground a bit higher and threw her into the edge of the cave. She yelped in response, and her body went limp as it slid to the ground floor. Then, Lyra carefully flew over to where she could safely land and did so, looking proud of herself but also completely overwhelmed. Once she was steady, she removed the amulet from around her neck, causing the glow to fade away until she looked like herself again. She threw the Metamorphyst to Archer who was quick to thrust it around his neck and take on his non-human form once more.

“What in the stars was *that*?” Rigel was quick to ask, rushing to the teenager and making sure she

Lyra smiled excitedly, suddenly radiating with excitement. “Rigel, that was my true form! The Metamorphyst turned me into a sorceress, just like I was hoping! I thought that maybe when I put it on it would because it’s all I ever wanted to be in my life, and even if I don’t know like anything about controlling magic and actually using it past a few beginner spells and stuff I read about in books, I actually had it! For once in my life,

I used magic! And I didn't even need my family or Amaris or anyone! Ha! This is the greatest day of my life!"

The rowdy teenager was about to give Rigel a hug, but he stopped her, putting a hand on her shoulder to keep her steady. "Didn't you tell me that harnessing the power of the Metamorphyst was extremely dangerous?"

"Yeah, yeah, but what else was I supposed to do? Let Amaris take it? Fall to my death?"

Rigel thought and then nodded. "Fair point."

"Did you just kill her?" Archer whispered, frightened as he pointed to Amaris.

Wondering the same thing, Rigel carefully approached the sorceress and knelt beside her, checking for signs of life. Once he noted the steady rise and fall of her chest, he gave a nod. "Nope. She's just knocked out."

Lyra snapped her fingers. "Aw, man."

Rigel and Archer looked at her, the latter raising a brow.

"I mean, yeah! That's what I intended all along! Ha..."

"Didn't you say that harnessing the Metamorphyst's power was extremely dangerous if you weren't ready?"

Rigel cleared his throat and got to his feet, dusting off his pants. "We need to get back to my ship. How far is that from here?" He didn't think the mountain seemed too far away once they'd parked but knew it would still take them at least a day or two back on foot.

“I don’t know,” Lyra said with a shrug. Archer shook his head, conveying that he knew just about as much as she did.

Making out the pathway they’d need to take in order to climb down the mountain, as there was a walkway to the right of him meant for tourist, Rigel motioned for the others to follow. “We’ll just have to find out ourselves then. Come on.”

Archer was quick to trail behind him, but Lyra hesitated. Stopping, Rigel turned to look at her, confused. “Aren’t you coming?”

Lyra’s ears perked up at the notion, and she blinked. “You want me to come?”

“Of course.” He gave her a humble smile, looking away for a moment. “I mean, you know your way around here better than either of us do. We could use your help.”

He could tell that Lyra managed to sneak past his vague wording in the way she smiled back at him. She knew he’d gotten attached. This kid would already be the death of him.

“Okay,” she said, falling into line between them as they made their way down the mountain. “In that case, do you want me to put the Metamorphyst back on and fly us to the ship? It’d be a lot quicker and-”

“No!” Rigel was quick to cut in, flinching as he remembered how Amaris had been flung around like a ragdoll.

“Fair. But when I can control my powers, I’m gonna fly you guys anywhere you’d like.”

Rigel didn’t want to smile at the notion of Lyra, as well as Archer, being with him every step of the way from now on. That didn’t mean he could help it though.

## Chapter 8

*Jericho had gotten used to climbing the wall that stood on the edge of Lunar City. It wasn't too far from his house, a popular meeting place for those who lived in his area. Of course, Rigel had already made it to the top by the time he was slowly trying to edge his way forward. His friend offered him a hand, which he took, chuckling.*

*"Sorry," he said with a wince, sitting on top of the wall at last. "You know I'm not the best at this."*

*"Nonsense," Rigel answered, laughing softly. "You've gotten better."*

*Shifting, Jericho situated himself on top of the wall next to Rigel and looked out at the city. The blinking lights of the buildings illuminated their town, a sight both boys had seen many times before but one that never got old. A relaxed sigh left Jericho's throat.*

*"Beautiful as always."*

*Rigel nodded, clearing his throat. "So, have you gotten your acceptance letter from Blue Moon yet?"*

*Jericho shook his head. "Nah. But I know I'm gonna get in because, y'know, Dad."*

*"Right."*

*He noticed that Rigel was looking a little more distant than usual. Giving him a sympathetic smile, Jericho gently placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Hey. You'll get in."*

*Rigel looked to him, flashing an awkward smile that fell soon after. "I don't know. Acceptance letters have been going out for months, and I still haven't received mine. I'm starting to wonder if I'm not good enough."*

*"Are you crazy?" Jericho gasped. "You're more than good enough! You are Rigel Barnard, top of your class, from a line of several inventors and, most importantly, my best friend. They'd be insane to say no to someone like you."*

*The last part seemed to warm Rigel's heart and calm his nerves. He gave a curt nod. "Thanks, Jericho. I knew I can always count on you."*

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Jericho woke with a start, his head thudding against the table. Disoriented, he sat upright and groaned, adjusting his top hat. He'd lifted it from that freaky skeleton once he'd finally got used to it. Sure, it probably wasn't the best thing to do morally, but wearing the same clothes for nearly a revolution was starting to feel a little disgusting. It was time for a change.

He groaned, remembering the dream he'd been having. Why were his dreams all memories now? Did he really miss his old life that much? Well, yes. He'd be insane not to. But at least he was making progress at getting back...or he hoped he was. Honestly, he hadn't been that successful.

Building an entire interdimensional portal sure wasn't as easy as Rigel had made it out to be. He thought he had this in the bag when he first came across the structure, but then began to realize that he had no blueprints or anything that would help him along.

Tinkering on the damaged framework had made it look a little bit more presentable, sure, but there was still a lot to be done. A lot he had no clue about.

Muttering, Jericho got to his feet and looked over at the tape recorder. He hadn't been recording his progress because he didn't really know what to say. All he could do was think about how much easier this would be if Rigel was here or at least someone with experience! Jericho didn't have experience. The novice inventor looked down to the blueprints he'd been creating which...honestly, just looked like a testing bot. He'd never successfully created anything but a testing bot in his life, and it was really starting to show. If only he had a scientific background outside of inventing helper robots...

Wait. Helper robots. Robots that help. He could create a robot to help! The idea burst into his head, jolting the life back into him as he looked to all the discarded scrap metal that lay around him. Surely, if he could repair the bracelet, he had one more testing bot left in him...or perhaps, more than a testing bot.

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It took a while and a lot of binging on that weird, canned red stuff for Jericho to finish, but finally, he'd managed to create once again the only thing he knew how to build: a testing bot! Jericho looked the small bot over, beaming as if a father might look at a son when he took his first steps as its optic slowly blinked open, showing signs of sentience and life.

"Welcome to the world!" Jericho greeted it, giving the bot a quick affectionate tap on the head. It blinked in response, a happy reaction.

Wasting no time, Jericho picked up the robot abruptly and sat it down in front of the portal's charred framework. "Now, you might be wondering why I created you, oh trusty testing bot!"

The robot gave him a blank stare.

"Behold: the portal that is going to get me back to Rigel and everyone else!" Jericho announced, motioning toward the structure in front of him. "I need you to show me how to fix this machine, so I can return home."

The robot's blank stare did not change.

"Don't be shy," Jericho urged it on, "fix the portal! I need you to fix the portal."

Nothing. The robot looked to him, stare suddenly a bit more readable.

"Do you understand?"

Flying upward, the robot made its way toward Jericho and nuzzled his face. Spitting in disgust, he shoved it away and put it in front of the portal again.

"No, no, no! Don't give me affection. I want you to fix. The. Portal!"

As if its inner workings weren't reading the question at all, the robot gave him one last blank stare before propelling off into the rest of the lab, looking at its surroundings. Jericho practically yelled in frustration, bringing a fist down to collide with the portal. He fixated his glare on the jovial robot, anger boiling inside of him.

"Even the testing bots in this dimension are broken," he hissed, groveling at the idea of another failed plan.

Truly stumped, he didn't know where to go from here or why the robot wasn't obeying him. Surely this wasn't too big of a project for its tiny computer brain to handle!

It was a robot! Okay, maybe it was, and this was yet another thing he hadn't thought through. Choking on his own anger, Jericho knew he needed to do something to let it all out. He'd been way too relaxed during his time in this dimension. It was time to allow himself a little chaotic fun. Looking to a very large broom on his right and back to the dumb robot to his left, Jericho began to come to terms with his ideal fate for the failed invention: to perish by his hands.

Picking up the broom and hiding it behind his back, he gingerly approached the testing bot that was now studying a nearby desk. It blinked its optics at him as soon as he approached, and Jericho gave a false friendly wave.

“Hey there, little buddy!” he said, cheerfully. “How’s it going?”

The robot made a small whir. Jericho laughed.

“Good? Well, I have some bad news. You see, you’re essentially a failed invention and have no use to me, so I’m afraid I’m gonna have to get rid of you.”

With a sudden maniacal smile, Jericho lifted the broom and prepared to smack the robot with it. Unlucky for him, the little thing had already gained some form of sentience enough to know that a broom crashing into it at such a speed would result in its demise and fled the scene as quickly as possible, using its propeller to get it along faster.

Angered, Jericho gave chase to the testing bot, swinging his broom every which way and accidentally knocking over various artifacts and parts in his chase.

“Come back here!” he yelled. “I brought you into this world, and I will be the one to take you out of it!”

The chase continued for a bit longer, and by the time it was nearly over, the lab looked even more devastated than it did before. But Jericho would stop at nothing to do the only thing that might make him feel less like a fool for a few minutes. Finally, he cornered the robot on top of a medium-sized bookshelf and centered in on it, eyes mad with the need to bash it into oblivion.

“Any last words, bot?” he laughed, wielding the broom above his head.

Terrified, the testing bot fled just in time, and instead, the broom crashed into the bookshelf. Hardly having time to react, Jericho jumped in shock and ran away as he noticed it tumbling down, spilling its contents onto the floor and making the centerpiece of the mess that was now his lab. He blinked, taking in his surroundings and feeling the desire to break his newest creation ebb away as he realized how mad he’d gone trying to do so. This was going to take a while to clean up. Somehow, he felt even more like a gigantic failure now.

Sighing, Jericho shrugged his shoulders. “Never mind,” he squeaked, throwing the broom to the side in defeat. “I should clean up. Sorry, little guy.”

The testing bot was hidden under a nearby desk but made a small, confused whir in response. Jericho walked over to the bookshelf’s spilled contents, picking them up and stacking them on top of each other. He’d do that before trying to lift the shelf. Maybe he could get the testing bot to do that for him if it wasn’t terrified of him now.

In the middle of stacking books, something caught Jericho’s eye. It was a big, black block, almost like...a video tape? Confused, Jericho picked it up and studied it, realizing that yes, it was a tape. Weird. He was about to set it aside when curiosity got the

best of him, and he picked it back up, studying the label. Blowing on it slightly to clear the dust, he read what it said out loud, scribbled there in handwriting that was somewhere between cursive and completely unreadable:

“Phase one...”

How familiar.

## Chapter 9

As it grew closer to nightfall, the group continued their trek throughout the planet's terrain. Rigel had only stopped here perhaps once or twice before, and every time he did, it was to fuel the aircraft and get out before he had the chance to be noticed. He'd never taken a walk through the planet's various fauna and plant life. The trek down Mt. Nebula was, to say the least, terrifying. Although there were safety rails and lights nearby for the tourists who visited during the day, it was currently the middle of the night, and he often found himself worrying that he would trip and fall to his death. Reaching the end of Mt. Nebula was like a breath of fresh air for him, and the others as well, who were constantly reassuring him that they weren't all going to die.

Resuming their journey on a more level ground that allowed Rigel to breathe better, the three made room for small talk amongst themselves whenever they could. While the first few minutes of their journey was spent with Lyra and Archer discussing something that Rigel wasn't exactly paying attention to because he found himself enjoying the planet's nightlife, from its streams with water that was tinted pink to its various wildlife, such as a small insect-like creature that looked as if it had flower petals for wings, he eventually began to open up when Lyra asked a question that directly addressed him.

“So,” she piped up, jarring his attention, “how long have you guys been traveling together?”

“Not for long,” Rigel answered.

“That’s surprising. You seem like you know each other a lot better.”

“We actually....” Wait. Archer’s origins. The excitement had almost caused Rigel to forget. He flipped around toward him, not even holding back since Lyra definitely realized something was off about him before he harnessed the Metamorphyst. “You!”

“Huh?”

“We were gonna talk about that whole “I’m not from this dimension” thing, remember?”

Archer grew red in the face. “We were?” He rubbed at his hair nervously. “I was kinda hoping you forgot about that.”

“Literally how could I forget?”

“Wait a sec,” Lyra gasped, “you’re from another dimension!? I thought you were just ugly and really insecure about it.”

“Okay, first of all, ouch. Second of all, yeah.” Archer’s voice almost dropped to a whisper. “I told Rigel this, but I’m actually from a planet called Earth in dimension 365. I got lost here after an accident back home, and I’ve been here ever since.”

“That’s kind of a short explanation for something that big,” Lyra commented.

Rigel nodded in agreement.

Clearly uncomfortable with the situation, Archer couldn’t meet their stares.

“Look, I don’t really wanna say more. All you need to know is I can’t exactly go back

there.” He tried to smile. “But that’s fine! I’ve been living it up here for how many cycles now? Four? Five? I lost count, but you got it! That’s in the past, and now, as long as I got my trusty Metamorphyst to keep me covered, I’m a-okay!”

Rigel and Lyra exchanged glances and raised their eyebrows in unison.

“Okay, Mr. Mystery,” Lyra snarked.

“Wait,” Archer said, “what about you?”

Rigel nearly jumped out of his skin at the other’s tone. “Me?”

“Yeah! Your skin condition! You’ve been walking around with that cloak down for ages, and you look fine.”

Uh oh. Rigel felt his face heat up in embarrassment when he realized his cover had been blown. “It...doesn’t affect me at night?”

Now it was Archer’s turn to give Rigel an accusatory stare. Lyra just looked confused.

“Do you two know anything about each other?”

“Apparently not,” Archer quipped back.

Rigel groaned. “Okay, fine. Maybe I’m on the run from something myself.”

“Ooh, I’ve been taken in by a pair of criminals!” Lyra butt in, sounding a little too excited about this. “Sick!”

“I am not a criminal!” Rigel argued. “Or I mean, yeah, I kind of am, but I didn’t do anything *that* bad.” Another lie, but hey, what the kid didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her.

Archer was looking a little uneasy. “I thought you were just an inventor.”

“I am.” Rigel nodded. “That was not a lie. And it’s all you need to know for now.”

“Boo!” Lyra shot back. “You’re no fun.”

He didn’t even know how to reply to that. The truth was, Rigel did want Archer to know at least a little about his past. He needed his help on the portal, and in order for that to happen, his companion had to be aware of it somehow. Lyra, however, he wasn’t sure about. The kid was nice, yes, but she was also very impulsive and dangerous. She reminded him a bit too much of how he was when he’d recreated the portal to start with. He’d wait until he could get Archer alone to break the rest of his story.

As if the universe was on his side, Lyra piped up with a question. “You guys getting hungry?”

“I thought you’d never ask!” Archer sighed in relief.

Rigel nodded. “I suppose. But where are we going to find any form of sustenance out here?”

“There’s a diner not too far off if I’m reading the location right,” Lyra added.

“They know me by name there. Best marsh cakes in the galaxy, I swear.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve had marsh cakes,” Rigel added, suddenly salivating at the thought of such a rich meal.

“Count me in!” Archer replied.

“Nice!” Lyra frowned. “Although, you might wanna stay put here. The owner, Bianca, she can get a little...talkative. And since you’re allergic to questions, I’d pass if I were you.”

“Fine by me.”

Rigel thought for a moment, then nodded. “Sure. Just don’t take too long.”

“I won’t!” Lyra grinned from ear to ear. “Don’t kill each other while I’m gone,” she called before bouncing off toward her destination, leaving Rigel and Archer alone for a moment.

For the first few seconds of their time alone, the two looked at each other. Rigel knew Archer had a lot he wanted him to say. He definitely had a lot he wanted the otherworldly being to tell him, too much to process. Who helped him build the device that sent him here? What kind of device was it? There was no way it wasn’t a portal. As far as Rigel knew, that was the only way to travel through dimensions.

But what if there was something Rigel didn’t know? The thought bewildered him and made him a little upset, especially considering that someone who appeared as naïve and for lack of better wording, dull as Archer might end up knowing more than he does. However, Archer was from somewhere Rigel had never heard of, another dimension that he knew nothing about. How do you even approach being faced with someone like that without becoming overwhelmed with every question in the book?

Then, Rigel centered his thoughts. Why had he even let Archer stay with him? Was it because he had a soft spot for him. Maybe. But more importantly, it was because he hoped to teach what he saw a novice student who’d never picked up a wrench before (despite the fact that they were close in, if not the same age) how to rebuild Orion’s Multidimensional Portal and get Jericho back. Everything else, the curiosity and the backstory and the studying, would have to wait. For now, Rigel was content focusing on

getting Archer to help him. And in order to do that, he knew now that he'd have to come clean about something that the other would hopefully understand. Perhaps that made it easier to spill his life story, Rigel thought, shuffling closer to Archer wearing an expression on his face that let his companion know he wanted a word with him.

“So...crazy day, huh?” Archer laughed, rubbing at his arm awkwardly. Rigel raised a brow, hoping to pry him to open up without words. “Look, I’m sorry for not telling you everything about who I was sooner. If we’re being honest, I probably would have, but I didn’t know much about you, and I didn’t want to risk being kicked off your ship if I did something suspicious or-”

“For stars’ sake, Archer, it’s fine.” Rigel gingerly reached a hand toward the other’s shoulder, placing it there so they could maintain eye contact. “I haven’t been honest with you either.”

Archer seemed starstruck at the contact, probably never expecting Rigel to lay a finger on him. Funny. Rigel didn’t really comprehend the notion until Archer was grinning at him like an idiot. He shakily removed his hand and cleared his throat.

“I figured as much,” Archer finally spoke up. “But no hard feelings. I get it, y’know. We’re even.”

“Mhmm.” Rigel allowed another moment of silence, trying to think of exactly how he approached this issue. “Archer?”

“Yes?”

“Is it alright if I...oh, I don’t know, tell you a few things about what I’ve do and where I’ve been and-- why are you looking at me that way?”

Archer's eyes were wider than a pair of aircraft headlights, and Rigel thought he could see a few tears peaking out in the corner of his companion's eyes. This was confirmed when he brought a hand up to wipe at his right eye.

"Are you opening up to me?" he asked, voice dripping with emotions that made Rigel feel embarrassed.

A snarl left his throat. "Stop that before I change my mind."

Archer nodded, but he still looked shocked.

Rolling his eyes, Rigel motioned for them to sit down on a nearby fallen tree. Archer plopped down next to him, looking at the inventor with stars in his eyes.

Rigel looked down at his palms as he spoke. He never in a million revolutions imagined himself in this situation, spilling everything to someone, neither did he think he would do a very good job at it given the circumstances. But he had to, he reminded himself. Closing his eyes, thinking of Jericho one last time before he did the unthinkable, Rigel opened his mouth and let it all out.

"A few revolutions ago, I attended Blue Moon University."

Archer's face lit up. "That's where you said the robot was from!"

Rigel nodded. "I was enrolled in a science and engineering program there for the brightest of pupils. At the end of our four-revolution enrollment at the university, we were to present a capstone project. This could be a study or invention of your choice, and my work partner and...friend, if we're being honest, Jericho and I decided to take an ambitious route with it."

An awed gasp left the human's mouth. "Awww, you were a university student? And you had a friend?"

Rigel didn't know if he should be offended by that last question or not. "Yes. Shocking, I know, but let's save questions for after, okay?"

Archer nodded, giving Rigel the cue to continue his story.

"As stated before, my capstone project was to be something big, something unlike any of the other students or even professors at that university had ever seen before. Perhaps it was a mistake, but it was something I've been passionate about ever since I was young. My father worked alongside this scientist who first created it before he passed away, Aeros Orion. He was a great man, mastered the skill of multidimensional travel before disappearing mysteriously one day right before it was perfected. Perhaps you've heard whispers if you're into the inventing scheme in this dimension as well, no?"

Rigel watched as Archer's composure completely changed upon Orion's name being thrown into the conversation. It was as if someone had hit him in the back of the head with a rock, causing him to freeze in something Rigel couldn't quite make out. Awe? Fear? Anxiety crept over him at this odd reaction.

"Now, I know many say that Orion was a bit of a madman, but hear me out: he knew what he was doing. If not, my father would have never worked with him! Anyway, I--"

Archer suddenly spoke, voice quiet. "Rigel, I...I really need to--"

"No! I said no questions!" Rigel wagged a finger in his companion's face. He got this far, and he wasn't going to stop.

“But I-”

“One day, while rummaging in my father’s stuff, I came across the journal Orion himself used to make his greatest achievement yet: Orion’s Multidimensional Portal. It’s a portal that can transport you to any dimension! I’m sure you’re familiar with it or at least something similar.”

Archer’s face was pale, but he seemed to get the “no questions” memo. He nodded.

Rigel sighed in relief. “Oh, that just made my entire day! Anyway, long story short, I made the portal in secret despite everyone and everything telling me not to and attempting to shut me down, and Jericho was my assistant-slash-partner-slash-friend. As much as I don’t want to admit to it, I couldn’t have done it without him. He did so much for me like build testing bots! And cover for me when the board asked what I was making! And stand there saying, “oh Rigel, you’re the brightest star in the sky” every time I got something right!”

Archer blinked. Rigel coughed, realizing that he got carried away. It was finally time to hit the harsh point of his tale.

“You’re probably wondering why I ended up all by myself and where Jericho is now. That is unfortunately not the happiest of stories. You see, we meant to send a testing bot through the portal, much like the one that flew into my aircraft the other day. During the presentation, he, for reasons I will never understand, put himself through the portal instead.” He balled his hands into fists, trying not to become overwhelmed with emotion as he always did when the topic presented itself in his head. “The machine was destroyed,

and I haven't seen him since. Nobody has, I assume. Unable to deal with the damage I'd caused to my dearest friend, I fled the scene and became a vagabond. For a while, I didn't have a solid plan and spent my time wandering the galaxy without much thought. After moping in isolation for a while, I came to the conclusion that I should attempt to rebuild the machine and get Jericho back. My aircraft is big enough and has a laboratory in it, so why not?"

"So...that's what you've been doing in there?"

He nodded, followed by a sigh. "But I must admit, that Jericho's work and help was a big reason why the first portal even got built. I was alone, and I knew it would be near impossible to create one on my own in a timely manner. Admittedly, as determined as I had been at the beginning of my project, I was starting to hit a slump." Rigel locked eyes with Archer, who was looking a lot smaller now, and fixated his glowing stare directly at him, sparkling with determination. "Now, that's changed."

When Archer connected the dots of what was going on here, a half-gasp half-scream made its way from his throat, and he fell off the log they were sitting on, looking as if he'd been cornered with a sword. "You...you want me to-"

Rigel cackled, high on ambition and adrenaline. "Yes! Archer, this time, I need you to be my Jericho." He offered a hand to his friend. "I want you to help me rebuild Orion's Multidimensional Portal."

He was expecting that familiar goofy smile to suddenly appear on Archer's face and for a solid "yes!" to ring out around the forest. But instead, Rigel was taken off-guard by a sudden outburst.

“Rigel...are you crazy!?”

The response shocked him, and he now noticed that Archer appeared to be straight-up terrified of him. He coughed, drawing it back a little. “Alright, now I know the wording of what I just said was iffy. I’m not asking you to be Jericho in the sense that I get you lost in another dimension! Or another other dimension, since you’re not from this one, but that’s only kind of important. What I’m saying is, it will be totally safe, absolutely fine, you will be alright, just please Archer, help me rebuild the portal.”

“No, no, no, a thousand times no!” Archer was quick to shoot back, getting to his feet. He began pacing back and forth, shaking with anxiety. “Oh man, this is bad. This is really, really bad! How far along are you on that thing? We gotta shut it down like as soon as we get back.”

Anger crept over Rigel at the notion. “Are you kidding? I tell you about a lifelong project I’m rebuilding to save my friend’s life, and you threaten to destroy it? What’s wrong with you?”

Archer took a deep breath and got closer to Rigel’s face. “What’s wrong with *you!*? How can you watch your so-called friend be transported to another dimension and want to do it all over again? You realize he’s probably dead, right?”

Rigel slapped Archer’s arm away, taking the upper hand. “Jericho is not dead. And I’m going to prove it, and you’re going to help me prove it rather you like it or not.”

“Rigel, I told you no! I’m never going near another one of those things in my life ever again. You don’t know what you’re messing with.”

“Archer, I don’t know what kind of juvenile science you did back in your dimension, but I promise, this is different! My dad knew Orion!

“But you didn’t!”

“Well, I trust my father’s judgment. He worked for him, that’s how I got the aircraft and the plans and everything; did you even listen to my story?”

“Yeah, but…” Instead of finishing his sentence, Archer heaved another deep sigh and turned around. “No matter what you say or think, I know for a fact that you have no idea what you’re getting yourself into.”

What was this man, five revolutions old? Rigel groaned.

“Oh, naïve little Archer,” he started, taking a gentler approach, “I don’t know what happened with you and multidimensional travel and everything, but I’ve had several connections to Orion. Not only my dad, I’ve studied his work for many cycles. I don’t know what your dad or mentor or whoever made you scared of the portal did, but there’s no way it was anything like Orion tended it to be. He always wanted the best for everyone.”

Archer wasn’t even looking at him.

“You know,” Rigel continued, “there was something Orion always said, a motto of his, if you will that I’ve latched onto. During my times of need, in which there have been many, where I feel as if my work is too…ambitious to put it lightly, I repeat it to myself, and it keeps me grounded.” He cleared his throat, readying to recite his favorite phrase. “What’s the point of presenting your work if not-”

“With a bang.”

Rigel cocked his head to the side in confusion as he was cut off. “You knew about that one?”

Archer finally turned around, wearing a smile now but not a genuine one. It looked sullen and almost fake. “Yeah. He said that a lot when I worked for him.”

“Oh, well, I assume you must have- wait, what?” The words that left his companion’s mouth hit him like a ton of scrap metal, and for a moment, Rigel wondered if he’d heard it wrong. “I’m sorry, but did you say *you worked for Aeros Orion?*”

“Yeah.” Archer gave a nod. “Not too long ago.”

“That’s impossible! He disappeared when I was a child. You weren’t even in this dimension then!”

The look Archer was giving Rigel stopped him from prodding any further. He dusted off his pants and sat back down on the log, motioning for Rigel to follow. He did so.

“Rigel,” he began, “I didn’t want to tell you this, but I think I have to.”

“Go on.”

“That stuff about my dad? All fake. I didn’t have a dad.” He corrected himself. “Or like, I did, but he’s been out of the picture for as long as I remember. I was talking about Professor Orion. I just said dad to avoid suspicion and to be brutally honest, get your sympathy.”

“Professor...” Rigel was becoming more and more confused by the second.

“Archer, I don’t understand.”

He took a deep breath of preparation. “I can tell you. Everything. But it’s a lot. Even more than what you told me.”

“That’s fine. The way Lyra talked about that Bianca woman and her yapping, she’ll be gone for a while longer.”

Rigel’s lighthearted jab got the smile out of Archer he needed before his turn to spill secrets he’d been harboring inside for longer than he could remember.

## Chapter 10

The distant buzz of occupied roads and marketplaces provided a decent background for Archer's tale. Nearby, some of the odd insect creatures were chirping as well, adding to what was almost a symphony of natural noises. Archer cleared his throat, and Rigel watched in anticipation as the story began.

"I met Orion back in my dimension, on Earth," he started. "It was during my first semester at university...Tealwood Tech." A smile spread across his face, and he pointed to the odd "T" symbol on his tattered jacket. "That's where I got this."

"Interesting." Rigel narrowed his eyes, looking at the symbol. "I don't believe it exists here."

"Figured." Archer continued his story. "To be honest, I wanted to go somewhere better, but mom didn't have the money and wasn't too into the whole science thing, so I had to stay close by."

Rigel frowned. "I'm deeply sorry."

"Eh, don't be. Tealwood's not that bad! I'm lucky to have gotten in a school with a good STEM program at all."

The other man made a noise of confusion. "A what program? Isn't that the small appendage on the end of most berries?"

Archer chuckled. "My bad. Science and engineering."

"Ah."

“Anyway, Orion wasn’t a professor or anything like that. He didn’t even work there.” Another laugh left Archer. “It’s kind of a funny story actually, how I found out about him. They were a bit full in the program my freshman year, so I had to either share a lab with someone or find one elsewhere. I didn’t really know anyone well enough to share, nor do I think anyone really wanted to share with me, so I took my stuff to an old abandoned art barn just off campus everyone else was too scared to claim because it was haunted. And I guess, it kind of was. I’d already spent a few days there when I noticed a button on the wall that I hadn’t seen before. And-”

“You pressed it.”

Archer blinked at Rigel. “How did you know?”

Rigel shrugged. “Lucky guess.”

Sighing, Archer continued. “I did. And it opened up into some kind of doomsday bunker! I was shocked at first and a little confused. But I didn’t have time to process it.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because that’s when someone started beating me up.”

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*The loudest scream humanly possible exploded from Archer as he grabbed the nearby broom, not hesitating to smack the creature aside with it. “Begone, demon art barn ghost!” he yelled, repeating the motion over and over despite the creature’s pleas.*

*“Ow! Kid, stop! I’m- ow- I’m not a ghost! I’m- ow- seriously, can you cut that out!?”*

*The strange creature grabbed the broom and pulled it away, glowering at Archer. Almost fainting upon sight of his strange color eyes and pointed ears and sharp fangs, the other felt like he was going to faint.*

*“Give me my broom back!” he begged, trying to grab for it. The creature simply pulled it back, almost causing Archer to fall on his face.*

*“So you can beat me to a pulp some more? I don’t think so.”*

*Giving up, Archer panted, turning to run. “I’m gonna tell Professor Curry on you!”*

*Acting quick, the creature grabbed for Archer’s leg and threw the broom aside.*

*“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hey now! Let’s not do that!”*

*“Let go of me!”*

*“Not until you promise to at least hear what I have to say.”*

*Archer didn’t know if he should trust the odd creature. But then again, he did want to know where he came from and what this room was being used for in the first place. There was no way this was a human, or if it was, he was definitely the result of a science experiment gone wrong. If he told his professor this quickly, he might never find out the answer to that. Plus, if the thing was going to devour him, it probably would have by now.*

*Heaving a sigh, he nodded in agreement. “Fine. Who, or what, are you?”*

*“My name is Aeros Orion, but you may refer to me by my last name preceded by “Professor” as it makes me feel more important,” the creature began. “As you can probably tell, I am not from your planet Earth.”*

*Archer gasped. "You're an alien?"*

*"Ehhh, I guess? Although, that would imply that I am of your dimension but from another planet, which I am not. Of your dimension, that is. But I'm also not from Earth, so I wonder if that would technically make me an "alien" by definition..." Orion prodded his chin with a finger. "I need to think this over."*

*Archer, on the other hand, was now completely awestruck. "An alien from another dimension?" His features fell. "Wait, how do I know you're not trying to trick me?"*

*Orion simply motioned to himself, pointing out his odd appearance and then pointed to Archer, silently asking him to compare it to his own.*

*"Right. But why are you here? How long have you been here? What's the name of your species, planet, dimension, ahhh, I have so many questions!"*

*"You sure do," Orion groaned, then coughed. "I'm from the dimension next to this one in the multidimensional pattern, 366. I have been here for a few years, I believe, as your time cycles are called. If we're being honest, I've lost count. Anyway, I planned to come here or any other alternate dimension to test a device I was creating back on my own."*

*"So, you came to our dimension for a study?" Archer asked. "When are you going back?"*

*"Funny question," Orion replied with a snicker, "especially considering said device broke when I arrived here, leaving me no way of getting back. Nor has my assistant come for me..." Orion's voice trailed off suspiciously, but he shook his head.*

*“No matter. That was ages ago. I’ve been trying to accustom to life in your dimension, but it’s hard, to say the least. I found this place a few revolutions ago and added what I like to call my “secret room” which nobody has ever found until now. Great job.”*

*“So, you’re stuck here?”*

*Orion nodded. “One could say that, yes.”*

*Archer blinked, not sure how to react to the creature he was so suddenly faced with. On one hand, he could be a wanted criminal or lying about where he came from. Maybe he was just the result of an experiment gone wrong and created some weird, made-up tall tale to garner sympathy. But why would he need to do that? After taking another look at the guy, Archer realized that he seemed a bit defeated. Helpless, even. And he was obviously talented, having created all of this himself. Maybe he should help him instead of getting his professor or another higher up to dispose of him.*

*He tried to think of a response (or settle on one of the many brewing in his brain) to Orion, until finally, he connected something. “Wait, did you say you were a scientist?”*

*Orion positioned his glasses. “Affirmative.”*

*“Wow! That’s really cool because so am I.”*

*Suddenly, the sullen expression on Orion’s bearded face turned to one of shock and joy. He leapt up, sticking his face closer to Archer’s. “What!? You? A scientist? I thought you were the janitor’s boy!” He grumped an aside. “Darn that man, the janitor. Always coming in here and making me hide in boxes. He’s the reason I had to make this place, y’know. I should’ve planted a time bomb on his shoe. That would’ve been hilarious.”*

*As the older man grumbled, Archer spoke up again, a little sheepish this time. “No, I’m a university student. One who is uh, studying science, so technically a scientist.” He beamed.*

*Orion’s joy-stricken expression returned, and he roughly grabbed Archer by the hands, shaking him as much as his frail little arms could muster.*

*“Oh, this is wonderful news! I’ve been waiting for one of your kind to find me. Scientist, that is. I’ve seen plenty of your kind kind, what is it again...”*

*“Humans?”*

*“Yeah! Those guys.” Orion shuddered. “Say, what’s your name? Didn’t quite catch your name.”*

*“Archer. Um, Archer Williams.”*

*“Archer!” He clasped his hands together. “Got a nice ring to it, love that. Anywho, Aardvark-”*

*“Archer.”*

*“Working on it.” Orion put an arm around Archer’s shoulder, pulling him in closer. “How would you like to help me get back to my dimension?”*

*Archer was excited at the question to start with, but after thinking it over, he deflated slightly. “I don’t know. You see, I’m kind of new here. I haven’t done a lot of heavy-duty science stuff, and that sounds pretty hard.” He laughed. “I don’t even know what I’m gonna do for my first project. I have to invent something to benefit the lives of the public. I was thinking some kind of device that picks up litter! Back where I come from, littering is a huge problem, and my mom used to complain about people throwing*

*plastic cups outside of their car windows and into her yard all the time, so I was thinking that maybe I could invent either something that picks the cups up or-*”

*Before Archer could continue his long-winded speech, Orion grabbed him again. There was a certain glimmer in his eye that he'd never seen before, and for a moment, it scared Archer. But then, the older man spoke, voice almost cunning.*

*“Forget all of that nonsense for a second, kid. What if I told you I had the perfect idea for a little side project you could do and show off later? Something that would really blow the socks off of anyone who ever doubted you?”*

---

Rigel was in absolute disbelief. Pausing the story, he leapt to his feet and began to pace from side to side around the general area of the log they were seated on.

“So, Orion landed in your dimension when he disappeared? How did I never consider that!” He laughed. “Oh stars, how didn't anyone consider that actually?”

“I don't know.” Archer shook his head. “I guess it's nice to know that he was probably telling the truth about all that.”

“Of course he was,” Rigel laughed, stopping his manic pacing to give Archer a glance. “Why would he lie?”

Archer was silent for a moment, unable to even look at Rigel. “You might want to let me finish the story.”

“I will, I will,” Rigel responded, taking a deep breath to calm himself and sitting back down. “I just got a little...excited, is all. Carry on.”

“When we first started on the portal, I was excited,” Archer continued, looking at the sky with an almost wistful expression. “Of course, I had to work on it on top of other stuff, but I was mostly getting supplies for Orion.” He chuckled. “I thought I was finally doing something worthwhile. Everyone kind of looked down on me because I wasn’t as experienced as most of the people at Tealwood, and sometimes my inventions didn’t exactly go as planned. Like one time I made a Ruth Goldberg machine that sent the can flying out into the audience, and it hit some guy named Brad in the face. I thought it was funny because Brad was a jerk, but I forgot that he was also twice my size and really mad.” Archer winced, rubbing at his arm. “I think I still have a scar on my shoulder from it actually.”

“Yeah, yeah, Brad this, school that,” Rigel piped up, “can we please go back to Orion? We don’t have all night.”

“Fine.” Archer hung his head, realizing he’d gotten a little carried away.

“Anyway, to start off, Professor Orion and I got along really well.”

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*“Signing off, Dr. Aeros Orion.” The inventor ended the video with a click of the old-timey camera he’d set up in the side of the room and looked back to Archer, who was fiddling with a few spare parts.*

*“Do we have to record everything we do?” he groaned. “I don’t like being on camera.”*

*“Why, yes, dear Archer,” Orion replied, “for it is a scientist’s duty to keep tracks of all of his work.” He took the tape they were recording on outside of the device, writing “Phase One” on the side of it. “A-ha! Phase one complete.”*

*“What all’s part of the first phase again? Just the framework?”*

*Archer looked toward the device as he spoke. It appeared now as a skeleton of what it would be in the future, a silver circle made of the finest titanium with a human-sized hole in the middle. He couldn’t help himself from beaming at his work, taking in just how far the two of them had come since they started the project.*

*“Yup,” Orion replied, walking over to the framework so he could screw one of the bolts into the framework’s side. “And we’re almost done!”*

*“Oh man, this is so exciting!” Archer squealed in delight. “I wish the others were here to see this.”*

*Orion looked away from his work for a moment, lifting the wielding mask he had on so he could make eye contact with Archer. “Now Archer, I thought we talked about this.”*

*“I know!” The human sighed. “It’d just be nice if they could know I was actually doing something more than the work I’m bringing in...”*

*The older man frowned, getting up to walk toward Archer. “Something’s the matter.”*

*Archer smiled, trying to hide that anything was wrong. “No! What are you talking about? I’m fine! Now, let’s finish up that portal and-”*

*He was stopped by a steady hand on his shoulder. Arched looked up to see Orion glaring at him with a knowing sympathy that he only saw out of the inventor every once in a while. He couldn't help but need it with a feeble smile.*

*"Alright," he sighed, "I guess I'm a little behind with school. More than I'd like to be."*

*"What all are you struggling with?"*

*Archer gritted his teeth. "You see, Professor Orion, it's not like I'm struggling with anything really. I'm just struggling with finding the time to do everything at once."*

*Orion raised an eyebrow. "Time?"*

*"Yeah! Back home, when I was still in high school, I was pretty good at managing my schedule. But here I have school projects and homework and classes and the portal and I have to eat and sleep and shower every once in a while, and it's...a lot to take in." He frowned. "I don't even really have a social life there. I want to talk to people, but I don't have time for that on top of everything else I have to do! And I always seem them in their little groups, wanting to be a part of that, but I can't because I'm just so isolated from everything."*

*A groan left his throat. "I thought college would be my chance to connect with people who loved doing what I do. Back home, nobody was really interested in science and comics and the stuff I liked which made it hard to connect with people. Going here was my chance to actually find people who want to be around me, but I think everyone just sees me as some weirdo who doesn't talk to anyone or ever gives a reason why...I'm never even invited to anything."*

*Orion gave the teen a pat on the shoulder. "I see. Believe it or not, I've been in your place before. Kids used to call me all sorts of names when I was your age."*

*He looked up at him. "Really?"*

*"Oh, yeah. Freak, crackpot, dunderhead...y'know, they got weirder and more irritating as I grew up. Either way, I never really had anyone to connect with, and when I thought I did, he..." Orion trailed off and coughed. "Never mind that. What matters is what you're trying to talk to me about. When I found myself struggling, I would reach out to my family. Do you have a family, Archer?"*

*Archer tried to grin back, but it was clear something wasn't quite right. "Well, yeah. I have a mom and two sisters. Dad left when I was a kid, and I never got to meet him."*

*"What about them? Have you spoken to them in a while?"*

*"No, not really. I text my mom every now and then, but she's so busy that I don't think she has time to think about me." He chuckled. "I guess maybe we do have that in common."*

*"Oh. What about your sisters?"*

*"They don't really...like me?" Archer grumbled. "Nobody in my family is really a science person. That's why I'm here and not somewhere less...average."*

*Orion seemed to be connecting the dots. He gave a brisk nod. "Well, there's not much I can say on that matter. But I can say that everything you mentioned about not really connecting with anyone since coming here isn't entirely true."*

*Archer looked confused. "What do you mean?"*

*The older inventor rolled his eyes. “Archer, who are you talking to right now?”*

*It took a while for the idea to settle, but once it did, Archer’s eyes went wide.*

*“Oh! But I thought I was just your assistant?”*

*“You are, yes. But you’re also my friend, Archer. I haven’t had a friend ever since I came to this dimension.” He smiled warmly, the kind of smile Archer might assume a father would give a son. “Well, now I do. And if I dare take this a step further, I’d say I might even have family.”*

*Archer didn’t know how to react to Orion’s offer. As if it were an instinct, he flung his arms around the older man and pulled him into a tight hug. “Oh, Professor Orion! That means so much to me. Thank you, thank you, thank you!”*

*Orion tried to laugh, but it registered as more of a breathless squeak. “Now, now, kid. That’s a bit enthusiastic of a reaction, don’t you think?”*

*He released the hug, a little embarrassed. “Sorry. I just got really happy.”*

*“It’s fine, it happens.” Orion gave him another firm pat on the back. “Anyway, Archer, you seem...unhappy here, to say the least.”*

*The frown returned for a moment. “I honestly kind of am.”*

*“Well, what if you could leave this place? Never look back? Go somewhere where you would be adored for your genius and not ignored and doubted by everyone you know?”*

*It took a while, but the gears began to turn in Archer’s head, and he knew where this was going. “No way...”*

*“Oh, yes,” Orion replied, that same glint from the first day they met present in his eyes. “When we finish the portal, if you’d like, I wouldn’t mind you coming back with me. In my dimension, scientists are renowned and respected. Everyone would love a bright mind such as yourself!” He grinned. “What do you say?”*

*Although Archer seemed excited, something was keeping him grounded. “I don’t know, if we’re being honest. I’d never see my family again...”*

*“Yes, you would,” Orion answered, still making eye contact. “You’d see me every day. Those other people you talked about probably wouldn’t even know you were gone.”*

*His words were tempting, to say the least. Archer was beginning to wonder if maybe there was sense to his words. “I’ll think on it.”*

*“Fine with me. Now, let’s get back to work, shall we?”*

*Archer nodded, finally eager to finish what he started and unable to shake the thought from his mind of a dimension where he was respected instead of outcast.*

---

“Did you want to come here?”

Rigel’s question seemed to strike a chord with Archer, for he looked at him with a solemn expression. “If we’re being honest, I did.”

“Oh.” There was a pause. “Why? What about your family? Don’t you think they’re worried sick about you?”

“I don’t know,” Archer admitted, making it clear it was more complicated than that. “I can’t go back now.”

Rigel was about to ask why but stopped himself. If there was one thing he understood, it was isolating yourself after making a mess that seemed unfixable which Archer obviously had, eventually. He decided to not ask any more questions, eager to get to that point in the story.

“Although Professor Orion and I got along, things started to get...weird,” Archer continued. “As the years went by, I started lagging further behind in my classes while working on the portal. Every time I tried to get him to give me just a little more time to focus on school, I’d be met with the same answer, always something along the lines of ‘that won’t matter in my dimension’ and ‘you’ll be free of it all soon.’ Which I guess was true, but at the time, I at least wanted to do decently! But Professor Orion didn’t understand...he only cared about himself.”

The hair on the back of Rigel’s neck bristled at the insult. “That’s not true,” he muttered under his breath. If Archer heard, it was ignored.

“Finally, I was pulled into the dean’s office one day near the middle of my senior year. That’s when everything was at its worst. I’d at least managed to keep my grades up to a passable level until then, but the stress of everything with the portal and not having heard much from my family in ages and just...existing caught up to me, and I was lucky to get anything done.” Archer’s voice went quiet. “That meeting was a wakeup call for me. I was essentially told that I wouldn’t be able to graduate unless I pulled it together fast, and it hit me that all that talk from Professor Orion about running away from it all was bogus. I couldn’t run.”

His shoulders sagged, and Archer sounded as if he were fighting back some complicated emotion. "I told Professor Orion I was done with the portal."

Rigel almost felt anger at Archer's response. He tried to swallow it down, knowing it wasn't best to express it. "I take it he didn't like that?"

Archer shook his head. "It was the worst day of my life."

---

*"What do you mean you can't work on the portal anymore? We're almost done!"*

*Archer shrunk back at his mentor's visible anger, nervously clasping his hands together. "I'm sorry, Professor Orion. It's not that I don't want to! It's just...I don't have the time with school, and-"*

*"Again with the school, Archer?" Orion rubbed at his forehead. "How many times to I have to tell you: that doesn't matter! You're coming with me as soon as we get this portal finished, and you'll never see any of those people again. Now, get to work."*

*The other's dismissiveness of his situation made rage prick up inside Archer. "No. I told you, I'm done. You can finish it yourself if you want it done that badly. I already got everything for you."*

*There was a pause, and then a deep laugh left Orion's throat. "You cannot be serious. All this hard work and every single promise I made, and you're all going to throw it away for what? Some people who don't care about you?"*

*“It’s my fault they don’t care! I’ve spent my entire university life shut up in this place helping you, and I never got a chance to spend time with anyone.” He sighed. “It’s my last year. This is my last chance. I’m done. You can have the art barn, just let me go.”*

*For a moment, Orion’s eyes glistened with an unreadable emotion, something odd that signaled...pain? Then, they hardened, and his size suddenly seemed so much bigger than Archer, even more than before. He towered over the student, and Archer began to realize that maybe he was making a mistake.*

*“You’re not going to do this to me, Archer.”*

*He shrunk back. “What’s your problem? Like I said, you have everything to finish the portal, and it’s almost done! You can do it yourself!”*

*“No, I can’t!” Orion’s voice was dripping with emotion. “I gave you everything you ever could’ve dreamed of along with the offer of a lifetime, and that wasn’t even enough to make you care about me.”*

*Realizing where this was going, Archer was quick to reach out. “Professor Orion, no, I do care about you! I think you’re great. Our lives just...aren’t the same. Yours is back in your dimension, and mine is here.”*

*“Oh, sure! That’s what they all say.” Orion turned on Archer, gradually stomping toward him in anger. “What was it that made me less appealing to you, Archer? Huh? Do you think I’m a raving lunatic set to send the entire universe into an impending doom?”*

*Archer fell over trying to walk backwards. “What!? No! I never said that!”*

*“Well, you mean it. I know.” Orion sighed, looking away. “You’re no better than my old assistant who trapped me here in the first place.”*

*Confused by the sudden piece of information that he didn’t recall knowing, Archer raised an eyebrow. “What?”*

*“Yeah!” Orion laughed, but it was clearly ingenuine, dripping with malice. “Oh, you should’ve seen the look on his face, Archer. Telling me all this stuff about how I’m demented and set out to destroy the universe before throwing me in my own invention without a means of escape to save it from me.” His fangs glistened, and Archer thought he could see a teardrop welling in his mentor’s right eye. “I hate him. And I hate this place.”*

*“Professor Orion...”*

*Archer was about to console Orion when he noticed where the other’s attention had shifted to. His body tensed when he observed the other’s eyes, practically bloodshot, looking directly toward the lever that would activate the portal. Archer’s blood ran cold. He wouldn’t...*

*The sickening laugh that left Orion’s throat as he began to lumber toward the switch said otherwise.*

*“Wait, what are you doing?”*

*“What I should have done days ago!” Orion snapped, approaching the lever and leaning over it dramatically.*

*Archer stumbled to his feet and ran toward him. “No! It’s not stable yet!”*

*“Stable schmable, I’m a mad scientist! He said so himself, and I know you’re thinking it!” He tapped a finger against his bearded chin. “Plus, it should have just enough power to send a single body to another dimension.”*

*Archer reached out for Orion’s arm, trying to do anything to stop him. “But that would break it! It could destroy the entire city, maybe even more-”*

*“I don’t care about this place or anyone in it!”*

*With the last statement, Orion slapped Archer and sent him flying backwards. He watched as his mentor flicked the switch, madness twinkling in his eyes. The portal activated with a loud whirring sound, but sparks were already flying from its structure. Slowly, it began to create what appeared as a glowing red eye, staring straight into Archer’s soul and causing him to freeze for a moment, before he saw Orion lumbering toward it.*

*A sudden burst of rage and protection firing up inside him, Archer flung himself at his former mentor, pulling him backwards and delivering a punch to his shoulder. The older man wheezed, attempting to throw the human down, but Archer was clinging to him.*

*“Get off me!”*

*“I’m not gonna let you do this! Shut it down, now.”*

*“No!”*

*The two tussled like that for at least a minute, Archer shoving Orion to the ground the moment he got closer to the portal. They cursed at each other and threw punches and pulled hair, not realizing the growing center of the portal or hearing how its structure*

*began to creak or seeing the growing blue sparks or feel the abandon barn beginning to shake. Neither of them noticed until Orion had finally pinned Archer down, right in front of the portal, close enough for them both to feel the heat radiating from it.*

*Defeated, Archer looked up at Orion, making eye contact with the inventor. His long hair, flowing from the gush of air provided by the malfunctioning invention, was covering most of his eyes, but he could still make out their green glow and see the sharpness of his smile. Realizing there was nothing he could do to stop him, Archer closed his eyes and prepared for his mentor to end his life.*

*But it never happened. After a few seconds, Archer dared to crack them open again. Hovering over him now looked almost like a different man. Orion's mad smile had fallen into a frown, and the pain in his eyes were back, but this time it was softer, less harsh. It was directed at Archer. The human looked at the portal and his surroundings, coming to terms with what they both knew: one would go through the portal before it exploded, the other and everything around him would surely be destroyed.*

*Determining that it was too late to shut the invention down now, Archer decided to be civil during what felt like his final moments. The portal was shaking the entire earth now, and he could hear the distant screaming of civilians. Orion had got what he wanted, but judging by the look on his face, it was up in the air rather he still wanted it or now.*

*"Go," Archer urged him, voice tired. "It's too late to stop it. Just go."*

*Sharing one last glance at his student, Orion's expression hardened into something more determined. Archer was expecting to see him gradually get to his feet and limp toward the portal, making a grand exit and leaving the world that had failed*

*him behind to burn. He wasn't expecting to feel his mentor lift him to his best ability, clearly straining but doing so successfully. He wasn't expecting words to fail him in this moment, not even able to make a squeak of confusion as all this unfolded. He wasn't expecting the last thing he saw before being shoved into the portal to be Orion's smiling face, his last memory of where he came from.*

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The end of the tale left Rigel speechless for a moment. It was a situation of information overload. In the past few minutes, so many questions he'd never even dwelled on had been answered, and all of them left a similar hole in his heart. He didn't know where to begin.

"Your home...it was destroyed?"

Archer shrugged. "I don't know, but I doubt it wasn't."

Rigel gave a quick nod. "And Orion is...?"

Archer didn't even want to speak on that one, giving nothing in return but a solemn smile.

"I expected as much." Rigel waited a few more moments before bringing up perhaps the most burning question. "And the assistant he mentioned? Did he ever say anything else about him?"

"Not really," Archer recalled. "It was a sore subject. I didn't even know his name."

"I see."

Rigel didn't even need to know a name. He knew it had to have been his dad. And he knew Archer was thinking the same. His dad was responsible for his hero disappearing...is that why he hid everything from him? Because he thought the portal was dangerous? But why did he still speak so highly of Orion? Perhaps it was societal pressure? Or maybe he felt guilty for causing what he likely saw as the renowned scientist's demise?

All of this, the story Archer just burdened him with, made so much sense. Rigel couldn't deny that. Yet something inside him didn't want to believe it. Not knowing how else to cope with the sudden information, he chose to feed into its wants.

"I don't believe you."

Archer looked as if someone had just punched him right in the gut. "What?"

"I said, I don't believe you," Rigel replied, getting to his feet. "My dad always spoke so highly of Orion. There's no way he would have done that to him."

There was a brief pause, followed by Archer burying his face in his palms and laughing, coldly. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, I am! Even if what you said is true, I still think I know more about Orion than you ever will. You met him in a time of distress. One would easily succumb to madness under those conditions, and he might have gotten the story mixed up. And there's no way he-

"Shut up!"

Rigel was taken aback by how Archer raised his voice.

“I tell you everything I’ve been through, things that I haven’t told anyone else in my life, and you still won’t believe me? He used that thing to destroy my home, Rigel.”

“Well, maybe if you hadn’t...maybe if...you...”

Rigel didn’t even know what to say. He took a deep breath and hung his head, desperate to never look Archer in the eyes again.

“I’m still building the portal.”

“Fine.” Archer got to his feet. “I want no part in it.”

Rigel snarled as he watched the other walk away and couldn’t help but scream back one more insult. “So, what? You’re just going to leave me too? After everything we’ve been through together?”

Archer didn’t speak. Rigel knew there was no hope in getting him to come back. He didn’t even know if he wanted him back, as he was now a constant reminder of a past he didn’t know he’d have to face. Still, he muttered one last sentence in a tone that one typically would use under their breath but loud enough for Archer to hear it.

“Orion was right about you.”

As he watched his old companion get smaller and smaller in the distance, Rigel could only hope he heard it.

## Chapter 11

For a moment longer, Rigel stood in place, too unnerved by the conversation to move a muscle. The feeling of loneliness that had plagued him for so long was already starting to creep back. Come to think of it, he began to notice that he'd hardly realized it had faded with Archer's presence until he was left to his own again. He thought he was by far used to being alone and that nothing, not even a moment of company, would be able to alter him into feeling that same empty feeling he did after losing Jericho or at least something hauntingly similar to it.

Still, there was something else. Another feeling, that of two eyes staring him down from behind. He was being watched. Startled, Rigel flipped around and was met with the curious gaze of Lyra, two large bags hanging from her hands. No longer alone, the feeling started to subside a little, but something was still off. Nonetheless, Rigel tried to swallow down any negative feelings for Lyra's sake.

"How much of that did you hear?" he asked.

Lyra winced. "Enough to know why he left but not enough to not be super confused."

Rigel nodded, sitting back down on the log and motioning for the teenager to sit beside him. She followed suit.

“I at least wish he’d have stuck around to help us eat some of these.” Lyra held up one of the bags. “Bianca packed extras when I told her I had company.”

A hum was all that would leave Rigel’s mouth as he sullenly took a bag from Lyra. He looked down at the fluffy purple discs, a sight would have typically made his mouth water. But Rigel wasn’t as hungry as he had been, and the sinking feeling in his gut made it feel like anything he tried to consume wouldn’t stay down.

“You gonna be okay?” Lyra piped in, taking a bite out of her stack of marsh cakes.

“I suppose,” Rigel answered, tentatively sticking his fork into the food. He took a bite but wasn’t able to react, although they tasted wonderful. This must have set off an alarm in Lyra’s head.

“You just had your first bite of marsh cake in revolutions and didn’t even crack a smile. You’re depressed.”

Rigel groaned. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were a licensed therapist.”

Lyra ignored his snide comment. “Do you at least wanna tell me what happened back there? Because I feel like I should know.”

The inventor looked to the side. She wasn’t wrong. “Not really. But you’re right.”

As the two shared a less-than-incredible dinner of marsh cakes, Rigel explained everything to Lyra. He was holding back on how much he wanted to tell her in regard to the portal and what happened to him, but now, he felt like he didn’t have a choice. If this impulsive teen was the only one who would hear him out in this situation, then so be it. He retold everything, down to his backstory to how he hid away for revolutions and then

to what Archer had told him. Once Rigel had recapped the conversation Lyra had walked in on, he took his last bite of marsh cake.

“So,” Lyra began, still working on her food, “let me get this straight: Archer left because he told you that the thing you were making to get your friend back is dangerous and gave you concrete evidence of it ruining his and that guy you worship’s life, and you essentially told him to get over it?”

Rigel gritted his teeth, setting his plate aside. “Well, yes, but do you have to put it that way?”

“Yes. I do. Because then you’ll hear how much of a jerk you’re being.”

“You act like I don’t know it,” Rigel snarled, staring at his feet. “Now, go on. Run along.”

Lyra cocked a brow. “Huh?”

“I said go,” Rigel repeated, looking to her. “You can’t possibly want to continue traveling with me after hearing all of that.”

A bittersweet smile spread across her face, and Lyra shook her head. “Nah. Just because you messed up doesn’t mean you deserve to be alone. You’re stuck with me.”

This made Rigel’s heart feel warmer, enough to grin for a moment. But it didn’t last, as he soon remembered everything else, and the weight crashed down on him fast.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” She waved her hand. “It’s not like I have anywhere else to go anyway.”

Rigel waited for a moment, realizing this might be a good time to ask Lyra some questions. “And what do you mean by that?”

Lyra paused for a moment, as if she didn’t want to say anything on that matter. Rigel was going to tell her it was fine, but she finally opened her mouth before he could, setting aside her marsh cakes and staring straight ahead.

“Well,” she began, “to be honest, we’re...not that different. My family kind of disowned me.”

“What?”

“Yeah.” Lyra sighed, putting her head in her hands. “I’ve always wanted to practice magic, but it’s kind of banned from where I am because of the Amaris story. I decided to do it anyway because it’s been my dream forever, and there was...an accident, because of me.” She paused, and Rigel could tell something was being left out on purpose. He didn’t have the initiative to pry.

“It cost my family a lot, so they kicked me out. And I went to Amaris because I felt like she was the only one who would understand me, and that maybe everyone was wrong about her, but nope. She’s crazy.” Lyra laughed. “But anyway, I guess this makes us mess-up pals?”

She turned to Rigel, wearing a coy smile and extending her fist. He looked at it curiously, not knowing exactly what she wanted him to do. Was this some kind of handshake? Awkwardly, Rigel tapped the fist with his hand.

“Mess-up pals?”

Lyra burst out laughing. “That’s not what you’re supposed to do, but let’s roll with it! We got a handshake now.”

The teen’s laughter was contagious, and before Rigel knew it, he was chuckling as well. She caught on, giving him a mischievous smile. “Aww, you can laugh?”

“Sometimes,” he answered, calming down and taking a breath.

“How surprising.”

Lyra leaned back, focusing her attention to the sky. Rigel did as well, picking up on the swirling purples and indigos of the night sky. It looked so different than it did when you were submerged in it, so far away. It was almost beautiful. He couldn’t help but wonder if Archer was seeing this too.

“So...what are we gonna do now?”

“I don’t know,” Rigel answered, for once in his life being completely honest. “But I have to find Jericho.”

Lyra looked to him. “Your friend?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She turned her attention back to the stars. “I can help you make the thing, maybe. I don’t know much about science though, so you’ll have to be patient.”

“Don’t be silly,” Rigel retorted. “You’re a kid. My practices aren’t that unethical.”

“A kid who’s been living on the streets and teaching herself magic for several revolutions,” Lyra corrected him. “I’m a lot stronger than I look, y’know.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t think any teenager is strong enough to deal with multidimensional travel.” Rigel sighed. “I’m well into my twenty-sixth revolution, and I apparently couldn’t handle it.”

“Fine.” There was another beat of silence. Then, Lyra spoke again. “Are you still going to go through with it then?”

“The portal? Absolutely.”

“Just to get some guy back who might not even be alive?”

Rigel tried not to get angry at her tone. “Jericho is not dead. He’s out there, and I need to get him back.”

Lyra seemed confused. “How do you know that?”

“I just...do.” Rigel allowed himself to get lost in the sky once more as he spoke of his long-lost friend. “I’ve known him for revolutions, ever since I was young. He’s been my dearest friend for so long. Every problem that man has faced, he’s taken in stride, even if he doesn’t know it. He’s a lot more durable than he looks. I don’t think being trapped in a strange new dimension is enough to take him out.”

“But do you even know if he made it there?”

Rigel took a deep breath. “That’s why I need to look.”

Lyra seemed almost concerned at the notion. “So, you’d risk tearing the universe apart to find some guy who’s dead at worst and trapped in an alternate dimension at best?”

Letting her words sink in, Rigel took a moment to respond. Then, he gave a nod. “Yes. I would.”

“Wow. You must really care about him.”

Rigel thought for a moment before vocally coming to terms with what he knew was true and had been for so long. “I do. My one regret is not telling him that enough.”

For some reason, reminiscing about Jericho brought Rigel back to what took place a few moments ago. His chest felt heavy when he realized that he’d repeated history again without even knowing it.

*And now Archer’s gone too.*

“Alrighty,” Lyra cut in, getting up and stretching, “we should really find a place to camp out. I’m getting tired.”

Rigel nodded, coming back. “Agreed. Do you know of any places to take shelter?”

“Only a million.” She gave a motion for him to follow, which he did. As they walked to a more secluded location and settled down for the night, Lyra piped up.

“Should we look for Archer?”

The question too Rigel off-guard. He wanted to say yes, to make a new goal in his life trying to find the other person he’d failed horribly. But at the same time, something told him there was no use. Archer didn’t want anything to do with him; he’d said it himself. He should just leave this one alone.

“No. He’s made up his mind.”

“If you say so,” Lyra replied. “Hopefully, he can take Amaris down by himself.”

“I’m sure he can.” Rigel laughed. “The first time we met, he almost took *me* down without his glasses. And he dragged me all over my own ship when I found that robot sent to track me!”

Lyra’s eyes got wide. “They send robots to track you!?”

“Apparently so, but it’s alright now. I took it and reprogrammed it to be a helping bot.”

The teenager’s eyes got even bigger. “You have a pet robot!?”

Rigel couldn’t help but smile. “Sure, why not. And you’ll meet him tomorrow if we get to sleep soon.”

And she did. But Rigel couldn’t. He was too mesmerized by the sky, looking into and hoping to see signs of Jericho and now Archer, even though he knew he wouldn’t.

## Chapter 12

More time than Jericho had bothered to keep track of had passed. Initially, he had been keeping tally on the walls like some kind of madman, but after becoming so absorbed in his work, forgot to keep up with it. But if he had to guess, he'd say it had probably been some revolutions since he'd discovered the tapes, something that he now saw as the best thing to ever happen to him.

The tapes had taught him a lot about the mysterious dimension he'd wound up in. It was dimension 365 on something called the "dimensional index," a concept he was still trying to fully grasp. His home dimension was 366. So far, the portal only had enough power to carry him into the next dimension it seemed. There were a few differences between the two dimensions, for 366 seemed much more advanced than 365. It also centered heavily around a planet known as "Earth," which was where he was now stranded. The only thing more shocking than the fact that he'd discovered all of this knowledge would perhaps be who gave it to him.

Jericho would never forget the shock he felt when he slid the first tape into the discarded television, a device he was surprised he'd gotten to work. He'd expected to see more of the Earth creatures known as "humans," and while one was present in the background, he wasn't the one giving all of the information. Singlehandedly, those tapes held enough evidence to alter history back on his home dimension. Little did he know

that seconds after viewing the first one, he would know what had become of Aeros Orion. And honestly, it surprised him.

Who would have thought that one of the most influential minds of his dimension had been transported to another during a testing error when he was creating his portal? Well, come to think of it, maybe the answer was right under their noses the whole time, but Jericho definitely hadn't considered it! His first thought upon being spoon-fed the information was that he had to tell Rigel, as he knew his best friend looked up to Orion almost as if he'd known him. But then he realized he had to be back in dimension 366 in order to do that. And that led to the slippery slope of thinking that he had finally found a way to successfully rebuild the portal. If there was something Jericho actually was good at, it was following in someone's footsteps. These tapes articulated every step one needed in order to complete the portal to a state where travel was possible.

However, there was a small holdup. Jericho would soon realize that the tapes ended rather abruptly, right before the finishing touches were to be added to the portal. Luckily, it was at a point where he could jog his brain and remember stuff from when he'd helped Rigel build his portal. During the finishing stages, he'd helped more than usual due to the fact that he had to make sure the testing bot he put through was compatible. Speaking of testing bots, he also kept the one he'd created there alive and well, and it did, in turn, help him with the building process. It just needed to take it all in small steps, which Jericho understood after calming down.

Filling in the blanks where Orion's videos had left off was not as difficult as he thought it would be, and now, after all these supposed revolutions, here he was, standing

in front of what appeared to him as the most complete version of Orion's Multidimensional Portal that he was going to get. All he had to do was press the button, and it would turn on. Jericho sighed, turning to face the small robot who was hovering next to him.

"It's all done, little buddy!" He gave the robot a gentle pat on the back. "You wanna do the honors?"

The testing bot gave a mock salute and fluttered over to the red button. It tentatively held out one of its arm-like tendrils and pressed down on it with a curious whir. Almost like clockwork, the gears of the machine started to hum, turning it on. Jericho stared into the middle of it as he watched a familiar red circle appear in the middle, more gradually and gradually until finally, it was bearing down on him, almost like a giant eye. He could feel the same hot sensation coming off of this portal as the one he'd impulsively jumped into revolutions ago. For a moment, he almost felt afraid at the realization but then calmed himself into feeling what he wanted to: relief.

Jericho turned to the testing bot. "You know what to do?"

It nodded. But before it could follow out on its duty, Jericho called for it one last time. "Wait! I forgot something."

The robot let itself be picked up. Reaching into his coat pocket, Jericho pulled out a marker. He used it to scribble a crudely written "365" onto the robot. Then, he put it back into his coat and gave the testing bot a knowing smile.

"You're all set," he said, nodding to his creation. "Good luck out there. And remember, when you find Rigel, let him know I'm on my way."

The testing bot gave another gentle whirl and with one last look at its creator, flew directly into the burning eye of the portal. Jericho watched it disappear and waited a few moments, the multidimensional machine growing stronger and stronger but still staying stable. After about a minute of no disaster, he felt pride well up inside his chest and pressed the button once more, causing the portal to come to a stop as the red circle began to fade.

He dropped to his knees, watching until it was no more. Then, he removed the testing goggles from his face, blinking at his success.

“I did it...”

Leaping upward, he let out a joyous cheer, reveling in his progress. “I did it! Oh, little buddy, did you see that?” He shook his head. “Wait, no you didn’t because you’re in dimension 366 trying to find Rigel, but I did it! It works!”

A smile fell on the man’s face, and he began to tear up. This portal was in the same state that Rigel’s had been in. It could handle testing bots without any issue, but anything bigger would be able to exit but not return. The moment Jericho walked through the portal, all of his hard work would be destroyed, and he could never venture back into dimension 365 again unless another was built. Good thing he was sick of this place.

Jericho wiped a tear from his face, still looking into the eye of the portal. “I’m coming home.”

## Chapter 13

The next morning, Rigel and Lyra took no time when it came to waking up and heading toward their destination. Luckily, they didn't have much longer to cover, and before they knew it, the two of them were minutes away from Rigel's ship. The scene from yesterday still played clearly in Rigel's head, no matter how hard he tried to forget. Something was still prodding at him, a voice in his head telling him that he was insane to let Archer go and that they needed to look for him. Maybe he was even in trouble.

But he couldn't act on it. If he wanted to get Jericho back, he wanted to push all those thoughts out of his head and move forward with the portal as promised. And that's exactly what he planned on doing. Plus, Lyra was still here. Her presence definitely helped ease his crippling loneliness and served as a reminder that even if things weren't as good as they had been, he wouldn't be going back into isolation any time soon.

The two walked side by side, making a small conversation as they approached the familiarity of the marketplace they met in.

"So, you have a pet robot?" Lyra asked, eyes wide at the suggestion.

Rigel rolled his eyes. "No. He's a testing bot that I reprogrammed specifically to help me with the portal and any future experiments."

"I see, I see. Can I still touch him?"

"If you'll be gentle."

“I’ll try!”

Rigel shook his head at the teen’s half-hearted promise, one she gave a coy smile to in response. The pair finally made it to the place where he’d parked his ship, and Rigel began looking for it. He’d wanted to hide it way back in the parking lot, so if anyone happened to recognize it (unlikely but a fear that nagged at him nonetheless), they’d have to do a whole lot of digging to actually see it. This, however, resulted in them taking a minutes-long trek across the parking area, and Lyra complaining about her legs falling off from all the walking they had done, something she didn’t even notice until they’d started searching for Rigel’s aircraft.

Upon the large ship’s sight, Lyra’s eyes widened to the size of saucers, and an excited gasp left her throat. She practically leapt up into the air before rushing to it, knocking on the hatch as if that would somehow let her in sooner. Rigel laughed, slowly walking up toward it with the key.

“Patience,” he scolded gently, pressing the button on the device in his hand that caused the hatch to slowly open, revealing the aircraft’s inner workings.

As if she were a small child in a sweets shop, Lyra bounded inside and began to marvel at all the various gadgets and weapons Rigel had strewn around his living space. The inventor placed his hands on his hips and couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm, feeling a sense of pride welling up inside him.

“Whoa! This place is massive!” Lyra squeaked, running up to his captain’s chair and sitting in it. “Is this where you pilot it?”

“Yes,” Rigel noted, walking to stand over her and she pretended to steer his ship through the cosmos.

“So cool!” Then, Lyra’s eyes wandered toward the wall of weapons, and she yelped in glee. “Oh my stars! Is that a plasma blaster? I’ve always wanted one!”

Rigel reached for the teen as she sped by, rushing toward the weaponry and grabbing just what she had in mind.

“This thing isn’t loaded, is it?” she asked, firing it into the wall and nearly falling back as it splattered plasma onto the side of the ship, Rigel having to duck so it wouldn’t hit him in the face.

Lyra grinned sheepishly as she saw the wall beginning to erode from the substance and put the blaster back where it was, noting Rigel’s disappointed glare.

“Oops.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “You’ve got to be more careful on this thing. There are a lot of objects here that could potentially hurt someone as young and impulsive as you.”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry,” Lyra apologized. “I guess I just got carried away with- is that a Cosmonian fire sword!?”

Before she could grab the weapon, Rigel’s icy stare pierced her, and she sighed, backing away. “Right. No weapons.”

Rigel nodded.

There was a brief pause before Lyra opened her mouth to speak. “Wait, where’s that little robot you mentioned? You said I could touch it!”

“Oh! He’s probably in my lab.” Rigel beckoned for Lyra to follow. “It’s this way.”

“Whoa, you’re letting me into your lab?” she asked, slowly doing as he asked.

“Yes, but do not, and I repeat *do not*, make me regret it.”

She chuckled at his practically empty threat. “Aye, aye captain.”

Rigel walked Lyra down the ship’s hallway, giving a smug grin at each awed noise the girl made. Once they’d made it to the lab door, he sighed in relief, finding it comforting to see such a familiar sight after all they’d been through together. He could tell that Lyra was taken aback in the best way by the size of it, and pride welled up inside of him.

“This is it.”

“Stars, it’s huge!” Lyra reached out a hand. “Let’s go in!”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Rigel gently scolded, pushing hers away and reaching inside his pocket. He pulled out a long silver key and smiled. “I’ll do the honors.”

Lyra nodded and stepped to the side as she watched Rigel fiddle with the lock, eventually getting it open with a satisfying click. Then, he gripped the knob and turned it slowly, watching as his companion’s expression changed from curious and eager to one of complete bewilderment. She was practically frozen in shock, taking in the sights of the different workbenches and prototypes and there, right in the middle of it: a modest start to Orion’s Multidimensional Portal, his prized invention.

“Wow,” Lyra breathed, readying herself to step inside, “it’s-”

“A quite lovely place you’ve got there.” The distant voice caused the two to lurch in surprise, chills spiking down Rigel’s spine as he connected who the speaker was before he turned to face her bony, smirking face, sharp teeth glistening in the ship’s lighting.

“Thank you for getting it open for me.”

Rigel stepped in front of Lyra protectively, who he could tell was unable to move from fear. “Amaris,” he snarled. “How did you get up here?”

“Did you really think you could end my life by bashing me against a rock?” the witch laughed, slinking out of the ship’s shadowy corners and into view, closer to them.

“I’m a lot tougher than I look, you know. And sneakier. Why, I’ve practically been right on your trail this whole time! I even got inside the ship faster than the two of you.

Pathetic, really.”

A whimper escaped Lyra’s throat, and it hurt Rigel to see her relaxed façade melt away. This made him feel even more protective of her.

“What do you want?” he asked. “The Metamorphyst? We don’t have it.”

“Oh, I know,” Amaris said, eerie smile growing wider. “I can hold off on that silly little gem with all you’ve provided for me in here.”

Rigel’s blood ran cold, taken off guard by her response. “Come again?”

“Rigel, look out!”

He couldn’t even process Lyra’s warning until the same thick, purple smoke from earlier filled his sense, choking him and eventually knocking him out, body falling onto the ship’s floor with a loud thud and followed shortly after by that of his companion.

When Rigel came to, he found himself in a similar situation as last time Amaris had knocked him out with her surprisingly effective smoke bomb magic, except this time it was completely dark. At first, he thought his vision could be failing, but as he looked downward, he saw a sliver of light just where the ground should be. Reaching out a hand to his side, he felt a long stick of wood to his left and grasped it, confirming his suspicions. He was locked in the broom closet. Confused by the lack of restraints, Rigel attempted to get to his feet but noticed something was off as he did, for he had to steady himself in order to do so. That was...odd. It was almost as if they were moving.

Wait. They *were* moving! A lump formed in Rigel's throat at the realization. How long had they been moving? Seconds? Minutes? Hours? And most importantly, where was Amaris taking them? Thoughts filled his mind and heightened his anxiety so much that he almost forgot to look for Lyra, until a cough alerted him of her presence.

"Lyra!" he whispered, making sure to keep his voice down so Amaris wouldn't hear it. "What's going on?"

"Beats me," the teen answered in a low tone. "She gassed us and locked us up. I should've known she'd find us." Lyra sighed. "She always found me every time I tried to run away."

There was a silence, and Rigel felt around until his hand collided with Lyra's head, and then her shoulder, giving her an awkward pat there. "I don't understand. What does she even want from us?"

“For once in my life, I got nothing. I thought she’d be after Archer, but he’s not here.”

“If I recall, she said something about having all she needed right here in my...”

Rigel’s voice trailed off as he made a connection he was almost too afraid to make, and he needed to sit back down to steady himself.

“You don’t think she knows about...the portal, do you?”

The idea made Lyra freeze, but before she could speak, something began to rattle the door and she jumped closer to Rigel. He held her protectively, listening to the jostling of the doorknob and readying himself to punch a science witch square in the jaw. However, once the door unlocked and began to open, allowing a sliver of light to seep through, Rigel realized that Amaris wasn’t there at all. He adjusted his spectacles, making out a small, floating shape that was much too small to be her or anyone for that matter. Then, the realization hit him, and a smile spread across his face.

“Hey!” Lyra exclaimed before he could. “It’s your pet robot! It saved us!”

Rigel got to his feet and slowly walked toward the testing bot, never happier to see one in his entire lifespan. He gave 365 a pat on its head, smiling at the positive whirring noise that left its system.

“Great work, 365! I knew I could count on you.”

Once the two had been freed, Rigel motioned for Lyra to follow him. 365 trailing behind as well, they walked as quietly down the ship’s corridor as possible and into the main room. As soon as they were by the big window covering the aircraft’s front, it was apparent that they were, indeed, in motion as they’d previously suspected. The autopilot

function was also traveling a bit faster than Rigel was used to, making it easy for him to lose balance.

“What are we gonna do?” Lyra asked, voice a hushed whisper. “Do you have any escape pods we could evacuate in?”

“Yes,” Rigel confirmed. “I have two. But we’re not evacuating.”

“Why not? She’ll kill us if we don’t!”

“And she’ll kill even more if she finds out how to use the portal! We have to find a way to get her out of here.”

“Have fun doing that.”

Surprised as usual at Amaris’s sudden voice, Rigel whipped around and saw her suddenly appear from the captain’s chair, leaning across it and smirking with delight. Of course, she’d been expecting them to escape. He noticed something sitting on the aircraft’s dash where a map would normally be placed, only this wasn’t a map. It was something else, something blue and faded. Rigel squinted, and when he realized why the paper looked so familiar, his stomach dropped.

“My blueprints.”

Amaris got to her feet and gave a curt nod. “Indeed! You were keeping an entire portal from the general public? Oh, you silly little thing.” She approached Rigel and gave him a condescending pat on the head, causing him to flinch and snarl. “Who needs the Metamorphyst when I’ve got access to interdimensional travel? Forge this dimension, I could take over several with the kind of power you’ve dropped directly into my hands!

Following you despite losing the stout one who made off with my amulet wasn't a bad idea at all."

Then, her eyes fell onto Lyra, who made a noise of fear when she realized Amaris's attention was on her. "And as for you," she spoke, spitting out her words with vitriol, "I'm afraid you've disobeyed me too many times to be of any use to me. I'll keep your little scientist friend around to show me how the portal works. You will be dealt with immediately."

Rigel noticed Amaris edging toward the ship's eject button, realizing almost too late how close Lyra was to the emergency door. Acting quick, he slammed himself into Amaris, knocking her off guard and called to Lyra while she was down.

"Grab the blaster!" he ordered, rushing to the weaponry rack.

He grabbed his trusty dagger and readied it, pointing it straight for Amaris as she lunged at him. The two tussled for a moment, the witch trying to escape the dagger but take Rigel down with brute force, surprisingly strong for someone her age. Then, Lyra caught her by surprise, aiming the blaster at her and causing her to run. Amaris was quick to act, however, using the previous disappearance spell to fade in and out of reality, confusing Lyra so she didn't know where to shoot. The teenager almost caught Rigel in the midst of it, who was now edging around the ship's main room with the dagger in hand, reading to strike at any moment. What he didn't expect was for Amaris to appear behind him, pushing him down and trapping his dagger-wielding arm there with her boot, staring at him with that horrifying smile.

"Lyra, now!" he ordered, confused.

She held the weapon, pushing down on the trigger to no avail. “It’s out of ammo!”

“How sad,” Amaris sneered, lifting her finger to the eject button while keeping Rigel pinned down. “Any last words to your disobedient little friend before she goes flying into space?”

Before Rigel could even think of anything to say, a sudden lurch shook the entire ship and sent everyone backwards. He held onto the side of the wall as he tumbled, grabbing Lyra’s hand so she did the same and letting Amaris slide as far back as she could. Parts of the establishment began to crumble, and he could tell that the bumper of the ship was damaged by whatever had struck it. Almost angry and expecting an asteroid of sorts, Rigel looked toward the main window ready to hurl an insult at whatever foreign body had struck them during their moment of combat.

However, it wasn’t that at all. Instead of debris or anything of the sort, Rigel saw a very familiar galactic guard ship staring them down, headlights flashing in the depths of space. Even more familiar was the face he could barely make out behind its controls, a stout man with dark blue hair, a determined expression on his face and a purple amulet around his neck. A face he’d never thought he’d see again.

## Chapter 14

Once everything had started to settle after the giant lurch, a second disruption shook Rigel's ship. He grasped the wall and Lyra's hand once more, looking upward to realize that the ship was now being sized by two giant clamps being used to attach it to the one next to it, tools typically found on ships belonging to the galactic guard. Looking toward the entrance, he watched as the other ship's doorway became level with his own, and the smiling, familiar face he'd seen piloting it seconds ago was suddenly looking right at him. All he needed to do now was to open his ship's hatch to let it in.

"Archer!" Lyra cheered as Rigel did as he was asked, feeling relief wash over him as his friend stepped into his ship. The teenager immediately ran in for a hug, which was returned immediately. Rigel wasn't sure what to say at first, but his eyes soon locked with Archer's, and he didn't have it in him to look away.

"I thought you weren't coming back," he began, trying to pretend he wasn't glad to see him.

Archer rubbed at the back of his head nervously. "Well, a few minutes after I walked away, I saw Amaris flying toward your ship. She just kind of left mine right next to it, so I stole it back and followed her when she left with you guys!" He chuckled. "You know, she's actually not that smart."

Before Rigel could continue his reunion, something dawned on him. “Wait. Where is Amaris?”

“No clue, but we should leave before she can catch up with us!” Lyra grabbed Rigel’s arm and attempted to drag him into Archer’s ship, 365 already flying on board.

Rigel looked into the distant corridor of the ship that had been his home for revolutions, trying to catch a sight of its hijacker. She didn’t seem as intent on catching them as she had been before. Something was up. Something that caused her to feel like she didn’t need them. And Rigel knew exactly what it was.

He turned to face Lyra, smiling. “Get on Archer’s ship. I’ll take care of Amaris.”

Lyra frowned. “No way! Not without you.”

“Seconded,” Archer piped up. “I know we...had our differences, but I came back for you, and I’m not just going to leave you.”

A warm feeling welled up in Rigel’s chest as he looked at the two, one he hadn’t felt in so long and almost thought he’d never feel again. He couldn’t deny that for a moment, he wanted to go with them, to leave everything behind and start a new life where he could possibly move on from everything that happened. But then, he remembered the promises he made, not just to Jericho but to himself. He’d been so caught up on righting his wrongs that he hadn’t realized how doomed he was to repeat them.

Recreating the portal to save Jericho had been his new dream, and it wasn’t one he ever wanted to let go off. However, the events unfolding in front of him were forcing him to face something he knew was true but never wanted to admit to: he hadn’t gone

about it in the right way. Had he not isolated himself and planned to complete the project on his own, maybe he wouldn't have found himself in another impossible mess, but he didn't, and there was no turning back time.

Rigel just knew one thing: he wasn't going to let himself run away from it this time around.

Trying his hardest to smile, he put his hand on Lyra's shoulder. "Amaris has the portal. There's no telling what someone like her could do with its power. She could rip the universe apart."

"But how are you going to stop her?" Archer was pretty much on his ship now, giving him the same look of concern as Lyra.

Rigel sighed. "There's a self-detonation button located in the lab. It will destroy the ship and everything in it, including Amaris."

Realizing where this was going, Lyra suddenly lunged at Rigel and pulled him into a tight hug, burying her face in his stomach to hide it. He knew it was because she didn't want him to know she was crying, but he could hear it in her wavering voice.

"No! You're coming with us. You *gotta* come with us! I can't..." She sniffled, saying the last part so quietly that he almost didn't catch it. "I can't lose you too."

Remembering the backstory she'd shared with him, Rigel's heart stung as he realized how much this was going to affect Lyra. He gave her a pat on the back and looked to Archer, who seemed just as devastated but covered it up with a stare of understanding. "Rigel, are you sure about this?"

Sighing, Rigel leaned down to Lyra's level and took her face in his hands, so they'd make eye contact. Sure enough, her eyes were sparkling with tears, which he lifted a finger up to wipe away.

"This is the only way I can stop Amaris from using what I've created to destroy everything," he explained as gently as possible. "I'll be as safe as I possibly can be okay?"

"But..."

Before she could finish, Archer's hand on her shoulder stopped her from doing so. "C'mon, Lyra."

Realizing she was defeated, Lyra got to her feet with a heavy sigh, giving one last glance to Rigel. He nodded in response, watching as Archer took her hand and led her toward his ship. Once they were both on board, Rigel saw the hatch start to close, leaving a barrier between them. The last thing he saw before it blocked out his view was how Lyra gave him a gentle smile and a wave, Archer soon following suit. He could only hope they had enough time to see him return it.

As soon as he knew they were away from the ship and safe, Rigel sucked in a deep breath and looked down the corridor once more. Now that it was quiet, he could hear clanging noises coming from inside his lab, something he recognized as Amaris working on the portal. Letting out a quiet growl of anger, he got to his feet and grabbed the discarded dagger that had been flung about in the fight. Then, he began to storm toward the room she was currently in.

When he entered the lab, he caught sight of Amaris. She was studying the main frame of the portal, holding something in her hand that upon further inspection seemed to be Orion's journal with the blueprints on how to build it. Rigel didn't know how much longer she'd been on the ship than him, but he could tell that she was a quick learner, for she was already setting aside the scrap metal he'd collected and figuring out how to precede. While she appeared deep in thought, Rigel turned his attention to the right of the doorway, where a red button encased in a glass compartment was placed. Slowly, he moved over to open the compartment, revealing it but not wanting to press it without a confrontation.

He waited a moment longer, making sure to stay close to the self-destruct button. Supposedly sensing his presence after about a minute, Amaris turned around with a cruel smile on her face that sent shivers up Rigel's spine. She shut the journal and began striding toward his working station, where she leaned against the bench.

"Why, hello there!" she greeted him, voice cold and sinister as always. "What brings you to my, formerly your, working quarters? And where is the brat?"

Rigel gulped back what little fear was pricking at him and cleared his throat. "She's gone to a place where you can't hurt her anymore."

Amaris arched a brow. "So, the other fellow took her?"

"I..." Rigel cursed underneath his breath, crossing his arms. "You have no business being this good at guessing games."

She cackled. “Always have been.” Then, Amaris turned her attention to where Rigel had his hand positioned. “And now you’re going to detonate the ship, destroying everything in it?”

Damnit.

He tried to remain calm, not wanting to waste another second before he slammed down the button. “Yes, actually. Any final words?”

“Absolutely!” Amaris was quick to cut in, holding out her hands to stop him. Rigel knew letting her speak would probably be a mistake, but he held off anyway, still keeping his hand above the button. “Listen, you probably assume I want to do away with you.”

“I mean, you have tried to kill me at least twice, so I believe I have good reason to.”

“I never said you didn’t!” Amaris clasped her hands together. “But how about I offer you a little wager?”

Rigel rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to be a part of whatever kind of world-conquering fantasy you’re planning.”

“I know.” Amaris smirked at him, slowly holding something up in her free hand, something she’d collected from his desk. “That’s not what I’m here to offer.”

Adjusting his spectacles, Rigel’s eyes zoned in on whatever Amaris was holding. When he finally realized what it was, his heart dropped and so did the hand hovering above the button.

“My...tape recorder...” He snarled suddenly. “Give that back!”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Amaris stopped him. If it weren’t for the fear of her overpowering him before he had a chance to destroy the ship, Rigel would have lunged at her. “I listened to it. All of it. You sure do have a spirit for inventing, much like I do for my magical studies.”

She sat the journal down on his desk and began to slink toward him, and Rigel positioned his hand back over the button, not wanting to be caught off-guard. Finally, she was looming over him, practically teasing him with the tape recorder.

“I can tell you’re passionate about Orion’s Multidimensional Portal. It’s something you’ve dedicated your life to, isn’t it?”

He nodded, not wanting to speak.

Amaris chuckled darkly again. “Splendid. You see, Rigel, believe it or not, I know what it’s like to be outcast. Thrown aside because nobody believes your work is safe or even worthwhile. You do know how I ended up frozen in time for revolutions, do you not?”

Rigel stammered. “I-I think so.”

“They all think so, but they never know!” Amaris growled, banging her fist on the wall with enough force to make Rigel jump. “My work could have changed the lives of many! Just because I didn’t practice traditional science doesn’t mean I had no idea what I was doing. I had plans, a future, so many ideas, and it was all taken from me because nobody liked my methods. They called me a menace to society and practically did away with any chance I had at following my dreams.” She inched toward Rigel again, leaning

into him and extending a finger to lift up his chin. "I thought you were my enemy, but now I understand. We're not much different, you and I."

Rigel shoved her away, backing up and turning away. "I'm nothing like you."

Amaris continued, and he could feel her closing in on him once more. "You might not think so, Rigel, but you are. Nobody understands minds as bright as ours. That's why we have to force them to." He slowly turned around to see Amaris extending a hand at him, her bony fingers beckoning toward him. "If you help me finish the portal and spread my power across multiple dimensions, I'll help you find your friend. You will both be spared from my wrath and will have anything you've ever wanted. I'll make sure of it." Her smile glistened. "All you have to do is help me."

His heart thudding against his chest, Rigel looked toward Amaris's hand and then to her beckoning grin. "You... You'll help me find Jericho?"

"Of course."

Rigel took a moment, staring at the unfinished portal in the background. He remembered everything he stood for: the sleepless nights, the copious amounts of research, the idea that him and Jericho could be together again, just as it should be. Then, he shut his eyes and extended his hand without another word.

Amaris's face lit up in glee. "There we go! I knew I could get you on my side." She shook his hand. "Now, come! Let us- ahh!"

The sorceress was cut off as Rigel pulled her hand forward, then used it to throw her to the ground with as much force as he could muster. Watching the tape recorder fall from her other hand and next to her with a gentle thud, the inventor stepped on her

flowing dress before she could get to her feet and put his hand back over the button, using the other to position his dagger right at the witch's face.

“What are you doing!?” she screeched. “I thought we had a deal!”

“Maybe you're right, Amaris,” Rigel spoke. “The Rigel you heard in that tape really wasn't much different from you. He made many mistakes, including one that lost him his closest friend. And the decision to repeat it.” He shut his eyes, other hand growing closer to the button. “But he learned. He stepped out of isolation, let others in and realized there's more to life than creating some big, show-stopping invention without much thought.”

“You imbecile!” Amaris shouted, realizing where this was going. “If you press that button, you'll be blasted into space too! You'll die without ever seeing your precious Jericho again! Is that really what you want?”

He opened his eyes, taking one last look at the button. In that moment, Rigel thought of the last time he saw Jericho. But he also thought of the day he met Archer. And when he reprogrammed 365. And how Lyra helped them pull the greatest (and only) prison break of his life. And everything else he'd done with them since.

Rigel looked to Amaris with an ambitious smile on his face as he pressed down hard on the button. And then, an explosion followed.

Everything after was a blur. Rigel supposed he would have been able to process such an event, what it felt like to be propelled from the ship at light speed, the sharp debris slicing against his skin, the celestial blanket that he'd watched from his window for so many revolutions now engulfing him, the floating yet smothering feeling of being

stranded in the depths of space with not even an aircraft to keep you comfort. But as he lost his grip on consciousness so much that he couldn't see the two yellow lights quickly approaching him, all he could feel was a sense of relief.

## Chapter 15

When his eyes finally focused again, Rigel cracked them openly slowly to what appeared to be a lighted room. He couldn't tell much about his surroundings or even remember much of what he did to get there, but he could make out a pale yellow ceiling, one that looked hauntingly familiar. After blinking a few more times, his memory started coming back in hardly digestible chunks: Amaris, the explosion, being flung into space and knocked out by...something. Before he could process any more, a voice startled him into an upward position.

“Holy stars, you're alive!”

Unable to question it before he felt arms wrap around him so tight he feared he might be dying, Rigel was forced to come to a little quicker than he'd planned on. Looking around and just now processing how much his head hurt, Rigel finally remembered where he was: Amaris's room, the one they'd broken into when Lyra helped them escape. But how did he get there? And who was squeezing the life out of him?

Turning his attention downward, he was met with the wide and relieved eyes of Lyra. Relief flooded him when he recognized what this meant and exactly why he was in a room he recognized as Amaris's. “You...I...how-”

“Rigel!”

Another excited voice took him off-guard and before he knew it, he'd been plunged into yet another hug even tighter than Lyra's. He didn't even have to think to know who the second pair of arms belonged to, and he found himself being sandwiched between his two companions as if he were a ragdoll. Then, a whirring noise filled his senses, and he looked to see 365 affectionately perched on his shoulder.

"How are you feeling?" Archer asked. "Any broken limbs? Bleeding, internal or external? Brain damage? You were pretty cut up, but we bandaged you while you were passed out!"

"Or at least tried to," Lyra cut in.

Rigel shook his head, trying to wriggle out of the hug and finally succeeding. "Well, other than my ribs being crushed by your extreme act of affection, I believe all my organs and bones are as they should be. Although, I do have quite a bit of a headache."

"You got hit in the head with some debris, I think," Lyra cut in. "You had a pretty nasty cut on your forehead. See?"

The inventor turned to his left, where Amaris's rather large mirror was placed. He looked at himself in it, noticing the copious amounts of bandages on his arms and face, including a big one wrapped around his head. Dried blood stuck to most of them, and he grimaced as he realized the feeling.

"Huh. Nice work."

"Thanks!" Archer piped up.

Rigel took a few more beats to process the situation, then turned to them. "So, you went back for me? Why?"

“Did you really think we were just going to let you blow yourself into space and die?”

“I said it once and I’ll say it again,” Lyra added, “you’re stuck with me.”

“And me,” Archer added.

365 gave a content whir.

“I see.” An almost sickening feeling of warmth washed over him, and if it hadn’t been so long since the last time he’d allowed himself to, Rigel probably would have cried. Instead, he carefully wrapped both of his arms around each of his companions and pulled them into an awkward half-hug. “I can’t say anyone has ever done that for me before. Thank you.”

“Awww,” Archer squealed in delight. “Don’t even mention it, buddy!”

“I prefer the term companion,” Rigel grumbled, breaking the hug.

After a moment of basking in the glory of being needed by others, the inventor turned his attention to more pressing matters. “So, what are we going to do now?”

“Actually,” Lyra laughed, “we were waiting for you to wake up to ask you that.”

“Yep.” Archer rubbed at his neck. “We got nothing.”

Rigel’s smile soon turned downward as he began recollecting more tidbits of information prior to the accident. “The portal is destroyed, as I’m sure you’ve figured out. My plans to find Jericho are now at a standstill, and if we’re being honest, I don’t think they’ll come to fruition.” He sighed, giving himself a moment to grieve before pushing it past him. Then, he looked to Archer with a smile. “But I can learn to be alright with that.”

Archer returned his grin, seeming proud of Rigel's decision. But then, he sighed. "I'm really sorry for leaving you back on Nebus."

"Water under the bridge," Rigel said with a flick of his wrist. "Plus, I was being exceedingly disrespectful."

"You kind of were," Archer laughed, then shook his head. "But so was I. A little less than you, but still, I'll stop talking! We...have something for you."

He slowly reached behind him, revealing something Rigel thought he'd never see again: his journal. It was a bit torn up and burnt but mostly in-tact, at least enough to read. Archer placed it in his friend's lap.

"It was floating in the middle of all the debris. Lyra went out for it."

Rigel held the book in his hands, fingers tracing over its leather binding. "I don't understand..."

"Look, I still think the portal is dangerous," Archer began, "but maybe if we make a team effort to study the logistics of interdimensional travel and further the research Orion left behind, we can safely rebuild it. That being said, it could take a few revolutions, but as soon as you've healed properly, I wouldn't mind helping you work out the kinks and see if we can find your friend."

Before Rigel could reply, Lyra cut in. "And I'm helping too! I know I'm not much of a *traditional* science expert, but you've done a lot of me, and I'm a fast learner." She beamed.

365 made another noise, confirming its approval to help Rigel further his studies as well. All the inventor could do for a few moments was look at the journal, then back to Archer and Lyra, feeling so beautifully overwhelmed.

“You’d really do that for me?”

Archer grinned. “Of course.”

Feeling choked up again, Rigel flashed everyone in the room a delighted smile. “I don’t even know what to say.” Then, something dawned on him. “Wait, actually I do. How?”

“What do you mean?”

“How will we remake something as elaborate as this in a galactic guard ship? We don’t have the lab for it, nor is that a room in here spacious enough to act as a lab capable of holding an entire portal. Not to even mention the resources! Granted, it might not take as long with all of us on board, but it took me revolutions to get everything together.”

“Uh…” Archer began to think.

“Could we maybe steal some other guy’s lab and resources?” Lyra cut in.

Archer gave her a look to shut that notion down before it was considered further.

As the other two wracked their brains for an answer, Rigel realized that he knew the perfect one. There was one place, now considered abandoned, that he could probably go to. It would be a risk, one he never thought he’d be able to take. But Archer and Lyra being there for him made him feel like he could do anything, even the one thing he swore he’d never do all those revolutions ago.

Rigel cleared his throat. “I have an idea.”

Archer and Lyra turned their attention to him, awaiting what he had to say. He looked ahead, determined. "I want to go home."

A startled noise left Archer's throat. "Whoa, wait. Aren't you like a wanted criminal there?"

"Yeah, what he said!" Lyra added. "We are not getting you locked up again."

"I can't hide forever," Rigel replied, "and it's the only place where we might have a chance at rebuilding the portal. I know I made it sound hopeless, but after surviving an aircraft explosion, going home kind of feels like a walk in the park."

Archer nodded, seemingly convinced by what Rigel had to say. But Lyra still wasn't entirely on board.

"Are you really sure you're ready to face your past like that?"

Rigel gave her a comforting pat on the back. "I've already faced my past a million times up here. Might as well actually be productive about it."

His snarky words got a laugh out of her, and she smiled. "Alright. But if they throw you in prison again, Archer and I are breaking you out within seconds! And that's a promise."

Laughing at Lyra's quip, Rigel took in the feeling of being around those who cared about him once more. He forgot how liberating it was to put his trust fully in someone else, to have others he could rely on. Something that had once seemed hopeless now felt like an adventure he couldn't wait to conquer. As the three of them sat there, having survived the unthinkable, Rigel truly knew that for the first time in revolutions, he did have a purpose. It wasn't the one he thought it'd be, but it was even better.

## Epilogue

You seem to wake with a start. Groaning, your eyes slowly start to open, but they cannot focus. Your memory is fuzzy, and you know it will be a few seconds before it starts to come back. As your vision returns bit by bit, you start to remember things: the lab. The portal. The other dimension.

The other dimension! Your eyes burst open as your senses come back at full force, and your heartbeat quickens as you realize where you are, where you've been, what you were doing. That morning, you activated the portal and leapt into it in hopes of coming back, returning home, and now...where are you?

Finally catching your breath, you blink one last time before looking around. You take in the sights around you and realize that you are in a lab. It has pale green tile, tables with all sorts of contraptions on them and motivational posters surrounding its walls. There's something about one of the posters that catches your eye. You look intently at it, recognizing the face in its center: the man who taught you how to build the device that was sent to bring you home.

At first, you become concerned. There's something familiar about this poster, but you don't realize what. Was it from the place you'd called your home away from home for several revolutions? Or perhaps elsewhere? You're trying to remember when something else on the wall calls to you: a framed portrait. Curious, you begin to walk

toward it. It is then when you notice how dusty and unkempt the room you're in is, as if it hadn't been used in cycles. It's almost like a ghost town, but you can tell there is some activity going on outside, for there are lights shining and faint voices.

You reach the framed photo and take a close look. There is a man, a different man than the one on the poster yet he carries himself in a similar fashion. A smile spreads across your face, and tears begin to form in the corner of your eyes. Of course. Why didn't you recognize him from a distance? Finally, you realize where you are and not only that, but you realize that your plan worked perfectly.

“Rigel's old lab...”

You are home.

## VITA

After completing her work at Lufkin High School, in 2015, Lauren Owens entered Stephen F. Austin State University at Nacogdoches, Texas. She received a Bachelor degree in Mass Communication with a minor in Creative Writing from Stephen F. Austin State University in May 2019. During the following two years, she entered the Graduate School of Stephen F. Austin State University and will be receiving the degree of Master of Arts in May of 2021.

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