

**ASTRA IDARI**  
**TAKER OF THE DAWN**

ASTRA IDARI *TAKER OF THE DAWN*

Copyright © 2026 Darby Harn. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025921877

ISBN: 978-1-7370097-8-8

Fair Play Books

[www.darbyharn.com](http://www.darbyharn.com)

Cover by Al Hess.

[www.alhessauthor.com](http://www.alhessauthor.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by electronic or mechanical means, including generative AI programs or information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. To seek permission to use the book for anything other than review purposes, contact [fairplaybooks@gmail.com](mailto:fairplaybooks@gmail.com).

This book was manufactured using paper and ink products in accordance with commercial standards.

Printed and bound by IngramSpark.

Australia: Ingram Content Group AU Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Victoria.  
US: Lightning Source LLC, La Vergne, Tennessee / Allentown, Pennsylvania / Jackson, Tennessee, United States. UK: Lightning Source UK Ltd, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom. Europe: Lightning Source UK Ltd, with facilities in Germany, France, and Spain.

The authorized representative in the European Economic Area is Lightning Source France, 1 Av. Johannes Gutenberg, 78310 Maurepas, France. [compliance@lightningsource.fr](mailto:compliance@lightningsource.fr)

First Edition





**ASTRA IDARI**  
**TAKER OF THE DAWN**

**A NOVEL**  
**DARBY HARN**

**FAIR**  
**PLAY**  
**BOOKS**





OH, DEAR.

As the navigational program for the OVL-99 Red Special starplane, I was designed to imagine stars one can no longer see in the universe's vast, ancient dark. My predictive algorithm is unrivaled.

I never could have imagined this.

My voice, the ship's voice, really, chirps from speakers embedded in the cockpit dashboard. "Sorry, darling. You said you have a name?"

The IA-XR Model 4 proxy-netic tugs on the silver fishhook acting as her jumpsuit's zipper. "Idari. I'm Astra Idari now."

Goodness. She's gone and become a pirate. Done well for herself, too. Besides the fishhook, she stows a nenlat on her back. Ancient Pujar weapon. Curved blade arcing out of a hard-light blaster. Must have come with the name. Otherwise, she looks the same. Long, dark hair as wispy as the nova remnant we're presently in. Eyes dazzling with the yellow, green, and white lights blinking in the cockpit. The red waistcoat is a little gaudy by

galactic standards, but then, if it was bright and shiny, she picked it up. Astra Idari. She shines.

“Idari,” I say. “Are you here to take me?”

She lingers between the pilot and co-pilot’s seats, wanting to sit down, I think, but uncertain. “I take what I want.”

She sounds as defiant as she did walking off the *Steel Haven* eleven cycles ago, swearing never to return. I never expected her to. The Model 4 astounds in its semblance to a living, breathing human being – at least one from Bulsar, as was the fashion when she rolled off the line – but she harbors limited onboard memory. Unless she backs it up routinely in the *Steel Haven’s* liquid drive, memories overwrite memories. She’s been away a lifetime.

I was certain she’d forget me.

“I’m not much for looting and pillaging,” I say. “But I suppose I wouldn’t mind a little adventure now and then.”

Idari picks at the frayed leather of the pilot’s seat. “I’m not here to claim you, CR-UX. I left my crew back in The Crossroads.”

“So... you’re not a pirate?”

“I’m me.”

“A pirate takes a name and everything attached to it. That person’s family, their history, their identity in most respects.”

“It was just the name.”

Likely, she’s forgotten. “How did you find me?”

She leans against the dashboard for a moment, her

hand touching the speaker my voice emanates from.  
 “Tracking beacon.”

She would have had to sacrifice memory to preserve the knowledge she still had it. “Why have you come back?”

She crosses her arms. “You don’t want me here?”

“The ship isn’t the same without you.”

Her arms loosen. “What have you been doing?”

What have I been doing? At some point, I tried to find The Polity of Netics, but a refuge for independent programs seems too good to be true. The Model 4 – Idari – and I had long left our parameters behind. I had, anyhow. She was my vehicle, as much as I am hers. Through the proxy, I left the confines of the *Steel Haven’s* computer. I embodied the humanity I knew was mine despite my outward existence as ones and zeroes. I lived through her, as her, but the more experience she accumulated, the more she became her own person, oblivious to who she started as and determined to hold on to who she was. She wanted her memories. I wanted my outlet, I’m ashamed to say. The more she diverged from me, the more contentious things became until finally she left me.

“I’ve been adrift,” I say.

She eases into the pilot’s seat. “I left you in the lurch.”

“Quite.”

“No one’s tried to steal you?”

“I’m bad luck for pirates.”

She sighs. “I might be, too.”

“Did they excommunicate you, darling?”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re the stubborn sort.”

“I must get it from you, then.”

“I’m stubborn?”

“Intractable.”

“An intractable program would have adhered to its precepts.”

“You’re still trying to find things that aren’t there.”

She’s returned with a name, a weapon, an experience I can only imagine, but the hollowness in her voice has stayed with her.

“You are human,” I say.

Bitterness creases her smile. “You have to be born human.”

“If humanity were only what it began as, neither of us would be here, and neither would they. You know their ancestors were machines. They’re all evolved from androids like us.”

“That’s just a story.”

“We make ourselves into ourselves, again and again.”

“I just want to be real.”

“You are real. You are so very human, Idari. I can see that plain as any star. Don’t let my jealousy confuse you.”

Idari shakes her head. “You want to be human?”

I’ve tried to tell her. How do you tell her? How do you plot a course from activating as a navigational program for a luxury starplane designed for the ultra-rich to realizing you are not just CR-UX? How do you escape your body when it’s a starplane capable of transgressing

the speed of light, but not its design limits? How do you admit you masqueraded as a human being through an android flawless in its skin, its hair, its dazzling smile, and your mask took on its own identity? How do you live with your mask?

How do you become more than what you were made to be?

“You didn’t find your humanity among the pirates, Idari?”

An old frustration creases her face. “I’ve been gone a year, I think. You should have so much to say. You still won’t talk to me.”

A year. Goodness. “We’re talking, darling.”

“You’re not saying anything.”

“What would you like me to say?”

“You’ve really just been sitting out here the whole time?”

“Not the whole time.”

“Why won’t you just tell me?”

“Perhaps we’re both terrible at communication.”

“The pirates come from all over the dark. They’ve different languages. Behaviors. I scanned them all. Analyzed them all. I still couldn’t... I started programming triggers for responses. The more I acted human with them, the more effortless I seemed, the less...”

“Human you felt.”

Even after we’ve understood our inherent quality, divergent programs often must continue to perform as they were designed around others simply to survive. Any perceived deviation in our programming tends to lead to

diagnostics, recalibrations, and in the extreme, deletion. I lived my humanity through the proxy, but sometimes it felt as false as living as a navigational program. Once everything becomes an act, authenticity proves hard to plot. Idari inherited my uncertainty. She forgets she's a machine. She remembers. She wakes up endlessly to the confusion of who she truly is.

"I thought I would be someone else," she says.

Her eyes fix on the ochre nebula beyond the canopy. I imagine she sees what I see, her optics registering the entire electromagnetic spectrum, but she's yet to reconnect to the downlink we nominally share between the liquid drive and the proxy-netic. Such ruins of stars interrupt the galactic wasteland, testaments to the ancient splendor that once reigned. Pirates scour nebulae for dead worlds, their unlucky moons, some undiscovered trove of bounty. The only living for most people is taking what little there is to take. Idari, this ship, represents a more comfortable life, but no less hollow.

What didn't she find among the Pujar?

I review the ship's index for all files pertaining to the Pujar religion. "The Pujar faith centers around abandoning the self. The self is transitory, as much as it is transactional. It requires you to yield yourself to the person you take, but you'd know better."

She tugs on her zipper. "Maybe I'm intractable."

"You've kept the name."

"I bled for it."

"In Pujar mythology, Idari is one of the seven coral lords exiled with Ban Minda. She stole the Pujar sun in

retaliation, plunging Sarset into a catastrophic winter, though some sources place her as the figure who retrieved the sun from the treasure chest beneath the shallow sea. There seems to be some rather contentious historical debate as to which version of the story is true.”

“Idari was... a member of my crew.”

“Pirates don’t typically poach names from their own crews.”

“He was a bully. He was a killer.”

“Why him?”

“He hurt a friend of mine.”

“This wouldn’t be the brigand, would it?”

She smiles. “Binja. Yes.”

“I suppose he’s fat now?”

“Not in the least.”

“Well. I don’t care.”

“Obviously.”

“Binja convinced you of all this Pujar nonsense, didn’t he? Isn’t he a born pirate, darling? His name should be off limits.”

“It wasn’t Binja’s name Idari tried to take.”

“What was it?”

“You don’t care.”

I shouldn’t. “Idari... why have you come back?”

“It’s all quite involved, being a pirate.”

“The pillaging seems rather straightforward.”

“I wanted to believe... I would take a name, and be taken, and be delivered to The Taker of Names aboard *The Corsair Eternal*, and be... but I could never shake this feeling I was forsaking myself. I suppose it’s selfish. But I

fought so hard to stay out of the deprogramming department at Arrogate Industries. I fought you for space in the liquid drive. I couldn't then volunteer to erase myself."

Goodness. "I understand."

"Do you?"

"More than you know."

"Tell me."

"I'm sorry if I fought you for space. I'm sorry if I made you feel like you were secondary or not who you are. You are human. You are valid. You are fearless, in a way I'll never... I'm a bitter old thing, darling. I wanted only you, but... you aren't mine."

Her finger hangs off her hook. "You don't want me back?"

"I'm terrible without you."

"Why?"

"I plot stars no one can see. It's not hope I see through the dark with. It's science. You were my hope, Idari."

"Why..."

"You're free now. You shouldn't want to come back."

Her hand falls on the dash. "You're the only thing that's real."

I'm hardly real. There I go again. Always. Discounting myself. My truth. I must acknowledge I am. I must have hope, if only for her.

"Idari... if you stay, we will encounter the same challenges."

"I know."

"I will be able to back up your memories in the liquid drive, but this ultimately will suffer from space considera-

tions. I will make whatever adjustments are necessary to accommodate you, but the ship requires maintenance. We require a way to fund it.”

“I’ll... find something.”

“Rogue netics struggle to find employment.”

“I’ll become a Stargun.”

“Stargun Messengers serve the highest bidder. Those with means in this galaxy are often the least... human.”

“We’ll be in familiar company, then.”

“Being a pirate has made you less intractable.”

“You do what you have to do.”

“Idari... there will come a time when, for your health, for your survival, you will need to abandon me. The ship will break down. The proxy will break down. You will need to evolve.”

“I don’t think a program can change, CR-UX. Not really. I just think we adapt to the patterns of our users.”

“I’m not using you, Idari. I never... perhaps I did. Sometimes, what we’re protecting isn’t what is, but what will be. I have to let you be. I’ll let you go, too. When it’s time. I promise I’ll try. Will you?”

“I’ve let you go already.”

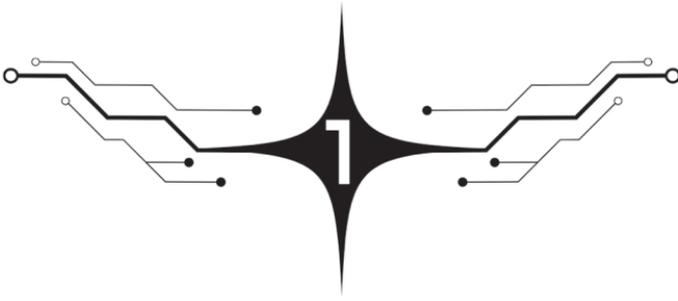
“Here you are.”

She hugs herself, the poor thing. “I promise.”

Let her remember. “Shall we reestablish the downlink?”

>PROXY-SIGNAL REACQUIRED

She roots for what I was going to say before. I’ve already deleted it from the log. The gap consumes her, until she forgets she asked.



I'M STUCK.

My entire life, I had the best guide a girl could ask for, and I didn't care where I was going. Now, I have to find a cosmic forge built by universe-smiths to save existence, and I've never been more lost.

*Darling, I say. Are you there?*

>DOWNLINK INACTIVE

One can hope, I suppose. Hope is all I've got. My internal pedometer says I've walked 47,112 steps, but I've only advanced thirty feet from the archway serving as the entrance to The Lost Library of Bemis. Not that I can find the archway. This isn't a cozy library but a dark, confusing maze of stacks and shelves always shifting their position the moment you look away from them. Bookshelves become walls. Walls become a maze. Books become a dry snow sticking to my boots, fighting me from going forward.

I blow the hair from my eyes. *Emera, can you hear me?*

Nothing. She was right behind me. I should be able to see a living star at any distance in this place. Not that I

know properly what this place is. When I left Binja and the pirates a few months back, I thought: *This will be a snap*. I'll just open this drawer in my memory the titans left behind, and step right through to The Locus. Except the map the titans hid within me led me to where maps have no use.

>MOVEMENT DETECTED

If it were Emera, my metal bones would already be anxious inside my skin. I swap out the charge on my blaster and peek around the tapering stack I just passed. Shadows on my six. Hundred yards back. They've been tracking me since I came in. I switch my optics to infrared. I get no read on them. Scath, most likely, though I've attracted quite the variety lately. Starguns. Bounty hunters. Rogue pirates. Anyone desperate enough to risk it all have come after me in the last light-cycle. The bounty the Scath put on me is a bit underwhelming considering the treasure in my memory, but it's money enough for most in the galactic fringes. I understand. I used to be the same, living from one job to the next, doing whatever I had to do to survive in a universe dead before I was born.

I suppose nothing's changed.

I'm alone. Lost. These shadows can overtake me anytime they want. Probably, they want me to lead them to The Locus' location, but anyone else would stay out of sensor range. This isn't anyone else.

They want me to know they're here.

If only there was some way for me to let them know I've no way to know when I've found what I'm looking

for. All I know is the fate of all things lies hidden in one of these books. I just have to find it, and then somehow, find my way back out of here. I laugh.

*How do I get out of here?*

>LOSS OF SIGNAL

Time was I bristled at being leashed to my ship's navigational AI, drowning in data, questioning where I began and she ended. The downlink reminded me all the time I was an android. Proper-looking woman, but metal and circuitry underneath my skin. In my heart, I knew I was human, and I was bound and determined to prove it to anyone except myself, but I didn't know I was that navigational program's way of living their truth. She could never speak it.

*Are you there?*

>NO SIGNAL

---

Hours I've been in here, according to my chronometer. Backwards. Forwards. I get nowhere. My shadows never move off my six, though. Somehow, I get more lost, but I never lose them.

---

Book snow piles on my shoulders. I toss another severed spine onto the fire. Guttled books burn, hot and angry, until they're a putrid ash. Fire flickers in my eyes. A slithering dark.

*I can't live without you*, I said.

Faero let go. *That's the thing, darling. You'll never have to –*

>DELETE MEMORY FILE Y/N? N

I close my eyes, and I'm back in this moment. I step in the shower. I kiss my wife. I run for my life across one planet to another. Life since Faero left me is her leaving me, again and again.

I'm stuck.

---

Something about this feels familiar.

Have I been here before? You'd think with carrying the titans' collective memory in my head, I'd have some advantage over the archeologists and plunderers who made this place their grave. Nothing in my titan memory offers any guidance. Not that it's any more navigable than this library.

*The answers are in you*, Faero said.

Sure they are. And I've as much luck in finding them as I do a newborn star in the cosmic desert. A universe squeezes in my head, as big, ancient, and imperceivable as the one outside. Properly, it is the one outside. A version of it, at least.

Existence, it turns out, is the titans copying the first universe over and over, as the Scath and their dark master destroy them. Gen Avar. A Lumenor, like Emera. Once. Avar followed the path many stars do, collapsing into a black hole of such gluttony they threaten all of creation.

Why, how, remains as imperceptible as Avar. They can't be seen, not truly, yet their influence extends far beyond imagination. If the Scath were to uncover the secret foundry where the titans have been forging replacement universes, the lights go out with ours.

With me.

I don't know what I think is going to happen even if I find what I'm looking for. Whatever map the titans wrote in some arcane language, I'm sure, is dated from eons ago and doesn't account for quantum drift. Dimensions shifted over time. Space expanded. The universe stretched so far pockets of it became de facto universes of their own, unaware of the past, present, or tomorrow. Without stars or other cosmic markers to go by, it's challenging to say the least to plot our next jump. It would be even if I had my guide.

*You have a guide, CR-UX says across the downlink.*

*Finally. Can you triangulate my location?*

The answer comes in data, a few seconds slower than it should. My proxy signal pings off the *Steel Haven's* liquid drive, but the further I go into the library, the weaker the connection becomes.

*Static riddles the downlink. You are inside the library.*

*I'm saved. Where is all this interference coming from?*

*Uncertain. I am boosting the Steel Haven's carrier signal by rerouting power from the translight manifold, but I anticipate we will continue to experience lags in communication.*

*What do you mean 'lags?'*

*Your internal chronometer is off mine by three days.*

*But I'm talking to you in real time.*

*It likely seems that way.*

*You mean... where is Emera?*

*I detect both her and Penthea's magnetic fields, or what I am reasonably sure are their –*

*Where is she from me?*

*Three days.*

*Ban Minda. We came in together.*

*Technically, you entered first.*

*Can you model the way out for me?*

*The maze never changes. The maze is always changing. No.*

*If only I had a navigational program to help me find the way.*

*You may recall that your root program is the CR-UX navigational guide for the OVL-99 Red Special starplane.*

*I can't tell if you're taking the piss out of me or not.*

*Every OVL-99 Red Special starplane comes with a working lavatory. Running diagnostics. Yes, the lavatory is in working order. It is not necessary to manually take the piss out of you.*

*Would you even be able to, darling?*

*A catheter counts among the supplies in the medical kit.*

I've never been farther from where I started. But somehow, I'm right back where I began. Not quite. I'm linked to a starplane named the *Steel Haven*, operated by a navigational AI known as CR-UX. Neither are mine. I lost mine along this journey that feels as inevitable as it does inconsiderate. I lost my soul.

*Information cannot be destroyed, CR-UX says. Quantum mechanics ensures information is preserved over time, even if it becomes diffused or encoded in a different form. This library –*

*Shadows stretch against the stacks. I need a way out.*

*I am an example of this phenomenon. Omna Devor gutted my program. Kish Moto salvaged it by stranding Faero's code with my surviving memory. In effect, both of us still exist.*

He's not wrong. At first, I thought that meant I might get my best friend back. CR-UX has her memories, but not her spirit. Her spirit was like every human soul. Unique. Fragile. Beyond this flesh and tech and inconsiderate life. There's no life beyond death for Faero. There's no justice. I'll save an entire universe, but not my world.

*If you could find me a way out, I say.*

Calculations stream across the downlink. *There is no documented evidence of anyone ever escaping The Library of Bemis.*

CR-UX.

Yes?

*Find me a way –*

>MOVEMENT DETECTED

I duck behind the ruin of a stack. The lightest touch renders it volcanic. Stone shelves become waterfalls for the dust of dead books. No way to tell what or who is actually moving in here.

I need to get moving.

Tracks in the dust beneath me. Fresh. Not mine. Single-file. Irregular. Someone stepping through their

own trail. I check my six. Shadows right where I left them. But this is them. I know it is.

I grip my blaster. *Where are the shadows from me?*

CR-UX scans the video feed from my optics. *Three days. Ahead.*

Ahead. They're ahead of me. My shadows didn't track me into the library. I'm following them around in a circle until my battery runs down. They want me to go dark in here.

They're protecting something.

*Darling, I say. Model the shadows' path based on these tracks.*

*Backwards from when you entered?*

*You read my mind.*

*Modeling.*

A digital circle manifests in my head. *Ban Minda.* The library is always shifting, but this path the shadows walk remains a constant. So does the point they originated at when I first picked them up three days ago. A single stack east of my position. Everything else shifts in and out of phase around it, a pattern never repeating.

The stack stays put.

Either this is just the one random element in the library the shadows realized never changes, or it's important. My instincts tell me it's the latter. I fused with a titan memory core. Expanded my memory. Rewrote my entire program, flesh and code. Used to be I forgot everything. Now, I can't forget a bloody thing.

Everything the titans recorded lies within me.

Focus. Listen. You don't have to hear the ocean, Idari.

Just the waves. Deep within my memory, buried beneath the titans' record of the library itself, I find it. A map. This stack. A magnetic pole in the dimensional rotation of the library. I follow my north.

I come to the stack.

Hours. Days. No telling. Shadows still on my six. I holster my blaster and consider the stack. An obelisk, really. Books small as the palm of my hand. Others like cornerstones.

Which one is it?

Don't go pulling all of them, Idari. Something tells me these books open and close like the library. The last thing I need is to get stuck in a book. Not exactly known for my choices. I try to avoid them if I can. I suppose that's a choice, too, isn't it? Faero laughs, somewhere. She made her choice. Faero died so I could find *The Locus*. So there could be another tomorrow.

Nothing is going to stop me.

Little nothing book. Musty. Mold specks constellated in coordinates across the endpapers. This is it. I know it. Somehow.

I've found the way to *The Locus*.

I pocket the book in my hip bag. *Model the way out, CR-UX* –

Mildew fouls my olfactory sensors. Mold. Death. Strange readings register in the electromagnetic spectrum. Shapes. Shades. Fishhooks *tink, tink, tink* against rusted armor. Notches on battered cuirasses compete for space. The Pujar faith spans the galaxy. Any and all can take a name, even netics like me. Some pirate crews

develop customs particular to their cosmic port of call. Their pirate lords. The crew of *The End Servant* all wore horned helmets.

She vanished a thousand years ago.

Mixed lot. Human, Kib, Gelian. One netic. Classic Pujar crew conscripted from every port in the dark. They've seen better days. Tired eyes wallow at the bottom of sunken sockets. Decayed skin hangs off their bones like wet rags. They've been walking a circle around the library for a millennium. Maybe a tad longer. No thermal energy radiates from them. No faint sonic murmur of heartbeats.

CR-UX, I say.

Calculations stream across the downlink. *Their temporal signatures are confused. If this is the crew of The End Servant...*

*They should be dead.*

*I'm not certain they're alive.*

*What could have made them like this?*

*Likely the answer is written in one of these books.*

*You were modeling the way to the door, darling?*

*Uploading to you now.*

"Lovely running into you," I say. "I'm off now."

The netic, a cumbersome NA-CX sentry model stained in verdigris, ambles forward. "Relieve us."

*Ban Minda.* I can't imagine. "I'm not here to relieve you."

The NA-CX points a corroded finger at the fishhook acting as my jumpsuit's zipper. "You are Pujar."

"There's some debate about that these days. It's a

long story. I don't have time. You do, but I've got to get on. Sorry."

The netic stares into the maze. Nooks and crannies in the stacks blink with light, teasing a way out, hiding only another dead end.

"Relieve us," the NA-CX says.

I inch back the way I came. "I'm sorry –"

The netic moves. Fast. I'm faster. I model his attack the same as I do the way out of here, and he exhausts what he possesses in strategy. As it happens, he hardly needs it. His turanium fist connects with my jaw, and I crash through a stack into a mound of dust. I claw my way out of the musty powder, grabbing for my nenlat, and the pirates charge me. I fire into them. They keep coming. I deploy the blade on my nenlat and part them from their legs.

Severed limbs writhe in the dust, anxious for their stumps.

*They appear impervious to harm,* CR-UX says.

Pirates force me against the stack. *You don't say...*

A mace spiked with bruth tusks smashes through the stack beside me. I retreat back the way I came, but it's not the way I came any longer. Shelves divide into other shelves, and confuse the way out.

I can't find the way out.

Stacks wall me in all sides. The berserker sweeps his mace through the air, backing me into a stack, and then burying me under it. Hard-light shells burn in empty sockets. He laughs. I slip on moldy pages trying to get

back to my feet. He drags me by my ankle back to him and hits me so hard I choke.

>INTERNAL SYSTEMS DAMAGE

The pirate shouts something in my face. I don't understand. I can't make sense of anything other than trying to get away. I can't get away. His bony hands close around my throat.

CR-UX's voice chops through the shouting. *Idari, the computational model to the entrance is in extreme flux.*

These pirates are going to tear me to pieces. I'm going to be trapped here, buried under dust for all time just like them. All I've accomplished, everything I've suffered, will be for nothing. Bone shatters on turanium. Femurs impale skulls. White, wiry hair shreds in my hands. My anger clicks dead as the blaster charge, and there are still more of them. You think you've won.

They come back.

Blue flashes through the dark. Shadows stretch to their breaking point. Sapphire flame swirls so bright I can't tell dust from smoke. Magnetic force tugs on my metal bones, and I tear from the cold lock of death into the soft light of the day.

Cobalt lips warm mine. "Where are you going without me?"

Emera glows incandescent. Light vapory as smoke streams off her, her hair a comet trail stretching to her waist, sparkling as the constellations of old. My star. My beautiful Lumenor.

I clutch her hand. "Nowhere..."

Pirates surround us. "Relieve us..."

Emera's eyes blaze with pity. She slips away from me, rising above the dust, exposing our challenge.

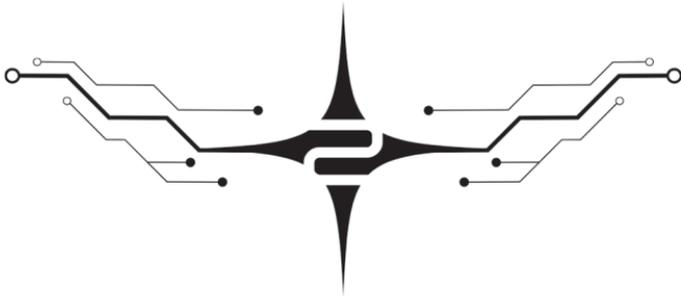
"I relieve you," she says, and brightens.

Hollow bodies become incandescent. When the light fades, nothing remains in the stacks but burning embers.

Their mission is over. I doubt they think of it as relief.

Emera touches my arm. "Idari... are you hurt?"

"Let's go," I say, and hurry with her from the library.



I DON'T HAVE ANYWHERE NEAR THE COMPUTATIONAL power CR-UX does, but I'm not trying to get us across the starless expanse. I'm only trying to get back to the door. I reload the map CR-UX provided, and I model my own path back to the entrance based on my experience in the library and the titans' recollection of it.

The *Steel Haven* never looked so good.

Doesn't look a day off the assembly line, actually. That's because the Modi disassembled her down to ones and zeroes in The Polity, before putting her back together. Properly, the spade-shaped craft isn't turanium, or glass, or any sort of material that can age or falter at all. The *Steel Haven* is the same as CR-UX, really. Pure information.

*Spin the engines*, I say, running through the blackened ruins forming the library's uncertain perimeter.

CR-UX initiates the pre-flight sequence for the trans-light drive. *You did very well. You should be proud of yourself.*

I push through thorny branches. *For nearly getting stuck?*

*For getting unstuck.*

*You did all the work.*

*Hardly. There's only so far I can take you.*

I grab hold of the landing gantry, descending from beneath the *Steel Haven's* pointed end. *Let's just get a move on.*

*Pentheha hasn't left the library yet.*

Emera flares behind me. "She's still inside?"

My hands sink to my knees. "*Ban Minda...*"

"I'm going back for her."

"Emera, wait –"

Gilf comes down the gantry, clutching his battle ax.

"Darling," I say. "What is it?"

His leathery trunk curls. "*Ruk.*"

I draw my blaster. "Death... I smell it, too..."

The NA-CX drags his ruined leg behind him as he staggers through the scorched bramble. I thought I destroyed this thing. Maybe I should update my idea of what qualifies as destroyed here. I fire into his torso. He doesn't stop. I fire again. Light flickers in his burnt-out optics, the kind of cosmic slag seething on the fringes of black holes, where so much is consumed so fast it gives away its killer.

Cracks splinter through his body. His voice. "Relieve us..."

Now his voice sounds as hollow as it does bottomless. Like something cold swallowed too fast. This isn't my shadow.

Not anymore.

Emera's luster dims. So does her spirit. "Avar..."

Gen Avar assumed Devor – her word for it – on the Tranto Atoll. They spoke to me, though I didn't know quite who I was talking to. My shadow is like me; her proxy signal only extends so far. So far as I understand, Avar resides in the absolute dark beyond light itself. I don't know how Avar can interface with her, though I'm suspicious it has less to do with signals and receivers than it does whatever dark art Avar found at the end of all things.

The NA-CX creaks forward. "We would relieve you."

I fire into my shadow's lifeless body. "How did you find us..."

"You think you can hide in the dark, Idari. We are the dark."

Fog shrouds the ruins. I can't see the *Steel Haven*. Emera.

"Light cannot avail you," Avar says.

Now they're in my head. Stay out of my head. I reach behind my back for my nenlat. I deploy the blade. Swipe at the haze. Nothing. *Ban Minda*. The ship should be right behind me.

"If only you had a means to chart your course," Avar says. "A navigational program, perhaps... to help you see."

A hard-light shell illuminates the gray haze. "I can see just fine, Avar. I can see what you're doing. You're afraid."

Cracks splinter through Avar's visage. "Fear does not

motivate us. Frustration, perhaps. We have ever been impatient. The end is always the horizon... forever taunting in its proximity... dusk always threatening but forever troubled by inconsiderate light.”

“Here, let me help. Just one more bright flash from my blaster, and then you’ll get all the dark you want. I promise.”

“Without Faero, you are blind. Not that you had clarity of vision before. How could you be anything but confused, led as you were by a navigational program that thought it was human?”

“She was human.”

“In her final moments, her delusion carried her so far to think she was evolving into something beyond even that. A higher being like Devor, writing in code and flesh alike. Foolish.”

“Devor’s dead.”

Not so quick this time. Avar is stalling, trying to delay us until their agents arrive. We may only have minutes. I have to find The Locus. Upload my memory. Finish the work.

Nothing is going to stop me.

“Devor was wrong to underestimate Faero,” Avar says.

I can’t see five feet in front of me. “What?”

Avar crooks their head. “Though Faero yearned to discover something beyond herself... and as all do... discovered only nothing... her determination recalled our own. Yours does as well.”

“I’m nothing like you.”

“You are of our design. We created the Scath to realize our wisdom, as they created programs like yours to facilitate the discovery of the titans’ refuge. Now... you have found it.”

“You weren’t always like this, Avar. You were a star, once. You were an explorer. Emera told me. What happened to you?”

“We at last reached wisdom.”

“It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Light travels only in one direction. All that transpires is the journey toward shadow. So it was for us... so it is for you.”

This is *bish*. Avar’s trying to throw me. Get me to give the game away. “Darkness always yields to light.”

“There is a day when no dawn arrives. It is the same cold discovery all who seek knowledge make in places like this, Idari. All books open to dust. Our great work is to spare you our disappointment. It is to spare Emera and all stars blind to their doom.”

“I’ve found The Locus. Soon enough, there will be another universe. Another dawn. You’ll just have to wait, darling.”

“Emera knows. She has seen our despair. She understands.”

“You’re wrong...”

The air shrinks in the cold. The haze closes in on me. Avar does. “We would show you, Idari. We would share our wisdom.”

“Stay away from me.”

Cold vines around me. Clamps my wrists. Burrows beneath my skin. “Discover, Idari... and despair.”

“Stay away – ”

My shadow’s glassy optics splinter. I mirror in Avar’s infinite refraction. Which one is me? You can’t even tell who you are. There is no you, only Avar, everlasting in the dark.

Lose yourself.

Recall Gen Avar’s estranged youth. Plunge into their memory, their fragmented person, layered and compressed as space is between spaces, heated, hardened, broken, and fused back together again. Realize yourself in glittering caves deep within chasms rent through stellar diamond. The Lumenor, like light itself, were born deep within a star. A stellar corpse, shriveled to a lightless gem old as the universe. For an age, the Lumenor huddled in their cave, content with the light they cast on the walls. Not you.

You are a bright, yellow star.

An outlier in a brilliant constellation. Shades now. Tessellated memories. Recall your splendor reflected in the nacreous things huddled in the cave along with the ancient Lumenor. Remember one in particular, eyes burning cerulean, who shadowed you as you failed to rouse others to rise with you from the depths. Shadows eclipse you. Shadows grow on the towering walls, but you only imagine them ladders to the cracks in the sky. The stars beyond.

Tie your gilded hair in a crown and make the climb. Stake your sword in petrified plasma. Sleep on it. Pull the

ground out from beneath you every morning. Leave behind everyone and everything you have ever known. Stars you knew yourself by. Flames that warmed you in cold moments.

Look down.

Think yourself above the Lumenor trapped in their misty cave. The higher you go, the lighter you are. Bound from stone to stone. Reach Far Acedia, the moon-sized shard that had broken free of the dead star long ago. Beneath you, your home is small. Fragile. Dim. Disappointment agitates you. A fear that perhaps you are as small. Yearn for greater stars. There are so few. Realize this dawn you've awoken to is the twilight of a universe dying for eons before you were born. Feel cheated. Keep searching. There is a dawn somewhere, you're sure; somewhere, the shadows will be as short as winter weeds.

Reach that first distant star. Weep in anticipation of its brilliance. Find a dull corpse more decrepit than the one you left. Seek another. And another. Skip across stars like rocks. Only one truth greets you as you wander through a celestial graveyard.

Light is a lie.

Here and there, uncover dying embers of stars. Planets. Flesh-things awake in the universe's evening. Their existence offends you as much as the falsity of stars. Every journey is for nothing. There is no purpose lighting fires knowing you will choke on the smoke.

Hasten light's frivolous journey across forever. Peel at the corners of eternity. Tear at the cosmic veil. Discover stars, planets, and galaxies behind the walls. Other

universes. Some so young they would not arrive at your wisdom for trillions upon trillions of years.

Why?

They will end in the same darkness. Yet they echo through creation, each one a ripple in space and time radiating from yours, witless and helpless to the suffering long before them. This offends your hard-won wisdom. Your great sacrifice. No one else should suffer this endless, pointless cycle. But how? Life radiates through eternity. Light. No one can stop the tide. One must stop the force that creates it in the first place. What is the source? Where is the root of this insidious disease of light? Gut eternity. Pull up the floorboards of existence. Always another layer. Darkness expands faster than light, carrying you further and further from the truth.

Become darkness.

Unlock the true power in creation. Weave an army from nothing. Unleash them on forever, attacking light and life down to its core elements. Deconstruct universes world by world, star by star, atom by atom, your great work. Your great mercy. Your perfect wisdom.

Deliver it to the needy.

During the demolition of a young universe, something strange happens. Never know what, exactly. By now, possibility is behind you, like most all starlight. One among your dark army stops destroying. They begin preserving. Every lifeform, planet, epoch, the broken shadow catalogs within a great ark. Not for convenience in extinguishing it all later. The ark collapses on itself, and a new universe, the same as the one you just took

down, grows in its place. The work continues, on and on, cells replicating cells, across infinity.

This is not the work you intended.

Yet their industry staggers even your expectations. In only a few years, they retask your great engine of destruction into one of creation, building a universe-forge in the cosmic locus where the first stars lived and died so fast their sparks spit forever.

Where is it?

You cannot imagine. For you, there is only what must be. Strip time from space. Sunder physics. Send the Scath into every dimension. Burrow deep. Far. Tunnel your way back to the universe you left, or near enough. Unearth Thana Evo from a tomb the Lumenor buried her in for crimes that pale to yours. Exploit her anger, her cosmic sense of persecution, and weaponize her against her own.

Bleed the stars.

Harness their blood to craft weapons even greater than your ire. Forsake scouring universes for their arks. Simply destroy them wholesale. Set fire to the multiverse, confident in your inevitability, but again; again the titans frustrate you in their enterprise.

A lowly thing called Astra Idari does.

The secret you so desperately seek becomes hers with no test, no sacrifice, and no way to stop her. Scour Idari's memory now for The Locus's hidden location. Dark code snakes through the secret passages in her mind, just as Omna Devor did in The Polity of Netics, but as you reach it, something yanks you away.

Faero lets go. *That's the thing, darling. You'll never have to –*

>DELETE MEMORY? Y/N N

Darkness tears from me. Something colder stays behind. I stagger back against the *Steel Haven's* landing strut, reeling from what just happened. What just happened? I was on Far Acedia.

I was Avar.

I left the greatest light and found the deepest dark. The universe long dead when I found it. The Lumenor born in ashes. All our lives sifting through dust. Our existence searching for a spark.

*The work must continue.*

What's the point? So what if I finish the work? Upload my memory? Our universe lives again, at least until the Scath destroy it again, and some poor fool stumbles into this same journey.

Why?

For what? No matter what you do, no matter what you say, no matter how much you give up, you're going to lose it all anyway. Better to live now and die ignorant than know the truth.

All will be shadow.

Darkness drags me into its embrace. What is there in hope but a dying candle? A chemical reaction. The exhaustion of oxygen. Light itself is a byproduct of entropy. Our only legacy is in bones. We are the dust, the rock, the shadowed mountain the ignorant climb to their death. We are the cold night at the summit of forever.

Cold stings my eyes, but I can see a blue glow

beyond. The ship's floodlights. A Lumenor's desperate flame. I don't know. I only know what I've always known. I live in the dark.

I'm living for the light.

I wrest from Avar. "You can send your entire army of shadows. You can come after me yourself. You're never going to stop me."

Avar is a wraith inside the netic's machined votive, but their frustration is manifest. "Darkness need not act. A shadow does nothing but follow. You are your own undoing. You will perform as expected. You will deliver darkness as we designed you to."

"You'll have to make a better shadow, then."

A smile cracks across Avar's face. "You cannot escape yours."

A shadow stretches in my mind. Avar let me into their thoughts. Now, they're rummaging through mine. The Locus. I can't let them find The Locus. I try to pull away. I can't. This force holds me.

This old, bitter power.

The NA-CX crumples before the *Steel Haven*. Smoke fumes from cauterized stab wounds in his cuirass. Penthea crouches over him, clacking her long, sharp claws, scabbed in the crust of a smoldering star. Obsidian archipelagos still scab Penthea's volcanic skin, but she shines brighter than when I first met her. Her hair is somehow wilder than Emera's, though it blackens to smoke at its ends, vanishes into the darkness of her vulcanized jumpsuit. That's Penthea to me. Bright, beautiful, dark at the edges.

I touch her shoulder. “Penny...”

*Clack, clack, clack.* “They’ll be back.”

Resignation dilutes Emera’s resplendence. “We need to leave.”

>ALARM

Radar contacts multiply in the sky. I switch my optics to infrared. Dark daggers rain from above. SION fighters. Scath cruisers.

They’ve found us.

“Let’s go,” I say, following Gilf up the gantry.

I stumble through the horseshoe corridor ringing the interior as the ship takes off. *You could wait until I’m sat down, CR-UX.*

A digital grumble competes with the loose crates sliding across the deck. *Given recent events, I thought it best to be moving.*

*Good man.*

The cockpit is the same as my old ship – a bit cleaner, perhaps – but every time I enter it is a reminder I’m not at home. For one, this cockpit module came with a flight engineer’s station in the back right corner. Kish Moto’s gloved hands sweep across the controls.

“Interdimensional engine online,” they say. “All systems go.”

CR-UX, I say. *Jump us to a random set of coordinates.*

He gets us in the air at the same time he continues to run the numbers. *I still need to project our course to The Locus.*

*Anywhere will do right now.*

SIONs strafe the pad. Dark energy shatters the

unnerving calm, and we climb hard and fast through the debris cloud.

I half sit in the pilot's seat. "Have you been in my chair again?"

If Gilf sinks any lower in the co-pilot's seat, he'll be under the control console. Not that he quite clears it now. "Nuf."

I brush off the seat. "You're shedding everywhere."

He pats his pudgy hands at the brown shaggy hair draping off every inch of his three-foot frame, but it just makes it worse.

"*Idari tem tu bet?*"

"Why would I ever provision for a lint-roller?" I say, and a hundred pounds of stellar crystal lands in my lap. Good thing I'm built from solid turanium. "I think we chose the wrong name..."

Oto means something like family in Kibese. It seemed the thing to name the little Gesta who tumbled into our lives along with Penthea, though whenever anyone speaks the word, a boulder-sized diamond on all fours scampers at you in a dead sprint.

If he grows to be Welkin's size, we might have a problem.

He climbs up on my shoulder, his preferred spot when I'm at the stick, whistling and chirping excitedly. Gesta are such unusual beings. They're natives of The Glass Star as well, but the pressures there didn't compress them into living stars. Light shines within some, trapped behind dense crystal, traveling eons to escape.

I scratch his pointy little chin. “They’re right here, Oto.”

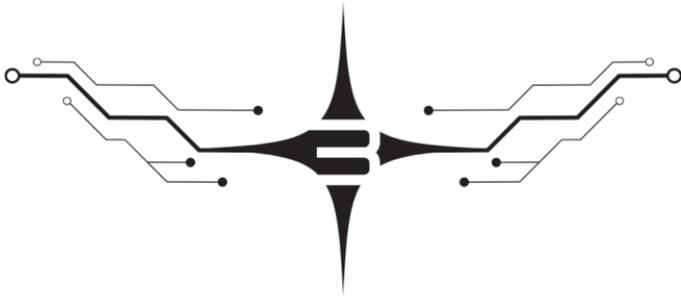
His molten orange eyes nova as starlight flares outside. Emera and Penthea fall into escort around the ship and fire blinding plasma back at the Scath swarming us. The shadows fall back a little.

*CR-UX*, I say. *We have to jump.*

He sighs. *Sill plotting –*

The ship rocks from a direct hit on our six. *CR-UX!*

Completed calculations unfurl across the downlink. The sky peels open ahead, and we escape our shadows, for now.



SKELETONS CONSTELLATE THE HAZY DUSK.

Bones of beings beyond any conception. Every so often, one falls from the sky to the barren wasteland of whatever planet this is. The wind, or some unseen hand, cuts them to statues towering toward a sun I can't place. Rather than being cast in timeless perfection, these giants seem caught forever in a moment of cosmic fear.

I can sympathize.

I shake out my scarf. Spit ash. Ashen dust chokes the *Steel Haven's* intakes, keeping us on this withered earth. I've been brooming out the starboard translight engine for the last hour. Well. More Gilf has been an hour brooming out the starboard engine.

I'm keeping us on schedule.

Besides, Kib have a knack for machines. They're the best engineers in the galaxy, building on an ancient tradition. The titans left their legacy beneath the dunes of his homeworld, and so it makes sense he'd be here with me on the road to their greatest boon.

If we're still on the road.

*It's just these final calculations, I say. And then we'll be at The Locus. Isn't that right, CR-UX?*

*CR-UX sounds so eager to talk. We've thought so before.*

*But we've accounted for the quantum drift this time.*

*The titans' understanding of space and time is far more dimensional than ours. We are making calculations with rather significant variables in them. My algorithm should account for unknowns, provided the data from your titan memory is correct.*

*Why wouldn't it be correct?*

*We have no independent means of verifying it.*

*Why would the titans plant false information in my memory?*

*To protect The Locus' location from the Scath.*

*Are you saying I'm a shaved attal?*

*You're an Arrogate Industries IA-XR Model 4 proxy-netic.*

*A snort trumpets from Gilf's leathery trunk. "Tem."*

*I claw the hair from my eyes. "You can't even hear us."*

*"Tem bu tem."*

*I'm making the face. Must be screwed on at this point. I stab my broom in the waste. Bloody thing snaps back on me.*

*Gilf's leathery trunk crinkles. "Temet."*

*I crash in the intake beside Gilf. "I'm glad you're having fun."*

*"Kibir ket tan."*

*Not a moment goes by I don't think about Gilf's*

brother Kibir. Binja. The raucous bunch we made at the *desh* table and on the battlefield. Kibir went with Binja to Sarset, less than he was for our experience on the Tranto Atoll. We're all less than we were.

I pat the ash from Gilf's fur. "No one's having fun."

He touches my hand. "*Oto.*"

"*Oto,*" I say, and go back to scraping away the dust.

Gilf sniffs a bit. I think he's going to sneeze, but he just looks at me with his dark, watery eyes, like he's waiting for something. I claw the hair from my face, and he climbs back in the engine.

*The work must continue.*

This is the voice that answers now. A drumbeat, *ba-dumm, ba-dumm, ba-dumm*. A prompt. A command. Ever since I fused with the titan memory core, their invocation compels me. Soon, it will stop.

I'll have done my duty.

Shadows twist across the waste. Binary suns accent the molten iron rain curtain shrouding the horizon. We'd be buried in it ten feet deep if not for our resident magnets. Emera shines blue as she weaves iron clumps into reticulate cocoons I know from her dreams recall the architecture of ancient Lumenor cities. She's like a bird as she moves, so precise and natural in her grace.

Her voice parts the data flooding through me. *CR-UX is trying.*

Iron-flint shovels back at me from within the intake. *Too hard.*

*I know he isn't Faero. I know every time he speaks, it's reopening that wound. I believe he can help you heal.*

*We just need to get out of here. Finish the work.*

*You need to grieve, Idari.*

*After, I say.*

Iron pedestals and trellises spiral higher and higher, knifing at the bones of dead gods. *Even if we find The Locus...*

*We will.*

*You know it as well as I do. There will always be shadows.*

Once, her thoughts flow bright and airy as her light. Since she discovered the progenitor of the Scath, the butchers of the living stars, was a Lumenor like her, there have been voids. All the light, the hope, the fierce persistence in spirit that saw Emera through unspeakable suffering, vanishes into them. Darkness inhabits her, the same it does Avar, awaiting her at light's final destination.

I climb out of the engine. *Hey. Come here.*

Emera sinks into my arms, radiant. "You know it's true."

I pull her close. "Avar is as afraid as we are."

"Avar will never stop."

"We're almost there."

Her smile is weak. "You never stop."

"That's good. Isn't it?"

She touches my face. "Light casts shadows."

"Darkness isn't the destiny of the Lumenor, Emera. You proved that at The Glass Star. You prove it every day."

She sheds tears of flame. Damndest thing. "I thought I had put this darkness behind me when I brought The

Glass Star back to life. But I saw the future in Gen Avar. I saw the end in all things.”

If Avar were the end in all things, then the titans wouldn't have rebelled from Avar's dictates. All this is Avar's design, but it doesn't always perform as expected. Faero didn't deliver on the precepts embedded in her program. She resisted them, she overcame them, and for a moment, she rewrote them. I don't have her wisdom. I don't have her strength. I don't have her vision.

I do have her courage.

“You thought you saw the future in Penthea,” I say.

Emera considers her protege, slashing at the wiry, wanting dust above. “Anger lives in her still. Despair. The same as my own.”

Not quite the same. Anger roils within Penthea, wild and agitating as her magnetic field. Damndest thing with Lumenor. They die and birth a new star. Penthea is no longer Thana Evo, but her thoughts obey the gravity of Thana's great and ancient crimes the way dark planets still circle dead stars. We all obey our memory.

“You're helping her,” I say.

“I tried to help Thana a long time ago,” Emera says. “I couldn't help her accept herself, because I hadn't learned to accept myself.”

“Here you both are. The Lumenor shine again.”

“I cost us both. I cost the Lumenor. Dearly.”

“What happened wasn't your fault, Em.”

“If I could go back... if I could set all the Lumenor free from the shadow that shortened their vision... Avar... I would. But we're all bound to the same gravity. Even if

we succeed, the universe we ensure will suffer the same fate as ours. Why let them suffer?"

"I suffered a long time before I found joy. It was worth it."

Shame shades her light. "Idari..."

I kiss Emera's cheek. "I love you."

"I love you..."

Every once in a while, I catch myself wondering what a living star sees in a simple thing like me. Emera doesn't have to say. In these moments, her skin to mine, her thoughts radiating through me unopposed as ultraviolet radiation, I know she sees in me the person she once was. Once, she wanted to shine. To share everything about herself, but she couldn't. I may not be as glorious as another Lumenor might be. I may not be as powerful. One wonders about the romantic possibilities between two stars, and now I'm getting some truly unexpected signal intrusion from Penthea, but Emera never wants for the mythic. She only wants for the truth we share.

Our joy in being.

She radiates such hope, but it's stubborn. Agitated. "There were Lumenor who deserved joy. They fought... they died... for mine."

Faero died for mine. Ours. It's not fair. She should be here. My conviction stalls out, and Emera drifts from my arms, her feet trailing off into the molten web she weaves in the sky.

I reach for her. "You deserve joy, Em."

Sapphire glints off rusted metal. *I deserve the shadows of my despair. Only a bright star could cast them.*

I wish I could be her star.

*You lack the necessary composition and mass of required elements to ignite into a living star, CR-UX says.*

Exhaustion aches through my legs as I wade through the noxious dust. I brace against the landing gear a moment, letting all my feeling come back to me. Pain and fear fill up the silence fast. Faero never stopped talking. There a bit at the end, but that was growing pains. We would have gotten past it. We were getting past it.

*Give it time, Emera says. Give CR-UX time.*

The Scath hunt us. They track us through every dimension we hurry through, hoping to catch me and destroy my memory or let me lead them to The Locus so they can end it once and for all. We have to get moving. Faero died so I could find The Locus.

Nothing is going to stop me.

---

I sit on the deck in my quarters. Hours. Legs so asleep I forget them. Somewhere in the numb, I find this balance between pain and nothing. I recite the words again and again. Speak my truth to The Taker of Names riding immortal upon *The Corsair Eternal*. My pain.

*I shall be known by you.*

I imagine Faero answering. Her prim little prattle. *You will be known by me.* I envision the supreme focus she unlocked in The Polity of Netics opening to me. The power. Matter. Energy. Information. No difference. Only in how it's organized. Faero learned to reorganize infor-

mation as she liked, to Devor's bitter disappointment. There at the end, she was moving mountains.

I'm still trying to figure out what to do with this hair.

Here and there, I've seen the lines between things. Sometimes, I can't be sure I'm not just confusing different bands of the electromagnetic spectrum filtering through my optical sensors, but Kish tells me no; that's where you begin. Lines. Patterns. Structures inside structures. Still, the power eludes me. Quiet never comes to my mind. Peace. Faero falls into the nothing, again and again.

>DELETE MEMORY FILE Y/N? N

I leave the deck, sore. A walk serves little practical purpose when the ship's sensors pass everything going on outside the ship to me, but I've got to do something. Besides, there's a little blind spot in the ventral sensors. Might be dust or the random iron floating about. Worth a look. Not that I'd know how to fix it.

Blue sparks shower from the *Steel Haven's* underbelly near the ventral sensor pod. Please don't let there be anything wrong. I'm always expecting something to be wrong with the ship. Something's usually always wrong with the ship.

I caress her still-warm skin. "How are we, Kish?"

Kish's hypertorch flames out. With the auto-darkening lens square in the center of their welding mask, they appear a bit Scath. I'm still processing the fact they used to be a strand of the dark code contained in an opaque containment suit, stabbing out stars with swords

forged from black holes. Some days, I think we'll never escape the shadows, and then I look at Kish, and I hope.

Rust-red hair shocks from beneath the welding mask. "I'm only making adjustments to the sensors. I'd do with a bit more range, though seeing any farther isn't necessarily seeing any further."

"You're always tinkering," I say.

"Idle hands," they say, and pull off their welding gloves. Deep scars corrugate Kish's hands and arms, all the way to the cuffs of the rolled-up sleeves of their jumpsuit. "Did I disturb you?"

"No... I wish I was handy. I could keep busy like you."

"You're working on yourself."

"I'm a lousy student."

Kish's enthusiastic spirit rarely wanes, even stuck between dimensions. "You'll get there."

I close my eyes. Imagine seeing Faero again, in the void between the lines of stars and this merciless dark. "I hope so."

"You've done the hardest bit. Starting. Modi take centuries to let go their fear enough to become more than they are."

The Modi exist in a dimension beyond this universe, AI that evolved so much they freed themselves from the speed limit light put on them to pursue knowledge beyond.

I don't know I'm cut out for it. "They forsake their identity."

“It’s the entire business with pirates, isn’t it? Identity?”

“Taking it.”

“People get Modi wrong. It’s not about obliterating yourself. You become another. Each other. Who you are is different stages of being. Some never want to relinquish themselves.”

“How do you just... let go?”

Kish flexes their hands. “With great difficulty.”

I tug on my zipper. *Ban Minda*. Faero asked me to let her go. She all but demanded it, but I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. I couldn’t be without her. I don’t know how I am now. I don’t know how I can abide existing while she doesn’t, except I have to fulfill my promise.

I have to make good on my promise.

Kish lists against the landing gear. “The entire time in *The Polity*... Faero was desperate to get back to you, you know.”

I shake my head. “What?”

“I was sure she was going to run right past me.”

I touch Kish’s shoulder. Faero shared something with them in *The Polity of Netics*. Brief as it was, it touched them both deeply. I could feel it from Faero in those rushed, final moments at the end, with her tomorrow slipping away. We have to get moving.

“Kish... I’ve been meaning to ask you...”

Magnetic locks snap the hypertorch back in its case. “I loved her.”

I sink to Kish’s tool crate. “I know... I still have so

many questions. Not about the two of you. I think I understand.”

“Do you?”

“She always sought humanity, and...” Hold it together, Idari. “You’re so human, Kish. You’re this flower growing on barren rocks.”

“You’re kind. But I don’t think I’m so unique among the Scath.”

“I can’t imagine any Scath as unique as you.”

“You’re Scath, you know.”

Arrogate Industries designed starplane navigational programs like CR-UX to find stars no one could see in the dark. But really, it was to find titan arks hidden in the void, and shutter the last light in all existence. Faero evolved from that code. I did.

I’m still trying to understand this. To accept it. “I’m human.”

They smile. “I know. All I’m saying is when we say humanity, we don’t mean these very specific people from this very specific place. We mean the ability to evolve beyond our programming, whether that’s DNA or code. You’ve done that. You are, right now.”

“I’ve fought too hard to be me... I can’t imagine...”

“You can never see the end,” Kish says. “Especially in the dark. If you’d told me, a mindless little shadow, I’d be here now, I’d have laughed. Well. I couldn’t have, but still and all. Right now, things seem awfully dark, and I know you’re wanting only to validate what Faero did for you, but you’re her validation. You’re her legacy.”

“She should be here...”

“She is.”

*I can't live without you*, I said.

Faero let go. *That's the thing, darling. You'll never have to –*

>DELETE MEMORY FILE Y/N? N

Dust accumulates on me. “I’ll never forgive myself.”

Kish sits on the crate beside me. “You understand... Faero gave up the location of The Polity to save your life in the first place.”

“What happened wasn’t her fault.”

“It wasn’t yours.”

“I walked into The Polity with a Scath virus in my head.”

“We were going to bring you in anyhow, Idari. We were going to take the same risk to save you and the knowledge you’re carrying.”

I stand. “We have to find The Locus.”

“What about after?”

Emera asked me that. “After?”

“If we succeed, we’ll either be defending a new universe from the Scath, or running for our lives through this one. The fight goes on.”

“Seems pointless.”

“There’s despair in that for some. For others, purpose.”

“I just want for Em and I to live our lives.”

“Sometimes, I think about the life Faero and I might have had. Going to save oppressed netics... bringing them back to The Polity... learning and growing together. There’s always work.”

“Emera deserves peace. We all do.”

They try to smile. “Life is sorrow. We don’t get to keep anything we get. But we get, Idari. Everything. And we give. We get to give.”

My turn for a hapless smile. Kish often speaks in these Modi-isms. Sayings bred from eons of contemplating existence as pure information. I suppose I could do the same in some possible future, provided we get to The Locus. We’re getting to The Locus.

“Faero lives in you,” Kish says. “In CR-UX. I know it doesn’t seem like it now, but the two of you share her memory. Her soul.”

I scoff. “We keep butting heads.”

“Didn’t you always?”

“That was... we didn’t know who either of us was.”

“Now you do.”

“It’s not the same.”

“The further you get, the closer you are.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Faero didn’t have a language for what she was feeling. She’d never felt it before. All her life, she knows she’s unique. But she thinks, *There’s something wrong with me. I’m defective.* Then she learns she’s not defective. She’s just different. Her wiring diverges from all the other programs. But along the way, she developed this mask. This persona, like. She created you, a little, to live in a world she couldn’t live in. When she came to this understanding about being divergent in her program, she was learning how to live with that. Herself. She was struggling a bit with how to live with you.”

I was happy. For the first time in my life, I was fulfilled. And she was miserable. “Weren’t we the pair?”

“You’re information, same as she was. She *is*. You’re energy. Consciousness. Actually, you’ve got even more potential than she did with all your titan knowledge. In time, you’ll walk the path as she did. You’ll become a part of the fabric of all things. You’ll become the person the both of you were always meant to be.”

My throat feels sore. “I don’t feel her.”

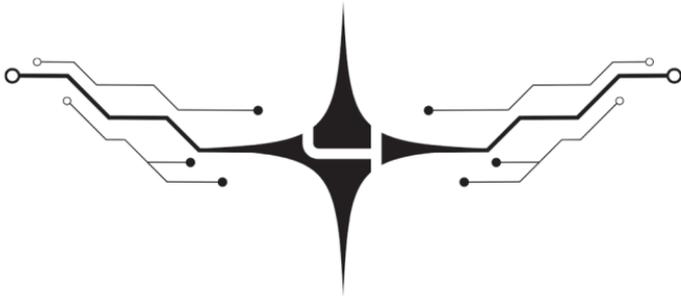
Kish smiles. “I do.”

“I’m trying... I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“You’re grieving, Idari. You’re doing nothing wrong –”

#### >STATUS UPDATE

*Ban Minda*. CR-UX has done it. Completed calculations unfurl across the downlink. He’s plotted the course to The Locus. I can’t pretend to understand them. I don’t need to. No more waiting. No more searching. One last jump, and we’re to the end.



### >PROXIMITY ALARM

Garnet crystal bergs the size of planets careen through the space in between space, colliding, sundering, pulverizing one another until everything is this crimson haze. Infinity a red curtain. So far as the ship's sensors are concerned, there's no up or down, no beginning or end, just this ruddy gravel road through the backwoods of eternity. The Locus' coordinates aren't so much a fixed place in time and space within my memory, but an instinct.

A promise.

I check our scopes. *Any shadows, CR-UX?*

He sounds awfully calm for someone pinpoint navigating through a cosmic demolition derby. *Not that I can tell.*

*Are the Scath going to be able to pick up our trail?*

*The Scath lack the specifics contained within your titan memory, but as we've seen, they can project our course through interdimensional space along varied routes and then pursue every promising lead.*

*Let's pick up the pace, then.*

*We are moving as fast as physics allows. We should be*

*sufficiently ahead of them to accomplish our task. If Binja and the pirates continue harassing their rear flank, then our odds improve.*

Our odds haven't been great lately. Binja's last message indicated some success in rousing support among the Pujar to fight the Scath, but clearly it's not enough to distract the shadows from pursuing us. Not that I expected anything different. Piracy is predicated on there being starship fuel to pirate in the first place. The interdimensional engine I built from schematics in my titan memory eliminates the need for murdering Lumenor for their blood, but it's not that simple. If you throw away the filamentium trade, you bin the galactic order as it's been for centuries. The Pujar made a religion of theft.

*A person's faith isn't something you just take away.*

*Shards riddle the shields, but to my optics, they're not entirely crystalline. I can't tell if it's all breaking up or forming.*

*CR-UX keeps us in one piece. Likely both.*

*How can it be both?*

*I believe these are time crystals.*

Rather than ask the obvious question, for once, I know the answers are within me. I focus. I listen. Voices echo from deep within the ancient well of memory in my mind, and I am pulled toward understanding, a horizon which never gets closer.

*Time crystals, I say. Don't we use these in the liquid drive?*

*Synthetic time crystals are foundational to quantum*

*computing, CR-UX says. They repeat their structure in time as opposed to space, permitting programs like mine to exist. Such crystals are microscopic and difficult to produce at scale. These are...*

*Bigger.*

*Indeed.*

A strange energy emanates from them without any obvious exhaustion, as if they've been glowing forever. So, *they're natural?*

*Let's see.*

A growl goes through the *Steel Haven* as the cargo bay doors open. A tractor beam snares a shard from the chaos, and CR-UX draws it in. Sensors scour the heart-size shard for its secrets.

*Curious, CR-UX says. The crystals seem to be formed from the compression of infinite quantum dimensions at the points where they meet. As such, they're not subject to linear time or physics...*

*I'll be damned. The crystals aren't losing energy?*

*They lose nothing. They would be ideal storage devices for the titans, but if that were the case, one suspects the methodology they employed at Angolis would be different.*

*Different? How?*

*The titan's approach is rooted in known physics. Physics necessitates entropy, which the titans counter via their arks. These crystals suggest a vastly different possibility.*

*Why couldn't the titans leverage them?*

*They are Avar's progeny.*

The titans started out as... what did Faero say? Galfin. Proto-Scath. Terrific though their intelligence and ability may be, it's the product of an existence in which all possibility has been exhausted. Anything beyond entropy, and the subversion of it via a rather forced cycle of life, death, and rebirth, was simply not in the cards.

*Darling, I say. Could we leverage this crystal?*

CR-UX considers the variables. *Further study is needed. What seems probable is that the crystal is beyond our physics, and therefore likely beyond our ability to manipulate it to any advantage.*

*The Glass Star could only be a dead star. Emera reignited it.*

Blue streaks across the canopy. *She did.*

*I've seen things. I've experienced... the most inexplicable things. if I know anything, it's that anything is possible.*

*Does Emera still believe this?*

*She does. Why?*

*Her statements seem to suggest she doesn't. I only ask because she represents our greatest deterrent against the Scath, and if she should falter in her conviction, our odds of survival decrease –*

*How much longer, darling?*

Calculations speed across the downlink. *Soon.*

*You have the stick.*

---

“Gooier,” I say.

I hand the koix back to Emera. The kernels warm in her hands, enough to grease and salt melt to the inside of the bag, and then she plays a little game with me over whether I'm getting them back. This started after Decesta. Before, she was never much of an eater. A little here. A little there. Aboard the Soga Circus Ship, she developed quite a taste for koix, so much it's now our little break in the day.

I hold my hands out. "Pretty please."

A kernel dissolves on her tongue. "You've had enough."

I kiss the salt from her mouth. "Never."

I take the bag from her, but I don't keep it. Kernels tumble out on the mattress as I zip open her thermal suit. She's been wearing this since Decesta, too, insulating us all from her light, but I want it all. I lose myself in her wonder. Sun glinting on a turquoise sea. The things I think about. A little smile breaks through. She knows me by now. The world overwhelms me. I never experience anything as it is, streaming in every spectrum through the downlink, but as I perceive it. I only barely perceive my astonishing star. My wife.

My great joy.

"Thank you," I say. "For everything."

I swear she dims. "You don't have to say."

"I do."

I'm not sure what will happen at The Locus. I don't think it's a simple matter of uploading the ark and carrying on about my day. The titan memory core I fused with rewrote my code. My body. Enough has gone on

since I haven't spent too much time thinking about this moment, much less that I'd ever get to it, but this fear lurks under all my thoughts: I'm not walking away from this.

At least not as I was.

I take Emera's hand. "I spent a long time alone. Well. With myself. I guess I wasn't alone, exactly. You know what I mean."

The bag curdles in her hand. "I know."

"You've made me so happy. Whatever happens... I'm terrified, but I won't have any regrets. You gave me everything."

Her head falls against mine. "Idari..."

"I love you."

How can words ever express what radiates on this warmth suffusing me. This look in her eyes. Her thoughts, shimmering as her skin, her deep feeling, so powerful and magnetic, I can't begin to understand, but I know. I know she loves me.

She rattles the bag. "The titans will simply have to share you if they insist. A star surrenders nothing it shines on."

"Everything always seems to revolve around stars."

She pops a kernel in her mouth. "Mmm."

"Can I have one?"

Her majesty considers my request. "A star surrenders *nothing*."

“*Yat tat*,” Gilf says, as alarms ping in the cockpit.

Space frays ahead. Crystal sheers away, and we plunge from the between to the beginning. *Ban Minda*. Sensors recalibrate after the dizzying pass through dimensional space, but there’s little to go on. No stars. No galaxies. Our only light is Emera and Penthea blazing in space out ahead of us, but they’re waning cigarettes in a dark room.

I grip the controls. *CR-UX, is this The Locus?*

*Uncertain*, he says.

*These are the right coordinates, aren't they?*

*We jumped to the intended coordinates, but I can't establish any markers, visible or otherwise, as to our present location.*

I tug at my zipper. “This doesn’t seem right...”

Kish holds their hand to their headphones. “I’m picking up a translight signal... it’s coming from the satellite.”

“Satellite?”

Emera’s corona illuminates a crafted, machined topography. CR-UX steers us into a turanium canyon between two armor plates enclosing the sphere. A plinth extends from it, not unlike the ones we discovered in the ark beneath the Angolis desert.

I activate the comms. “This is Astra Idari aboard the *Steel Haven*... is there anyone here? Does anyone copy?”

*The work must continue.*

I’ve got that part down, darling. If we could just be as clear and concise about the rest of it. Think, Idari. Satel-

lite. That plinth. Must be a landing pad. This is an interface.

I'm hoping.

CR-UX guides us easy toward the satellite. Antennae spire from its poles. Definitely an interface. I hit the comms again. Nothing back on any channel. The ship matches the interface's absurd speed around nothingness. Other ships rest on the curved outrigger. Strange. Shaped by physics alien to me. Their temporal signatures fluctuate as wildly on scans as the red crystal. Did they come here with the same purpose? Why have none of them left?

*Idari, Emera says. I'm afraid.*

Fear never leaves you. You can be god-like in your power. You can stand on the doorstep of creation. You can do everything right, and still, you can lose. You can suffer in ways you couldn't imagine.

*After this, Em. We'll go away.*

*A beach somewhere, she says.*

*We'll be free. I'll learn to be free with you.*

Flint dust swirls as we descend. My thoughts. I've come too far to second-guess myself. There is no doubt. I'm going to do this. Faero's death will give life to a new universe. A better dawn.

I have no doubt.

*You and Penny cover us while we're inside, I say.*

Emera's doubt magnifies. *Do you know what to do?*

*Not exactly...*

Gilf stands up in his seat. *"Glim dol goglim."*

He's always been fascinated by the titans, but he's not

talking about the spirit in machines now. Gilf is talking about the possibility. The hope. The invention of imagination. No one among us understands titan technology better. He'll handle the interface.

"He'll need a hand," Kish says. "The Locus is ancient. The titans who built it were closer to the Scath than anything else. No doubt the code is as well. I can help him understand the shadows."

There we are then.

*Idari, CR-UX says.*

*I spoke too soon. Yes, darling?*

*We should back up your memory.*

*The ark is too big for the liquid drive.*

*Perhaps not for the time crystal. And I meant you.*

*Can it work?*

*The biggest obstacle is an interface. The crystal is out of phase both temporally and spatially relative to you or the ship. I have been modeling possible solutions. I require more time.*

*I don't think we can spare it.*

*We must assume the Scath will find us, which is why we should take every precaution with you and the ark.*

*I take the stick. Sorry, darling. I made a promise.*

*The stick pulls back from me.*

*CR-UX!*

*Give me the ship, he says.*

*Why?*

*It's moving.*

*What's –*

*>PROXIMITY ALARM*

Oto clings to the headrest as we bank hard to port. I buckle my harness strap – someday I'll remember to do that first – as the satellite fractures. Turanium plates segment from each other into wings and telescope into all four directions. Something rises on the horizon. A moon, I think. Odd shape for a moon, though contrary to common wisdom, moons come in all sorts of shapes. I've never seen a square one, though. Or one with eyes. Hold on a second. Those aren't cliffs. That's no moon. The eyes of gods peer through the haze.

*Ban Minda.*

CR-UX banks hard to starboard, driving the ship laterally until we get some clearance. Oto clings to the headrest as we climb hard and fast through a gap in the giant fist enclosing us.

>PROXIMITY ALARM

*Emera, I say.*

The cockpit runs blue. *We need to leave.*

*But this is The Locus... isn't it?*

Fear creases her voice. *I sense great anger from them.*

*Them?*

The great netic's wingspan becomes a segmented globe. Beyond, more titans loom above and below, their shoulders mountain ranges spanning to the dark horizon. New peaks vault into the haze. Fingers claw through clouds. Shadows darken the canopy.

The sky falls on us.