



# Chapter 21: The Burden of Solitude

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A 10,000 Dawns Tale

“What the hell is this?”

“Er, Atlantis base I just covered that, keep up.”

“No, you’re on Titan. With Dogs that should have died literally centuries ago. How.”

“How do you know they’re the same dogs?” Heinrich chimed in.

“They’re the same dogs.” June and Graelyn said in unison, which seemed to piss both of them off slightly, “The dogs both had a distinctive mark on their left flank, its there.” Heinrich hadn’t been looking, but yes, yes there was. Some letter of the Cyrillic alphabet.

“Is it really surprising they’re the same dogs? I mean, you know what’s going on here don’t you?”

“I clearly don’t, miss.... Scythes. So I’d appreciate if you’d stop talking down to me.” Graeylin looked disappointed, and ran her hand along her tightly pony-tailed hair, her pin glinting off the bright lights.

“Oh. Oh well.” She made a sort of dismissive gesture to no one in particular.

“Its pretty obvious we’re not from here though at least? I’m sorry you didn’t figure out we were from the future.”

“...What?” Heinrich said.

“The future. You know, that time that’s not now but yet.”

“I know what the future is.”

“Are you sure? Regardless, you got here just in time.” She turned abruptly, and started walking down the silver, gray, and green hallway.

“In time for what?” June called.

“We’re going to be facing away from the solar system in a moment, and since it’s the year 2227, it should happen again.”

“Stop teasing us. What?”

“We should encounter another extra-solar object. Only not like any you’ve seen before. Follow me.”

They obliged her, what else could they do, “and take off those bulky things this place is airtight with the best fake gravity money can buy, you just look ridiculous.” She pushed her glasses up into the bridge of her nose and kept walking. The man called Archimedes sighed, and squatted down to pet one of the dogs, “Sorry about that, she’s usually pretty snippy when people can’t keep up with her.” June nodded, and followed Graelyn down the hallway, she and Heinrich removing their helmets and gloves as they went. The facility varied between being gray silver and green, or gray silver and blue depending on the area they passed through though neither June nor Heinrich could particularly figure out why. Graelyn kept her eyes forward, with a supreme aura of confidence that moved beyond self esteem and into superiority. Parts of the place looked as though they had been ransacked, with knocked over tables and chairs, smashed computers, and broken mugs and glassware every which way. The walls were sometimes stained with what looked horribly like brown dried blood. Graelyn kept walking till she arrived at an open room with a big table in the middle displaying a very high quality hologram of Titan and the space surrounding it. Floating next to it in the air was a timer, that appeared to be ticking down. The rest of the room was lined with scientific equipment of all varieties, some recognizable (a seismograph, microscopes, flasks and Bunsen burners) and some that were utterly foreign (a strange device that appeared to be a floating silvery orb that shifted into geometric shapes while a panel under the floating orb displayed a seemingly random number with every shift) but the purpose of the room was fairly obvious: it was a lab and command center in one. It was also fairly messy, but in that way a room looks when someone is a clean freak but hasn’t had the time to clean up properly but still forced an effort at it.

“You want an explanation to what’s going on? I’ll give you one.”

“Aren’t you curious who we are?” Graelyn shook her head to June’s question.

“Not in the slightest. I know who you are, because I knew you were going to arrive here. I’m from the future remember? You meet me and write all about it. Though dare I say, you kind of left out some of the awkward bits.” She waved her hand and pulled up a model of their ship.

“If I’m correct, you have a WeN-D model AI on board correct?”

June nodded, “that’s right.”

“Could you patch her through your suit’s speakers? I know she’s already listening in.”

Heinrich was surprised June followed the request without question; he really didn’t understand what June was doing. She clearly didn’t trust either of these people, but seemed to be willing to go along with them. Archimedes finally entered, carrying a dog under either arm in an unintentionally condescending show of strength. WeN-D’s voice then crackled in, “Hello?”

“WeN-D, welcome to Triton.”

“Thank you, Miss Scythes.”

“Now WeN-D, you should find the list of codes to jack into this building’s mainframe in the Folder labeled F22 on your G drive, correct?”

“That’s... How is that correct?”

“Log in, this will make things easier.” Graelyn waved her hand through the hologram, and it shifted again, the colored light shimmering on her cat pin. The hologram showed a team of people in a clothing style that clearly hadn’t been created yet. Graelyn was there, though she looked younger, and more optimistic. “This is the team who worked on Project Atlantis. Officially, we were attempting to build underwater cities in the deep ocean. Unofficially, we were attempting to use the natural high pressure of the deep ocean on earth to facilitate experiments by our CEO, John Aril. He had a theory that there had been experiments in an alternate reality by another version of himself to create and manipulate tears in the fabric of reality in order to travel to or remove things from alternate realities.”

June grimaced, “I’d say that’s impossible, but you’re here.”

“Well, we’re from an alternate reality, so clearly it can happen. We’ve managed to get into your reality, just in the wrong time... But I’m getting ahead of myself.” Arch set the dogs down, and they walked over to the table and lay down in front of it. Graelyn didn’t pay particular attention.

“Unfortunately, as it turned out not only was the experiment on our end not ready, but neither was the one being worked on in the other universe, which by the way did exist and Aril was totally right about. Also, we weren’t the first people to try hopping realities, and there seemed to be a sort of... Inter reality travel regulation group. An image appeared of a man in black robes wearing a ring with an arc emblem on it, or maybe it was just a sideways “C”. “They didn’t react kindly to our jaunting around, and the experiment went even worse than anticipated. We’ve been wandering around alternate realities for a while now, before ending up in our your time stream and... well, getting stuck there to. But this time is different, because in a way I’ve always known I’d meet you, June. I’ve been waiting a long time.” Graelyn pulled off her cat pin, holding it up to the light, and Heinrich noticed the obvious thing he’d been missing all this time: it was the same cat pin June was wearing, and the same one in the hologram.

“That isn’t right though, you’re not supposed to have the pin are you?”

“Am I? Sorry, its very hard to get the timing on these things right.”

June paced around the table, stepping over the sleeping dog. “This has been all ready for so long, all these coincidences, all waiting for this year in this place for both of us to be here.” Graelyn nodded, “I’m afraid on that matter you know more than I do, I only know what was told to me.”

Heinrich looked between the two women, they were staring each other down.

“Okay, you two clearly are in cahoots somehow, and I want in. You’re keeping stuff from me, you’ve been keeping stuff from me this whole time apparently June, and I’m done with it. Tell me what on Earth is going on.” June sighed, “Heinrich, this isn’t the first time I’ve seen Graelyn.”

“You’ve met before?”

“No, she’s met me. I’ve never met her before.” Graelyn clarified.

“But you knew you were going to meet her?” Graelyn nodded again.

“God, okay, so.... Time travel is possible... Second question: this base has been here a long time if the dogs have survived, so how have you survived?”

Graelyn ran her hand over her hair again, and closed her eyes. She looked like she was listening to a

sound only she could hear. "Because for Arch and I we've only been here a few days, and this base isn't always here... It comes and goes." Arch spoke again, "Yeah, basically this building has been here for a few days a really long time ago, a few days in the 1970's, and has been here for a few days now." "That also isn't possible..." Heinrich muttered.

"You'll see exactly how possible it is very soon. I'm afraid with your arrival, it means the 2227 cycle we're on is about to reach the point where its going to happen."

Heinrich crossed his arms, "What's going to happen?"

Graelyn lowered her spectacles on her nose.

She looked him right in the eyes.

She leaned in slightly.

The light of the hologram cut into her face, so her eye and cheek swirled with the seas of Neptune.

"What's going to happen," she began, "is first contact."

There are some things you can say that people instantly know the power of, statements that hold a weight beyond the seeming face of their characters. These are things with implications, bold statements that open up profound weight beyond the echo of their waves of the flow of their ink. This was not only one of those statements, but it was one to which there was no way to immediately respond. The words took up the next few minutes, though there wasn't anything else said. Anything Heinrich could think of saying didn't seem appropriate, like slathering jam on a rock. As time ticked on though, the importance of the weight whittled till he could finally espouse something, even if it was totally unbecoming of the weight of it all.

"So... Aliens?"

"Yes. Well, sort of. More like a probe. I can't tell you much about the future, but I can tell you that this won't be the last contact with Extra-solar beings we'll have. Of course, no one knows about this in the future. It's all locked away in the files of Heirum J. Whitehead's 'the Pilgrimage' group who you'll be reporting back to. But what we do here is still going to be important, and its going to influence the future in huge ways."

"And you knew about this, June?" She shook her head, "I didn't know all of that..." She looked at the hologram, "So what do we have to do?"

"Keep your spacesuits on. I'll be getting mine on in a second. Arch is fine as he is."

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They met Arch and Graelyn at the airlock. She looked kind of awkward in a spacesuit, the way people who weren't used to space do, bumping into corners, and expecting their reflexes to be faster. Arch looked just as imposing as always. "I'm still not sure of a lot of this... They haven't explained everything well, like why the building disappears and reappears as they claim it does."

"I know. And the only way we're going to learn is if we stick by them. I've been waiting a long time for this. Be patient. We'll get our answers."

WeN-D piped into their comms, "Er, hello, hi. I'm sensing some really weird things from space. You've almost rotated into a full-darkside position from Neptune. I checked, you're on the equator, so you'll be on the furthest point on the farthest place in our solar system. Whatever that means.

"Thank you WeN-D. Keep monitoring everything, we need someone who can analyze all the data we're getting."

"I'm on the job."

"Great." Graelyn pushed the button to open the airlock, and the four of them stepped in, leaving the two dogs whimpering behind them. The airlock shut, decompressed, and opened up into what was both the darkest and most brilliantly colored sky they had ever seen. With the light from the sun absent, it was darker than you can imagine, but the stars were bountiful in a way they had never seen. It wasn't that much further out as the scale of the universe goes, but it was enough. Above them a cathedral

ceiling of light lit their path, the dust they kicked up incense, the arbitrary point they walked towards their labyrinthian center.

WeN-D said the readings were increasing, and as the moon turned, the darkness and lights grew more and more, till where they stood was it, the farthest place and the furthest. And they knew it was, somehow. In their bones and in their blood they felt so distant and so put away from anything they had known. It was then in that distance that the sky opened up in a tear of fantastic blue and white, literally. For a moment they felt it wash over them, felt that there was something wrong with reality, that it was wounded, and from that wound shot out a silvery white ball, rocketing downward like a meteor. It should have impacted the moon, and tore up the ground, sending the four humans flying like bowling pins, or crushed them under dirt, rock, and ice. But instead it stopped 1.23 meters off the ground and hovered there for a moment. Its skin was silvery blue and crystalline, with white and faint black designs on it. The ball began moving, slowly this way and that way, always maintaining its height of 1.23 meters. Any noises it made were intransigent in the near vacuum.

The ball was, according to the measurements WeN-D took from the visual data, also 1.23 meters in diameter, and according to the same visuals was moving in the shape of an asterisk. It moved, out in one direction, and back in towards its center landing point. It did this over and over again, while the four (or five, depending on who you count as living) watched it.

“Should we attempt to communicate with it?” Heinrich asked.

June shook her head, “How on Eart- how could we?”

Graelyn was focused on it with a fixed stare.

“Is it from the Council Incursion?” Archimedes asked.

Graelyn nodded, “It’s some sort of probe. A scout.”

“Council Incursion?” Heinrich didn’t take his eyes off of the orb.

“Its in the future, don’t worry about it.”

“You mean there are more of these things?”

“No. There are it’s creators. That’s why this is important. This is the first shot, and whatever we do here is going to reverberate through history... A lot of histories, actually. Maybe we’ll capture it and gain a technical edge. Maybe it will report back on us and they’ll have plenty of tactical data in order to begin their assaults. Maybe it will just explode or something. I don’t know. But what I do know is its up to us, right at this moment to decide that with our actions.” The ball stopped moving in an asterisk.

“This isn’t your first time seeing something like this then. Tell us what to do.” Graelyn tried to ignore the clammy feeling she had as the bead of sweat rolled down her face, and the suit’s automatic systems blasted cold air there and began to absorb the moisture. The ball suddenly and silently dropped to the ground.

“Huh.” She muttered.

“First step, lets start running.” Archimedes said.

“I don’t see why Arch it hasn’t-“

Four legs popped out of the orb, right where some of the patterns on the shell had been. Its sharp feet pierced the icy ground as it barreled towards them.

“Oh dear.”

“Run- move move MOVE!”

“Why is it running with legs when it could float?”

“Don’t question the alien robot’s motivations Grae!”

“WeN-D we might need a pick up or something.”

“No! We need to trap it. It wants to learn from us, we have to sto-“ she tripped on a rock, and just as swiftly was pulled up by Archimedes large hand. “-p it from leaving here and we’re the best bait there is. Back to the base.”

They ran from it at breakneck speed, bounding and leaping in the low gravity. The orb seemed like it should have caught up with them, and June looked at Graelyn across the dark plain with a look of

indignation. Graelyn looked back, maybe her curiosity got the better of her, maybe despite her cool demeanor she was as terrified as she should have been. Whatever the reason her head turned, and her attention lifted up off the ground and floated to the charging orb kicking up moon dust. That was when she tripped a second time. It wasn't a graceful trip, like you'd see in the cinema, she didn't fall straight towards the dirt with a stunned expression on her face, arms ready for the fall: her ankle spun around more than it should have, and in the low gravity she not only fell but corkscrewed. As she spun her face came into view every other moment which gave her the effect of a cheap animation as her face became more and more shocked with every rotation. She hit the ground head first, and bounced. A hand reached out above her, and gently kept her from floating off. Instead she hovered there, face down, sinking slowly. The other hand attached to the person stabilizing her reached out the other direction, towards the charging orb. It stopped, inches away from him. A single leg lifted up, and seemed to gently poke him in the chest. It wasn't so innocuous for very long, as from under the curved fore part of the leg, silvery white tendrils that looked wound like rope slithered out, and began feeling around his chest. Archimedes tensed (it was him, of course it was).

June and Heinrich grabbed Graelyn and slid her into a standing position. The orb and Arch stared off, or something like starting each other off. If there had been sound, it probably would have been humming in an ominous pulsing way, but it was inappropriately silent instead. June pulled on Graelyn's hand, but she remained rooted in place, her eyes fixed on Archimedes.

"Arch?" She whimpered. She whimpered? She never whimpered.

"Uh, Grae?"

"Just hold still, you'll be okay." She said firmly, as though her resolve had never been shaken in her life. June took a hold of Graelyn's shoulder, and shook her head.

"How are you sure?"

"Trust me. I have your pin right?" Graelyn looked back at Arch, the tendrils were wrapping around his chest.

"They're trying to get inside my carapace Grae."

"Damn it." She tried to wipe her brow instinctively, but there was a helmet in between.

"Cut it. Cut the probes."

"What if that sets it off and it goes berserk?"

"Arch we'll deal with that, get free."

"We need to get back to the building."

"I'm not leaving Arch. I told him to get in front of it."

"I'll hold it off Graelyn, go."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Heinrich, grab her." June and Heinrich took Graelyn by the arms and pulled her back. She tensed at first, letting them pull her with light resistance as Arch became enveloped by the cables. Then something clicked inside her like a watch mechanism, and she turned with them, and moved as quickly as she could, hiding the wince in her breath as her twisted ankle hit the ground.

"WeN-D we need a pick up. Now." June basically yelled it into her comlink.

"Not the base?"

"Not the base." She told Heinrich.

Graelyn tried not to look back at Arch. She had never been the greatest partner to him, and she knew that. Her concern was generally beyond people, beyond things. If there was a clock, she could try to work out the things inside it by how it moved and sounded. She visualized the insides of people to, made guesses about what was going on inside them by any outer clues she could get. Where some people undressed people with their eyes, she skinned them. Today though, she could imagine the cords wrapping around him, squeezing his outer shell till the squishy bits inside burst. This image though wasn't fascinating, it made her stomach churn, and Graelyn tried to push back everything she'd been told as a child.

*...Is Arch gunna be okay? What will Graelyn do... and what is she pushing back? Find out next week on 10,000 Dawns! Same Dawn time, same Dawn place!*

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