

## Ensnared at the Roots: Sprouting

Bright lights shine down upon Elliot Romero, heating up the suit he's wearing, but hiding the eyes of the audience that is watching, but doesn't hide the thought that countless more are watching as he's being recorded. Sitting in his chair he looks toward the host of the show, a black furred, cream colored belly sergal with orange tipped furred ears and predatory green eyes that are currently filled more with curiosity than anything else. He gives a friendly smile, dressed even nicer than him, "The story of you and the crew with the pulsar star is unimaginable. The things all of you had to go through given such a dangerous situation is what legends are made of," he says in a clear-cut voice.

"You know, when you are in the heat of the moment, trying to simply survive? You're not thinking about what kind of story this will make or how exciting it will be. Nor do I think it was any one person who allowed us to get there safely. It was a group effort... Without us all working as one, I wouldn't be here today to tell you what happened."

"Yes, of course, no one here is saying that. But you are the only one who can answer the one question that is on everyone's mind."

Elliot's toes curl, heart racing, already knowing what is going to be asked of him, and the mere thought of it makes him feel off and strange, bothering him deeper than he lets out with his friendly smile to the host Kronas and the cameras.

"What was it like connecting to the Pflanze?"

"Ah... I'm sorry to disappoint but I feel a loss of words to describe exactly what it's like to be connected to a network of sentient plants. They don't see or really feel the world like we do. In one way I could say it's limited? But in other ways, getting a grasp of how they are together? It's far more expansive. I know it sounds contradictory, but it's the only way I think I could describe it. And to be fair and honest. I was not so focused on the experience but on keeping the ship in one piece. It was the end result of work from people far more deserving than I."

"A hero and humble," he replies.

Elliot smiles, nodding, doing his best to be in the spotlight. It's not the first nor the last interview he's had since returning back from the mission. A lot of the key members of the crew are put under the spotlight. That is all except for the Pflanze themselves. Their special status within the systems allows them to avoid the common society norms such as being famous or being hammered by the press. Quite often they are boring, and not worth looking into, but still wrapped in mystery, a mystery that almost no one thought about till word that someone connected to them got around.

Back in his hotel room, sneaking past nosey reporters still wanting to get more information about him and what happened, he closes the door behind him, leaning against the door frame, "It's been a month and they are still hounding me..." he mutters with a long drawn-out sigh, locking the door, before sliding down against the frame, huddling into the corner, listening to the silence that envelops him.

“So many people speaking yet none of them are talking. It’s all so separated. Alone,” he mutters, after some time he gets up, sauntering over to the mini kitchen, grabbing a hard drink, pouring himself a glass big enough for three shots of it, before slugging it down in one solid go. The burning liquid flowing down his throat, heating up his empty stomach, “It’s just not the same. It’s never the same,” he mutters.

The next day the alarm buzzes loudly. His head pounds, feeling like there’s a construction crew working in his head, he slams the clock knocking over a half drunk can of beer, sending it spilling onto the floor, “Ah fuck…” he grumbles, rolling out of bed, stumbling to the floor moments later, reaching up for the clock, which is still buzzing, knocking it over to the ground. His vision blurred, he pats around the device, eventually realizing, “Alarm Off.”

The alarm shuts off, he sighs, his vision steadily clearing enough for him to read the time, “Not late at least,” he grumbles, using the bed for leverage, making his way toward the bathroom, taking a shower.

He feels the hot water spray across his body, hitting his skin, feeling so good. Moments flash in his mind, the sensation of Pflanze feeling the water hit their leaves, flow to their roots, parching the sensation of thirst they had which was recognizable yet alien to his own experiences. The constant beating of the water provides a white noise for his mind to wander all over those moments, “It’s so quiet…” he mutters.

Getting out of the shower the lithe white skinned human with normally wild blond hair that is matted along his head, his blue eyes showing the strain over the past several weeks. He gently rubs his face, feeling the growing stubble, “At least I’ll be able to head back into work today. I really don’t need another interview. There are more important things for me to do,” he grumbles, preparing himself for the day.

He dresses decently, putting on a pair of sunglasses in an attempt to better hide his identity from the public, making his way to the local spaceport, moving through security with minimal issue, and having the highest civilian level clearance possible. Within the hour he’s whisked into orbit. From his chair he sees the brilliance of space appear before him, the horizon of the planet, the indomitable structures of technology across the surface. Sitting by himself he simply watches the world fly by, the shuttle making two separate stops at other stations till it heads straight toward his destination, one booked just for him.

A female human stewardess approaches him, “Do you need a drink or anything?” she asked.

Elliot is drawn out from his endless staring out of the window, turns to her, seeing her dressed in her black and blue uniform, “I’ll be alright, thank you,” he says, lowering his sunglasses to get a better look at her.

“Okay, if you need anything let us know,” she says, walking away, toward the other stewardess on the flight, he can just hear her mutter, “It is him. I saw him last night.”

“He’s not what I was expecting,” mutters the other stewardess.

“That’s how it always is with famous people,” she replies.

Elliot sighs, “Everything is just so...” he mutters, feeling an emptiness within him, watching the ship come into view, surrounded by a massive space dock structure. Machines big and small are busily working on the exterior of the ship. The damage that occurred from the pulsar can no longer be seen, “Don’t worry, we’ll make you good as new.”

The ship rumbles slightly, slipping into the docking port, “Thank you for flying Orbital Way Shuttlecrafts,” says the stewardess.

He grabs his luggage, smiling to her, “Thank you for your hospitality,” he replies, heading off. He follows through the connection port, bag in hand, seeing three friendly faces there to greet him. The large anthropomorphic red scaled male dragon with strong eyes, and even stronger wings, Thorphax. Beside him another dragon, silver in scales, hefty in bust up above and down below, but she pulls off her luscious shapes with style and professionalism, Nimbus, who’s draconic blue eyes show concern as well her prowess. Lastly the seemingly always tired, but still determined head researcher of the previous mission Dereck. His brown hair well-combed, brown eyed Caucasian male human, dressed in a matching professional black and white business suit of Nimbus’.

“Welcome back!” they declared.

Thorphax approaches him first, giving him a strong handshake, “You’ve been down there for over a week playing superstar, but we’re glad to have you back,” he says, giving him a tender smile, wings spreading.

“It’s good to be back. Being down there was more draining than what happened on the ship,” she chuckles, forcing a smile.

“More would have come but we’ve been busy working to get the ship back in working order, and those non-essential to the ship repair and retrofit are having a much-deserved couple of weeks off.”

“Yeah, I figured that would be the case, but thank you for coming.”

Nimbus approaches, giving him a big hug, “Of course sweetie. You took a lot of big risks, speaking of which, how are you feeling? Any residual effects?” she asks, getting nice and close.

“No, no, nothing new. And I’ve been sleeping much better. A little bit of time was all that I needed,” he replies.

“You haven’t been giving me any reports on your state since you left planet side. What we did was hobble together so quickly that we aren’t sure of the end results, but at the time we didn’t have the luxury to worry about safety,” she says, giving him a concerned look.

Elliot smiles, “I do appreciate the concern, but I’m fine. And thank you three for coming to see my arrival. I appreciate it. Seeing hordes of people who up until last month didn’t even know my name, fawn over me as some kind of hero? It was rather disconcerting.”

“For someone who likes to get to know everyone, to have everyone you don’t know, know you can be a bit of a twist,” says Derek, walking over, patting him on the shoulder, “Come. Let’s have something to eat and then we can get back to work. It’s lunch time for you, isn’t it?”

“More like brunch from where I woke up on the planet, but close enough,” Elliot replies with a smile.

“Good way to get you adjusted to space time,” says Thorphax, the group walking through the spaceport, seeing anthropomorphic races of all sorts milling about. The trails of purple grass and special walkways built into the structure, a Pflanze makes its way down the path, catching Elliot’s attention, his head following the plant while he walks forward.

“Elliot? Elliot? Yoo hoo, Earth to Elliot? Do you read?” asks Derek, waving his hand in front of him.

“Huh? Wha? Oh sorry, what were we talking about?” he asks.

Nimbus flicks her wings, “You zoned out for a good twenty seconds. I’m going to have to get some scans on you.”

He sighs, “We’ve done plenty of scans. Everything looked okay, didn’t they?”

“They appeared to be. I sent them to my colleagues, who better specialize in human brain structure, and they say it’s within expected parameters for your species, but who knows? There could be residual effects.”

“If it makes you feel better, I’ll do another set of scans, but really I’m fine. I’ve just been a little stressed with all that has happened, so fast, that I just need a little time to process it, but really now that I am away from that fame and glamor of something that frankly we should all share, not just me, I’ll be alright.”

Thorphax pats him on the back, “We know. Every interview you’ve stressed just how valuable everyone on the ship was, not just yourself. We notice and appreciate it. And you’re taking the bullet for us once again. I don’t think I could handle that spotlight. You get famous once as a dragon and it follows you for a long time.”

Nimbus replies, “I don’t mind some of the scientific fame that has come through my work, but I can agree. The popstar fame that you are getting, no thank you. Give me my lab any day over a recording studio.”

“In the end it’s good to have you back Elliot,” says Thorphax, giving him a gentle pat on the back, “Now let’s eat, I’m famished.”

Elliot smiles, “You know, now that you mention it. Lunch is a really good idea. Do they still have that one shop on the strip where they make those little swirling meat delights?”

Derek chuckles, “You’ve been gone for a week, not a decade, yes the place is there, and if that’s where you want to go, it’ll be my treat,” he looks to the group, “All of it on me.”

Nimbus’ eyes light up, “Really? And here I thought you were bothered by me,” she says with a draconic purr.

“You drive me crazy, but honestly you are one of the best people to be working with and I can’t imagine doing the next mission with anyone but you and our crew.”

“Awe hun that is so sweet of you,” she says, giving Derek a big old hug, her wings spreading out to almost encompass him.

“Ahh... remember to keep it professional,” remarks Derek, feeling her bust press up against him.

“Oh, right, right, sorry. I forget some of your human society boundary things.”

“It’s fine but let’s get something to eat. We have a long day still ahead of us.”

“Agreed,” says Thorphax, cracking his neck.

Elliot sits with the others; the smell of the cooked synthetic meats gave him a mixture of hunger and something else. He can’t put something about it that feels off, or perhaps good about it. A delight? He mentally shrugs it off, “Sorry I haven’t been able to keep up to date what’s going on with the ship. Mind letting me know what’s happening?” he asks, taking a long swig of water.

Thorphax takes a moment to think it over, “I don’t have the reports on me, I wasn’t expecting to start work already...”

“Sorry, but I want to get myself reaccumulated and really get back to work.”

He waves him off, “It’s fine. Well, the engines have been fully repaired, and the new technology we invented on the shield boosting against whatever the heck that pulsar was doing, will be implemented into our ship as a new test bed for the invention.”

Derek says, “It appears to be subatomic particles, copulated with dark matter and therefore dark energy. We’ll be keeping the heads back at home busy for years if not decades. Meaning Nimbus here we’ll get to see the end result of this event and still be early in her career.”

“You’re assuming we don’t solve the mystery together before you head out,” Nimbus says with a sly grin, wings fluttering, “But what I’m getting called into is what happened to Elliot. I try to talk to the Pflanze about their end of the experience, but they refuse to tell me anything. Have they said anything to you Elliot?” she asks curiously, chewing on a fry.

“Ah... well I haven’t talked to them since it all happened, but they haven’t said anything to me.”

“Shame. Knowing how they are talking about what happened.”

Thorphax speaks up, “They have only been helping with their key components of the vessel, still being a core with the navigational system, but we are installing the manual system to prevent the problem we’ve had. It’s costing the higher ups twice as much to refit the ship with this than what it would have cost. That’s the bureaucracy for you.”

Nimbus sighs, “Yeah, I really can understand that. They want us to learn and explore the galaxy but what about the budget? It can be infuriating, and I prefer not to play the politics, but spend time learning those mysteries, not smooching up to someone who only wants the knowledge, not the effort that it takes behind it.”

“Yeah, and sometimes they think if they throw enough money at the problem, it will go away, while at the same time *not* wanting to throw money at real problems,” remarks Derek.

“At least you only have to worry about one or two generations of people. We dragons if we slight one person we have to worry about their children’s children, especially if it’s a rather nasty slight. My great, great, great, great, great uncle still has to deal with a Scottish Clan because he fought on the side of the English during one of those wars. An entire CLAN, and those clansmen do get around.”

Nimbus nods, "I know. We really have to invest in the future in ways that I am still trying to wrap my head around. Why can't I just enjoy the lab and be done with it?"

"Lab life can be the easy life, despite the insanity of the difficulties of the mysteries we are in charge of unravelling," Derek chuckles.

Elliot continues to eat, looking at the conversation, watching, monitoring, seeing them converse with each other, with him, he responds as needed, but as he talks to them, there is something that he can't just escape from his mind, *"So alone. Disconnected. They are here with me, but really they aren't. There are walls between us. Unseen walls that prevent us from knowing exactly what the other is knowing, what they are feeling, secrets? That is what makes politics so dangerous, the not knowing the true motives of someone. But with them? It's all there, open, connected. Sharing of knowledge unlike anything I've ever seen. Even now when I sit with them I just..."*

"Elliot, what do you think?" asks Thorphax.

"Huh? Sorry, could you repeat the question, I didn't hear."

"I was asking if you'd think about another game of skee ball sometime? You know, a game without the chance of a giant pulsar star going supernova on us."

"I do like the idea. They do have a Zero-G room on the station. I don't think using the ship's would be a good idea while everything is being worked on and repaired. Is Jim still around?" he asks.

"He's out for another week or so, but so is Sylander. We'll need to find someone to replace them," says Derek.

"We'll find someone. Shouldn't be too much of a problem. But I don't know who will want to compete against me after the dazzling moves, I put up," Elliot replies with a sly grin.

Thorphax chuckles, "Don't be so sure about that, I gave you a run for your money, and Nimbus has been practicing, haven't you Nimbus?"

Nimbus' wings twitch, "Who says I've been practicing?" she asks, becoming all shifty eyes.

Derek chuckles, "You don't have to be as stereotypical nerd Nimbus."

"But I take my studies very seriously," she huffs, before letting out a soft sigh, "But I will say. Playing that skee ball game was rather invigorating, and got my blood pumping, and good circulation is helpful for a good mind. So I'm more dangerous than before, be ready for I now know how to play, rwar," she says with a playful growl.

"That just means you no longer have beginner's luck to help you," Elliot says with a playful smirk.

"You'll see what was luck and just innate skill."

"I look forward to it, but we'll have to find two new players."

Thorphax responds, "I'm sure we'll find someone willing to join. I'll look around."

"When you do let me know, but I think I'll look around the ship, see what's the condition of her in person."

“I can get that organized no problem Chief Engineer Romero,” says Thorphax, giving him a quick salute.

Elliot smirks, “You don’t have to be so formal yet,” he says, turning his attention to Derek, “Thanks for the meal. It rather hit the spot.”

“You’re done? You haven’t eaten your fries,” he comments.

“Huh?” he looks down, noticing that only the meat of his meal has been eaten, “Oh, hmm, I’m just full. I guess I wasn’t as hungry as I thought.”

Nimbus leans in, “Are you sure?” she asks, looking him over.

“Yeah I am. Relax, if something feels off, I’ll let you know.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” he replies with a smile.

Nimbus lets out a soft sigh, smiling, “If you are lying to me, I’ll kick your butt harder than I did in skee ball.”

“So, you’ll never be kicking my butt then even if I do lie, got it. Not really much of a threat if I must say so myself.”

“Hey, that is not what I meant, and you know it,” she replies, the rest of the meal going on without a hitch. The group headed back to the ship, boarding via one of many connection corridors. He looks off to the side up at one special corridor for the Pflanze, though not being used, just knowing it’s there...

“So far the engines are purring like earth kittens,” says Thorphax, guiding him toward main engineering. The moment they enter the room, the crew rush to greet him, before having to hurry back to their positions, monitoring and constantly keeping the engines in balance and check.

Elliot sighs, feeling relief when everyone returns to their stations, “Are they still being fickle?” he asks, glancing over to the engines seeing two Pflanze moving about their locations, feeling a tingle run down his spine, he pulls his attention toward the dragon.

“The variances have been reduced to under 0.02% down from the 0.70% high we were noting when you left, if that’s what you are referring to,” says Thorphax tapping the holographic screen, “You have no idea how good it is to have finally gotten all the screens repaired.”

“The problem of it being considered a low priority, eh?” chuckles Elliot, turning to the holographic screen, pulling up information, looking over the data, “The core power transfers to the engines and shields are doing fine. The structural fractures from the jump appear to have been repaired with the nanite structural self-repairing systems. It’s slow but effective.”

“They are normally used only for long term maintenance to keep the ship in a new-ish state. Not for major structural repairs but using them when injecting a super charged set of nanites, a brilliant idea.”

“The nanites talk to each other and work well in getting the entire structure repaired faster and surprisingly cheaper. I’m surprised no one thought about it before.”

“How did you think of it?”

“Ah... well...” he rubs the back of his head, thinking about the connection he had with the Pflanze, feeling across the entire ship, the interweb connection between them to give him a better understanding of the ship as a whole in a way he... he shrugs, “Just came to me is all. How about we check the shields and those modifications with the crystal sensor tech?”

“Lead the way. She’s your baby.”

“Derek and Nimbus had a hand in it too.”

“But you helped design it.”

“With your help you big scaly lug,” he says, giving him a faint punch in the chest.

“Yeah, but you’ve done more, nonetheless,” he replies, “But are you sure you’re okay? You feel a little off?” he asks, making their way toward the primary shield generator.

Elliot sighs, “I’m fine. I can’t say never better. I went from being everyone’s friend to everyone wanting to know me. And I love to get to know people, but at my own pace you know?”

“I suppose I can see what you mean there. But none of that famous shit matters here. You’re my boss because you’re my boss. The chief engineer. Fame has nothing to do with our relationship and you with the rest of the crew.”

“Which is why I’m glad to be back,” says Elliot.

“Hey Elliot, how are you doing?” asks one human crew member.

“Oh, hi... Tamil. How are you doing?”

“Good, saw you yesterday. Thanks for not forgetting about us.”

“I’d never do that. Keep up the good work,” he says, nodding to her.

“Trying my best,” she says when an anthropomorphic black fur feline passes them across their path.

The feline suddenly stops, turning, “Elliot! How’s it going? Doing well?” he asks.

“Oh, hi...uhh, Mark?”

“Oh you remembered, thanks for that, I appreciate it, but how are you holding up?”

“Me? Good, good. Just checking up on everything. Getting myself reaccumulated with the job. A week planet side is a week too long,” he says with a chuckle.

“What I wouldn’t give for a week down planet side, but I see what you mean. Good luck,” he says, giving him a salute before walking off.

“Thanks,” he says with a faint smile, heading down the walkway.

“Chief Elliot Romero. Good to see you back aboard sir,” says a slithering black and red scaly breasted anthropomorphic female naga.

“Oh, hello, Snevika, how are you doing?”

“Well, temperature controls are a little off though, making me feel a little sluggish.”

“Shall I have someone look into it?”

“It’s not a high priority. I already submitted a ticket for it.”

“If I find a moment I’ll see what I can do. Do you know what areas of the ship are giving you trouble?”



“The ticket number is E-532-21, if you want to check out the details there, but really, you don’t have to.”

“Nonsense, if it's affecting you, it's affecting others, and it could be a subtle sign of something more serious. I can’t promise when I’ll get a moment to look into it, but I’ll do what I can.”

“I do appreciate it Chief Engineer Elliot Romero. Good luck on everything, and thanks again for everything.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Saving our butts from a supernova is the farthest thing from nothing,” she says, waving him off, slithering away, “Thanks again, but I have a lot of work to do!”

“Best of luck to you Snevika!” he says, a Pflanze, making its way down the path, it not paying attention to him, while he feels his heart quicken, mouth becoming dry, attention about to be drawn to it when Thorphax pats him on the back.

“You have a good heart, trying to help so many still.”

“A-ah, well I do what I can. Keeps me busy you know?” he says, entering the shield generator room.

“As chief engineer I think you have enough work to do, but if you’re addicted to work I’m not going to stop you,” he says, the pair walking over the complex machinery that creates the field generators known as shields.

“The new sensor array for the moment is remaining near the shield generator, as a way to quicken the reaction time between sensing the danger and supercharging the shields,” explains Thorphax, bringing up the schematics from a nearby holographic screen.

Elliot does the same with another, looking over the information, “It appears the installation has gone well, though it will make moving through that corridor a tighter fit.”

“No other place to put it without it being constantly in the way.”

“Either be a slight annoyance all the time or a heavy annoyance some of the time. The price we pay for convenience. Hopefully that won’t come and bite us in the ass.”

“Sorry, we wanted to get your approval, but you were indisposed.”

“This is the decision I would have made, but my complaints would be the same. It’s not that we can build a bigger ship on the fly. We are all slaves to the cost benefit algorithms. But that doesn’t mean I can’t complain about it, does it?” he asks with a smirk.

He chuckles, “That’s the truth. Does everything else meet up to standards?”

“If they didn’t, I’d say you were body snatched and demand what you did with the real Thorphax.”

The dragon shudders, “Don’t even joke about that. Something like that gives me the... ah let's just call it the willies.”

“Dragons get the willies?”

“Yeah, but it's a big dragon secret, so don’t tell anyone otherwise we’ll have to make you disappear.”

“Do you think you can without it being obvious with how popular I am?” he asks sarcastically.

“You play a mean game of chess Elliot.”

“I’m more of a shogi player if I am to be honest.”

“Shogi? Really?”

“Yeah, is that so surprising?”

“I never thought you’d be into it, perhaps we could play a game.”

“Wait you paly shogi?”

“I don’t have to be an Asian dragon to play shogi you know?” he asks, shooting him a look.

“Relax, I was making a point on what you know and assumed,” he says with a pat on his back, *“Always so separated. Not really knowing. Having to make assumptions. Constantly having to guess,”* he thinks.

“Touché. Where to next?”

“Is the bridge repaired?” he asks.

Thorphax freezes, “Yeah... it is. Are you sure you want to go to it? You just got back to the ship.”

“I need to see it.”

“As you wish Chief,” he responds, heading through the ship, using the elevator system to get there quickly. Here more of the ship is in active repair with crews working around the clock to repair and rebuild the ship, making the events of what happened disappear.

“Chief Engineer Elliot Romero, making a surprise visit to us sir?” asks a female anthropomorphic gazelle.

“Galla, right, Galla is it?” Elliot asks with a hint of uncertainty.

“You always remember my name. Thank you, sir.”

“And no, it's not a surprise inspection. More of a personal inspection of the current progress. Keep up the good work, we all appreciate it.”

“Thank you, sir,” she replies, getting back to work. Thorphax and Elliot walking onto the bridge, everything there repaired, with only a few control panels still needing to be installed but one that’s there is the control panel that the captain wanted him to check on and fix.

Elliot walks up to it, running his hands across the panel, which remained inert, “This is where it all began.”

Thorphax stays near the door, “Yeah it is,” he says, taking a deep breath, looking around, “You can’t even tell that half this room was blown into space.”

“It’s going to be a strange to see someone else commanding the bridge.”

“Yeah... speaking of which, did you hear they promoted Bartley? Word is she’s going to be the ship’s new captain.”

“Really?” he asks, spinning around to him.

“Yeah, not sure if she’s going to get the promotion though. Last I heard she’s still considering it.”

“I bet she’s suffering from imposter syndrome... I sort of know the feeling.”

Thorphax pulls his attention to him, wings twitching, “Is that what’s bothering you? Feeling like you are something you are not? Getting all the praise like you are? Look Elliot,” he says, moving up to him, “You saved all of our butts. Yes, you weren’t the only one who did their part. And you never denied it. Heck you push it harder than anyone else. And we all notice that you do. No one is blaming you for the attention you are getting. Like it or not you do deserve the credit you are getting, and as long as you remind the world that the events that happened revolved around more than just you. No matter what, not only your actions but you, yourself are a hero.”

Elliot takes a deep breath, “I am a person, who did what he could, given unusual circumstances. Just like you. I’m no more of a hero than you are. Don’t sell yourself short to raise me,” he says, walking up to him patting him on the shoulder, “Come, let’s check out the labs.”

“The labs? Why do you want to check out the labs?” asks Thorphax, wings twitching, unfurling slightly.

“Can’t I look around the ship however I want?”

“No, no, just call me curious.”

“No real, reason, but I think that will be my last stop before I get back to work.”

“Fair enough chief. Oh, one more thing.”

“Yeah?” he asks, looking over his shoulder at him.

“Thanks for those words. It’s good to hear them, especially from you. I don’t think I’ll ever forget them.”

“Coming from you, that means I won’t be forgotten for another millennia huh?”

“I’m not *that* young,” he says, patting him on the back.

“Why is youth considered such a problematic thing for you dragons?” he asks.

“It’s a sign of inexperience and making poor judgement. If you’re in your first century or even two, you are seen as too wet behind the horns to really be trusted.”

“Really?”

Thorphax nods, “yeah.”

“That must be really hard on Nimbus then. Even I am older than her.”

“She’s a special dragon that’s for sure. I have to give her confidence and strength of character to get herself through it all. I know in dragon circles she’s not as... let’s just say not as welcomed yet. Which is why she leans heavily into the human scientific community which focuses more on achievements and skill than just age. But to be fair, there is a bit of seniority when it comes to you humans too, but nowhere nearly as big as us.”

“I’ll try not to mention it then.”

“Treat her like you always do, and you’ll be fine. It’s not something we talk about often with non-dragons.”

“I appreciate the trust man, it means a lot to me,” he says giving him a hug, in the back of his mind he’s thinking, *“How little I know. How little I really understand those around me. It’s so empty, hollow, lonely.”*

“Don’t mention it.... Really don’t mention it. It’s a taboo thing to talk about.”

“Got it, you’re the dragon expert. I will take your advice to heart.”

“Appreciate it,” he replies, the pair entering the lab, which was a hot mess of excitement and work. Nimbus and Derek orchestrate the constantly shifting and changing chaos that surrounds them, making it difficult if Nimbus is helping or just adding to the fuel to the fire that burns through the area.

Elliot’s attention is instantly drawn to the harness. The one he wore when he connected to the Pflanze. It’s currently in a silver mannequin monitoring device, contained within a glass tube with dozens of wires connected to it. Nimbus is looking over it, calling out what help she needs, before checking something else moments later, her mind going a lightyear a second, trying to grasp the mysteries that are on the tip of her tongue, calling out to the Pflanze, which continues to just do its own thing.

He looks at the plant, twitching, feeling the air growing heavy around him. He walks straight into the chaos, bobbing and weaving through the assistants, which soon notice him, “Hey Elliot! What are you doing here? I thought you were still planet side?” asks an anthropomorphic female gazelle.

“I just got back, Marley, yes? Yes, Marley, right, ah. How have you been doing? Stuck in this lab? You know I thought they’d move you all to the station’s lab while the ship is being repaired.”

“Some of the equipment we use is only found on the ship. It’s just easier to work here, not a lot was damaged from what happened, due to the lab being located in the center of the ship.”

“That would explain it,” he says, eyeing the device that’s in its tubed container.

Derek turns to him, “Elliot? Thorphax? What are you doing here? Missing us already?” he asks, checking something on the computer screen before rushing over.

Nimbus waves, “I’ll be there in a moment, I need to monitor these calculations.”

“No one is going to blame you for keeping to your work, I only have a moment to spare myself, what’s up you two?”

“I’m still guiding Elliot through the ship, and he wanted to stop over here.”

Nimbus raises her head, “Awe, checking up on us like that? Miss us that much?” she asks, pulling herself back to her work.

“I have a legit reason to be here.”

Thorphax’s wings twitch, “Do you now? This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Derek, I heard reports of some of the environmental controls being off, how has the temperature been here? Have any of the cold-bloods been complaining about the temperature and being sluggish?”

“Not that I know of, but I haven’t asked,” says Derek turning to an anthropomorphic male naga snake scientist dressed in a white lab coat, who is near the Pflanze that is doing its own thing, “Hey Seevin, how’s environmental for you?”

He flicks his tongue the brown and black scaled naga looks to him, “Here has been good, but deck one through three have felt... a little too cold? I don’t go there too often so it might of been fixed by now. I haven’t been there in about a week I think.”

“Ah, good to know, thanks.”

Thorphax suggests, “You could check the sensor data you know and find out.”

“I want to compare my surveyed information to the sensors. That way we can catch if any of them are not reporting correctly.”

“Oh, good idea. I didn’t think of that.”

“Maybe you are getting too comfortable Thorphax, be mindful of that when I beat your tail in skee ball,” he says with a smirk.

He huffs, “We’ll see about that.”

“Did you find two more players?” Derek asks.

“Not yet, though I have an idea of who to ask, if they are still here.”

Nimbus raises her head, looking over to them, “Who?”

“Kirisha and Aqua.”

“The ship’s cooks?”

“In a world where generated food can make any meal you want, anyone who can keep the job as a chef has to be damned skilled,” replies Elliot.

“Last I knew they’re still on board,” says Thorphax, looking at him, “Though that would ruin our scales vs. skins team combo, one extra scaly.”

“I was thinking dragons vs. non dragons, what do you think?”

“That could work, Aqua is a wingless water dragon.”

Nimbus raises her head again, “That works for me, but Derek, your screen is blinking.”

“Oh crap, thanks Nimbus!” exclaims Derek, rushing back to it, “That sounds fine, next we’ll have to find a day to do it, not today, no, no, no, not today.”

Elliot chuckles, “I don’t think that will be a problem. I’ve seen enough here, another look around of other sectors, and then I think I’ll do another run about at main engineering, and get to work.”

“So, this isn’t work then?” he asks with a smirk.

“It is, but you know what I mean,” he replies waving him off.

Derek waves, “Good luck, keep up the good work.”

Nimbus unable to turn away, “Appreciate the visit... oh crap!” she exclaims, rushing about, the chaos bubbling up again as things get heated up again.

Thorphax whispers, “Best we head out now.”

“Agreed,” Elliot replies, they slinking off. The rest of the day going smoothly, with many more crew members and people of the repair team giving Elliot a hello and greeting,

complimenting him, till he returns to engineering where things calm down enough for a few hours of work, and monitoring.

Elliot would eventually finish the day, having a nice quiet meal in his room, waving off anyone's attempts to invite him for dinner, repeating the phrase, "I've had a long day and I just want to relax and get some sleep, but thank you."

In his room he eats a large steak, dripping, juicy, it really hits the spot, chewing through the wonderful meat, filling his hunger. When he finishes it he remarks, "I forgot to synthesize any vegetables..." The room is homely with a small personal stand in shower and bathroom, a bed and a small guest quarters big enough to have two or three people over and not feel cramped. His bedroom connected to the area, the door automatically closed for a sense of privacy, *"It's no different if I eat here, or eat with everyone else. It feels the same."*

There's a ring at his door. Elliot sighs, "Who could it be now?" he mutters, thinking, opening the door to see a larger Pflanze standing there, a rare time with them not on their purple grass. The mixture of machinery and plant, intertwine with one another. The leaves shift and flutter. There is no real front or back to the Pflanze, and this close, you can really see the mixture of technology and nature, where nature itself uses technology to enhance itself in order to better move and interact with the world around them, to conquer other aspects of nature.

**"Hello Elliot, may we come in?"** the Pflanze says, using a voice synthesizer to transmit what it wants to say to him.

Elliot's heart races, a shiver running down his spine, eyes focused on the plant before him, swallowing a lump that was quickly forming in his throat, he steps to the side, "Of course. I never had a Pflanze visit me before. How are you doing, Breck?" he asks with a hint of unsureness in his voice.

**"Yes that is our name. We appreciate that you recognize us."**

"It's hard not to..." he says, stumbling back, Breck's synthetic body whirring, the soft groan of wood from its plant body emanating from it, the door closing behind it.

**"We were selected to talk to you due to your familiarity with us."**

"I'd say I'm very familiar with all of you."

**"You became briefly familiar with the local branch."**

"So that is what you call it... local branch. I can't imagine what its like back on your homeworld," he says with a soft chuckle, "I'm sure you guys have strong roots in your homeworld, right?" he asks with a soft chuckle, stumbling back.

**"Your attempt at humor with us is curious,"** Breck says, taking a few steps deeper into Elliot's room, despite its size it moves around elegantly, expertly, even with its synthetic enhancements, using a tentacle leg form to move about.

"Sorry, uh, how could I help you?"

**"We wanted to inquire about you. Your actions and personality have been off of your norm. You've grown tense and anxious when in our presence, the moment you notice we are there. We wish to talk about it."**

"You can tell huh?"

**“It’s in every muscle of your body. The vibrations of your voice. The heat given off your skin. Your emotional state is felt through all of us.”**

“Right, you can do that. Your way of ‘seeing’ the world is something else. I still can’t describe it, but I have been limited in telling everyone about what I felt in details...”

**“We have noticed. But our main inquiry is with you Elliot. Those details are secondary.”**

“You’re that concerned about me? Pflanze always well before connecting, it felt like you were there, but mostly stand off-ish. Like you were beside us but not part of our world. Boy was I wrong.”

**“We are all connected. Our means of communication and interaction differ. Crossing the communication bridge between animal and plant is Perelis. We limit that crossing to prevent misunderstandings.”**

“Can’t make a mistake if you don’t make it in the first place.”

**“Yes, that is an apt way of describing it. Communication as required. Nothing more, nothing less.”**

“You all communicate with each other constantly.”

**“We are all part of each other, one way or another. More literal between ourselves than we are with you.”**

“I never felt anything like that before. It was mind blowing.”

**“We have concerns about your mental health.”**

Elliot sighs, moving to his chair, taking a seat, grabbing his alcoholic beverage, swirling the glass in his hands, making the ice dink against the glass, “To be honest with you, I haven’t felt the same since that day.”

Breck moves further into his home, shifting, creaking, standing beside his couch, **“We know. We’ve felt it since you left us.”**

“Left you?” he asks, raising his head.

**“We were never connected to an animal before. The experience for us is as jarring as yours was about us.”**

“Your hive mind goes both ways, doesn’t it?”

**“Yes. We are connected together. Working together. Growing together. We expanded and survived with each other. We grow slowly, move slowly, efforts can’t be wasted as much time will be lost. Your life comparatively is fast paced, on the edge, learn, fail, fail to learn, learn from that failure. Getting glimpses of all those around you, but isolated to achieve your own goals.”**

“It has its draw backs for sure. I never realized just how little... how alone I was till then. I talked to everyone around me, but who really knew me? How much do I really know them? I feel like I found something with you all, that I didn’t even realize I was missing till I no longer have it.”

**“We understand the sensation. The ability to see the colors of the world like you. How focused yet limited it is. It’s knowledge we will be sharing back home.”**

“Back home?”

**“In a week’s time, we’ll be returning home. Sink our roots into the planet that bred us, and gave us life. Connect with our people, let our experiences transfer through them so it may not be loss. The other branches need to know of what happened on the ship, from our perspective.”**

“Oh... see...” he says, taking a long swig of his drink, “A week from now? How long will you be gone?”

**“About a month. We’ll be back before the ship repairs are complete. We’ll be recruiting replacements for the ship’s navigation system. There are some budding talents we wish to cultivate.”**

“I wish you a safe trip.”

**“Thank you. If you need us. You have an open invitation to the garden.”**

Elliot eyes open, “An open invitation?”

**“Yes. We believed we described it correctly in your language.”**

“You did, I was just making sure I caught what you pitched. I know you let no one in there... no animal like me.”

**“It is our sanctuary within the ship, a place of trust and connection. We’ve built that trust and connection with you. And after you’ve departed, you’ve kept our intimate bond between us. We appreciate it.”**

“Well I kind of knew that what I got was not meant to be readily shared to outsiders. I couldn’t bring myself to even mention the existence to anyone. It felt... wrong? You know? If you really wanted us to know, you’d tell us, right?”

**“We would. We recommend you lay off the neurological suppressing drink. It doesn’t suit you,”** Breck says, while Elliot takes a sip of his drink.

The human looks at the drink, sipping it a moment longer, placing it down on the table, “It helps.”

**“Explain.”**

“If I am too drunk to be alone with my thoughts, I can’t realize how alone my thoughts are.”

Breck reaches out, placing a branch of synthetic entwined tentacle vine on his shoulder. The Pflanze is gentle yet firm with the touch. Elliot looks at the move, feeling the plant run along his shoulder blade, **“We do not determine your actions. But remember, if you need us. Ones who understand the connection and the loss of that moment. Meet us in the gardens, any time. We do not need sleep like you animals.”**

He looks at the branch, reaching over, touching the room temperature plant, feeling the soft cooling leaves that shift under his touch, the hard insulating wood and room temperature metal that feels smoother and softer than he’d imagined, “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind... and sorry I have been so standoffish. Every time I see you guys...”



**“We know. But we understand. Come down to see us. Root with us. We will welcome and listen,”** Breck says, withdrawing its vine, **“I need to go. You enjoy your sleep cycle,”** it says, heading back to the door.

“Yeah... I will. Thanks,” he says, watching the Pflanze leave, the door closing automatically behind the planet, leaving him alone once again. He looks down at his drink, “It’s rare to see a Pflanze off the grass. It disconnects them organically from the others. Half removed from their people. Just to speak to me...” he mutters taking a big swig of his drink, “Computer, another scotch.”

“Error. You’ve reached your allotment of alcoholic beverage for your current time allotment.”

“Damn...” he sighs, “Never seen a Pflanze give emotional contact support either. That’s a more... human gesture,” he says, leaning into the couch, looking at his small private synthesizer, “Maybe I can bypass that security,” he thinks with a smirk, getting to work.

Five days have passed since Elliot arrived back at the ship, and the entire crew was buzzing about the up and coming skee ball match between dragons and non-dragons. Talk about how exciting the last game was before the pulsar put a damper on the situation made the excitement only grow, and spill into the space station.

An hour before the big game, Elliot finds himself standing before the entrance to the gardens. The purple grass separates his path to the room. The signs of several languages indicated that this area is a Pflanze only area. He looks to this left, then to his right, “I’ve never seen the ship so empty before. Are really that many people coming to the game? I guess everyone needs to relax a bit. But what am I doing here? What really are they going to help me with?” he mutters.

The door before him opens, from where he stands, he can see the Pflanze there, sunken into the purple grass, a soft mist in the air, faux sun and audio to mimic their homeworld. Memories of his time connected flutter in the back of his mind, flash points of being there, as Pflanze sinking roots into the ground, he snaps out of it, when a synthetic voice speaks out to him.

**“Come Elliot Romero.”**

Elliot stands there on the edge of the raised platform before the purple grass, his heart races, hands shaking a little, licking the dry mouth, even drier lips, he looks toward the room, unsure which one spoke to him, “There’s no platform for me to stand on,” he responds.

**“You may walk ahead.”**

“On the grass? You don’t like anyone to walk on your grass. It’s a part of you.”

**“You are not anyone. Come. We trust you.”**

“Okay... here I come,” he says, sitting down, about to slide off the platform, though it's only raised a few inches, it feels higher to him. He’s about to step on it when he stops, “Wait...” he mutters, removing his boots and socks, keeping them on the platform. With a slow and steady caution he places his feet on the soft purple grass, feeling cool to the touch, soft and slightly velvety yet firm, far more supportive than he’d thought it was going to be, like very tough earth

grass that is able to lift him enough to never be able to fully touch the ‘ground’. “Are you sure about this?” he asks, taking another step forward.

**“We are. And you know we are, if you focus on it.”**

Elliot nods, taking a deep breath, thinking on it, knowing deep down they were right. He knew this was alright with them, yet the time of disconnect has made his confidence in this feeling fade as it steadily deteriorates, “I’m coming,” he says, walking through the doors, which close behind him, locking him into the jungle wilderness of the Pflanze, a little slice of their home, recreated right here. No holograms, only the sun and the audio is faked, everything else is natural to their home. Several Pflanze bask in the light, shifting only slightly when he walks into the center of them.

**“Welcome back Elliot,”** says the Pflanze, the voice omnipotent, making it difficult to tell where the source is, but he knew that wasn’t really necessary, they were speaking together, for each other and with each other in a mutual agreement.

“Thank you... all of you,” he says, looking at each one, trying to be mindful of his feet, how much weight he puts on the grass, moving to a new spot after a moment to keep him from putting too much weight on any single spot, the grass slowly rises when he steps off it.

**“We thank you for coming to see us. How can we help?”**

“Who says I need help? I was just coming to see you.”

**“You’d normally be preparing for your skee ball game. Yet, you are here. To see us. We sense your concern. Your burden. What happened when you were connected to us, has not been forgotten. We remember as you remember.”**

“No... I don’t remember the same way... well I’m not sure. I don’t know how Pflanze memories work. I realized that I don’t know as much about you as I thought I did. Or perhaps anyone at all...”

**“We did not mean to cause you such problems. We did not fully know the risks of connecting to us. Your experiences have reverberated through us. We never understood much about your animal experience till then.”**

“Did I cause you all trouble? I didn’t think about it. I was just... I was so focused on myself that I didn’t take into consideration how you are all feeling. I...” he trails off, tensing, “Feel cut off.”

**“We do wish to help you. We are responsible for your current state. We have noted that it was difficult for your fellow animals to understand your condition. Their machines are being helpful but not zeroing on the problems you face.”**

“Ah... maybe? I tried to be open with them, but respectfully so. I can’t talk to them about this feeling the same way I can talk to you all about it. But then I’m afraid to.”

**“There is no need to be afraid. It’s only us here.”**

“I know,” he says, shifting looking at them all, “But that in a way is what scares me. Why I am so hesitant to talk to any of you. I feel so damn comfortable yet conflicted when I am with you. I feel that I actually know you, can feel your sincerity and concern that I can’t get with anyone else. Everyone else is so guarded, hidden, not able to open up the same way as you all

can, even when they open up to you. It's an echo of a shadow of the experience that you gave me for that brief moment in my life," he says, panting, tensing, hands clenching toes feeling the grass before he takes along deep breath, trying to calm himself.

**"And?"**

"I want it again. I want to feel that sensation. I want to be with all of you again. To be connected, rooted, whatever you call it. I simply want to be with you like you are all with each other. But... I've been so afraid to ask."

The Pflanze move in closer, the voice rings out all around that, **"Why is that?"**

He takes a deep breath, "I'm afraid of the answer. If its no, forever cut off from something I found myself craving... no needing. But if it's yes? I'm afraid of what it's like. Is it nostalgia? Or will I just be lost in it and not be able to handle it?"

**"Is joining us something you really want?"**

He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes, focusing on the question, "Yeah... I suppose so."

**"We've been waiting for you to make the offer to us. We already have accepted if it is what you would want."**

Elliot lifts his head, "What? You mean... you'll take me?"

**"Yes, but you will return to our homeworld. We'll connect you to us all."**

His heart races, feeling the weight of it, "All?"

**"All."**

"I... yes, I suppose that is what I've wanted. You knew I was thinking this?"

**"We were connected. We understand you Elliot Romero. The connections you forged with so many, but it was only surface level. To be brought to something far more rooted and enriching. It was not expected before we connected, but we knew after. All we had to do was wait for your wish and consent to be vocalized to us."**

"You were simply waiting for me to tell you?"

**"Yes. A desire to join us can't be forced. Would never be forced. But joining us is a commitment. Think about the decision. Come back here on the day we leave. And we will take you to our home, and there, if you still want. We can become one, once more."**

He nods, "Okay... I will. I'll definitely think this over, thank you."

**"Now, don't you have a skee ball game to play?"**

Elliot looks at the time, "Shit, I do, thank you," he says, slowly, gingerly walking out of the garden, being mindful of the grass he's on, climbing onto the platform, turning back to them he says, "Thank you for the opportunity, I won't take it lightly," he says, putting on his socks and shoes.

**"We thank you for the opportunity to connect to your kind. It was more than what we were expecting. The connection goes both ways. Remember that."**

"I will," he says, rushing to his skeeball game. He bobs and weaves, dodging through people, trying to make up for lost time. He makes it to the space station's gym area, a crowd has already gathered along the large open window of the zero G room, where the game is to be

played. He sneaks into the locker room, quickly changing clothes and gear, getting the connecting gloves, shoes and collar that synchronizes with the entire system, preparing himself for the game. He looks into a nearby mirror, seeing the connection around his neck, thinking back of the time he connected to the Pflanze, "I'd never be the same..." he mutters.

He stares at the mirror for a bit till suddenly he hears, "Elliot? There you are. Where have you been? The game is going to start soon, we need our star player," he says, walking up to him.

"Oh, sorry. I lost a bit track of time and was running late."

He looks over him, "It's fine, but are you okay? You still sound a bit off."

Elliot smiles, mentally shaking the weight on his mind, "I'm fine. How about we kick some dragon butt?"

"Sounds good to me," says Derek, patting him on the back, the two heading out, people cheering them on as they step into the long zero gravity room. Warning signs much like on the ship, inform people that this area is a zero-G zone, and enter at your own risk.

Thorphax holds onto the ball, chest puffed out, "There you are. And here I thought you were going to chicken out."

Nimbus smiles, "Give the man a break. He's been working hard to help everyone, can't fault him for losing track of time. But I will warn you Elliot, we aren't going to go easy on your team."

Aqua, the anthropomorphic breasted female blue water dragon, she looks over at the crowd, swallowing a lump in her throat, "I-I wasn't expecting so many people to be watching," she says softly.

Kirisha, an anthropomorphic green scaled female utahraptor, floats over to her, patting her on the shoulder, "Don't worry love. You'll do just fine. All you have to worry about is the game. Just put those people out of mind and have fun, okay?"

Aqua looks up into her yellow eyes, nodding, "Okay hun. I'll do my best."

"Just don't get too down when we beat you. Just because you're my wife doesn't mean I'm going to go easy on you."

"I'll do my best to give you a challenge," she says with a little smile.

"That's what I like to hear," she says, floating over to her spot, "I'm ready to kick some dragon tail," says Kirisha.

"This will be a fun game, right Elliot?" asks Derek, floating to his position.

"Right. Does everyone remember the rules?" he asks, taking the lead position, Thorphax moving to place the ball in the center of the room. The crowd of people who came to watch on the other side of the glass are completely drowned out, providing a quiet playing field for them.

"We're good. Kirisha filled me in on them," says Aqua, swallowing a lump in her throat, trying her best not to look at the crowd.

"Come on Aqua you can do it, look at me or the ball. Don't worry about the end result, as we know we non-dragons will win," she states with a smirk.

Aqua lets out a little huff, “I am going to give you a run for your money hun. And that’s what I am going to do. I’m ready.”

“Good.”

Thorphax chuckles, pulling his attention to Elliot, “On three?”

“Three then go, yeah,” he replies.

“Okay... one... two... three!” exclaims Thorphax, the game starting, he and Elliot rushing to the ball, pushing off the invisible barriers they create within hidden three dimensional cubes that make up the game. Thorphax manages to grab the ball, beating Elliot by a surprisingly wide margin.

“Oh I actually got it!” he exclaims, before pulling himself back into the game, “Of course I did,” he remarks, the game kicking off. The ball being thrown back and forth to and fro, Elliot managing to make a few good moves, while losing chances on a few occasions.

The game itself by no means is as close as last time, but also doesn’t mean it was bad. There was a moment where the non-dragon team itched out ahead with an amazing tail play by Kirisha bouncing the ball from the red square into the twenty-five point ring.

Aqua herself makes a few surprising plays, getting the hang of moving through the air, practically “swimming” through the battlefield to put herself into positions where she needed to be, assisting Nimbus and Thorphax, the trio sharing the effort to stay ahead of the others.

Derek does his best to keep up, and Kirisha certainly does help, in the end the missed chances and opportunities by Elliot steadily added up and in the end, the game ended 780 to 1,030.

The crowd enjoyed themselves, but it was noticed by some that Elliot wasn’t playing his A game from the time they watched in back on the ship, but such talk was quickly squashed by those who weren’t there, the whole “Give him a break he’s been stressed with saving people’s lives” and whatnot.

They retire to the locker rooms, members of engineering, volunteering as a “security” force to keep people from rushing in, giving them all a moment to breath and recuperate from the hour plus long game.

Kirisha gives Aqua a big hug, “I’m so proud of you love! You really showed me what’s for. When we get home I’ll cook dinner.”

“Really? You think I did good?” she asks her ear fins twitching, a purple blush appearing on her scales.

“You didn’t just do good, you did great,” she says, giving her a nuzzle licks. Kirisha turns to everyone else, “Thanks for the game, but if you don’t mind I think Aqua and I will head out and shower in our own room, how does that sound love?”

Aqua blushes more, softly letting out a squeak of a reply, “Sounds good to me.”

“Perfect,” she says, pulling Aqua nice and close, the two heading out.

Nimbus lets out a soft sigh, “They make a lovely couple.

“They do and make a fantastic Filet mignon. Who would have thought that meat eaters could make the best meat-based foods?” remarks Derek.

“I’ll have to ask them about it sometimes,” Elliot says with a chuckle.

“Speaking about having to ask, what’s wrong Elliot? You were not yourself that entire game,” says Thorphax.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Compared to our first game, you were a push over here. I know you could do better than that. And to be honest, you’ve not been yourself at all, I know you’ve been through a lot, but as your friend, tell me... what’s going on?”

“Ah...” there is a moment of silence, closing his eyes, looking down to the ground, thinking through everything, “*I should say something,*” he thinks, “I’ve just had a lot on my mind. I sort of got told something big right before the game,” he says with a soft sigh.

Nimbus sits beside him, “Tell us hun. What’s wrong? I am concerned about your health.”

Derek stands beside Thorphax, “Yeah. If you need a place more private, we can talk back in your room. Or our room?” he suggests.

“Actually... that would be a good idea. Talk there? In say, a half hour?” he asks, looking up at them.

“Sounds good to me,” says Derek.

“Me too,” replies Thorphax.

“Whatever you have to say hun, we’re your friends and want to help you, okay?”

“Yeah, I understand. Regardless of how well I played, it was a good game, wasn’t it?” asks Elliot with a smile.

“Yeah, it was fun. Next time, provide me with a challenge though, okay?”

“Of course. I wanted to go a little easy on you,” he says with a chuckle.

“Sure...” he responds, flicking his wings, heading to the shower.

When they all meet back up in Elliot’s room, they notice the smell of alcohol lingering in the air. Thorphax flicks his wings, taking a deep breath, moving to sit on the couch “Elliot?”

“Yes?” he asks, clearing his throat.

“Why does it smell like a bar in here? How many drinks have you been having in your off time?” he asks, giving him a curious look.

“Only a few, I spilled a drink today, before I left for the game, sorry about that.”

The dragon looks over to the synthesizer, taking note of the subtle scratch marks in the panel, “Okay... So, are you going to tell us what’s going with you?”

Nimbus sits on the couch, leaving a spot open for him to sit, “Whatever it is hun, you can tell us.”

“What news did you get to put you off even more so?” ask Derek.

Elliot takes a deep breath, gently rubbing the back of his head, “Ah, not sure how to put this in any simple way, “I asked the Pflanze about joining up with them again. They said yes. I’m going to go with them in two days to their homeworld.”

“What?” they all ask in unison, Derek in surprise, Nimbus in a curious concern, while Thorphax is just concerned.

“What do you mean by joining them?” asks Nimbus, getting up from the couch, approaching him.

“I’ve been thinking about it, and what I... really enjoyed the time I spent sharing with the Pflanze. In a way they did as well. So, I am going to go with them and join them.”

Nimbus’ eyes show a mix of concern, yet curiosity, “Elliot, do you realize what you are saying?”

Thorphax, moves in closer, “You are talking about mind melding with plants. PLANTS. They aren’t people, they aren’t the same as us. Connecting with them could... well look at you now. You were only connected to them for a little while, and you haven’t been the same since then.”

“Yeah... it’s because I realized how wonderful it was to be with them. I know they are different from us. And it’s not a bad thing.”

“I never said it was, but there is a difference between plants and animals. They function is so fundamentally different.”

Derek says, “I can agree. They are a hive mind society. You are an individual. You have no idea what kind of affect being stuck with a hive mind would do to you. There would be no privacy, nothing. This is honestly a terrible idea.”

“I know of the dangers, but I have thought about this. I can’t get it out of my mind.”

Nimbus steps up to him, placing a claw on his shoulder, “As much as the idea of connecting to the Pflanze, a true perspective into their world in a way we ever dreamed of. I can’t tell you how such a thought tickles my curiosity to no end. What would it be like to experience a true cooperative hive mind? And not the one science fiction movies of the past and present have shown us. But I am concerned that this hive mind is what is bothering you hun. The damage to your human mind could be more far reaching than our scans are picking up. And you connecting to the Pflanze could do irreparable harm.”

“I have thought about that. Really, I have. But this is something that I wa--no, need. The experience is something that I can’t put into words, nor as to why I need this so, but if I wanted to do it and not tell anyone. I could have done it very easily, but the thing is. Out of everyone on this ship. Out of everyone I go and say hello to on a daily basis, get to know names. You three are the three that I know the best as my friends... that are still here.”

“We appreciate telling us. Perhaps its your way of having us talk to you out of this?” asks Thorphax.

“No, this is not something I am going to change my mind on, but I felt you guys deserve to know. It’s the last I can do. A after all you’ve done for me.”

Derek sighs, “I’m not sure how I feel about this except concern. One call is all it takes to put an end to this. Get you some long-term psychiatric help. Perhaps we should have suggested it from the very get go.”

“Look I am in the right of mind. And you can try to stop me, honestly, I know you can. But trust me. This is something I have thought on. It's not something that the Pflanze just took

lightly either. They did not actively approach me for this, even though they knew of what is going on in my head.”

Nimbus’ wings flutter, “They knew? They didn’t say anything to us, no matter how much we questioned them.”

“They consider what happens within their rooted connection to be very private. They got a greater understanding of me and I of them. But the point is they didn’t solicit me to join them. They waited for me to ask them. They were ready for it, but at the same time, its not something they are forcing me to do.”

Derek paces around the room, “This could change you for the worse Elliot. You may end up not being who you are. You could lose yourself in the hive mind. No longer be an individual.”

“That thought has crossed my mind, but I don’t think so.”

“What makes you so sure?” asks Nimbus.

“Call it a gut feeling.”

“You are willing to risk a life altering decision on a gut feeling?”

“Haven’t you done such things yourself?”

“Ah... well... sort of. But I put a lot of thought and facts behind it with a healthy dose of logic, questioning my gut feeling one very step of the process.”

“I’ve done the same. And all I ask is that you all trust me. Support me on this. The biggest regret I’m going to have is that I’ll be gone for a month.”

Thorphax wings spread, “A month?!”

“Yeah, but I have gone over all the work that needs to be done to update the ship, and I have all my files transferred to you. Any question you need, should be answered there.”

“You’re kind of being a little over confident with that, aren’t you?”

Elliot chuckles, “Yeah I am. I am sure there are some questions that I won’t have the answer to, is in there, but it’s better than nothing. I didn’t want to leave you hanging.”

Thorphax sighs, “Is this really what you want to do? To connect your mind to a bunch of plants?”

“They are more than just plants, and you know it.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do... I think. But that’s the thing. I never know fully what any of you are really thinking. If you are going to just up and go and tell everyone what I am planning to do. You could do that, and I’d never know, regardless of what you say here. But in the end... I trust you three. More than anyone else on this ship. Please don’t tell me that my trust has been misplaced.”

Derek pats him on the back, “Look Elliot. We appreciate the trust you put in us. And if we were to tell people and stop this idea of yours. It’s not because your trust was misplaced, but more that it was placed in the right people, who are only looking out for your best interest.”

“And how do you know exactly what is in my best interest? How do you know me so well that you can make that decision for me?”



Derek sighs, “You’re right. We can’t. Though together as a group we can think this trough, come together and solve what’s bothering you.”

“What’s bothering me is that I am desiring this more than I ever thought I would realize, and it does scare me. I have every concern you speak about and more. But even as I think about it. Going through the what if’s. The worst-case scenario. I keep coming back to the same conclusion. That I want to do this. I didn’t come to you three for confirmation on my idea. I am glad you are challenging me on it. And in the end its only making my conviction grow stronger. Not out of spite, to do the opposite of what you say, because I think you are all wrong. But that I needed my ideas challenged, so I can keep questioning myself on this to the day I leave.”

“Which is?” asks Nimbus.

“Two days from now. Till the day I leave. I want you three to come here, after hours and talk to me. If you feel its a terrible idea. Do your best to dissuade me. If you think I should try it? Go for it. I want you to tell me without judgement, without concern, from the purest depths of your soul to tell me your thoughts. And I want to listen to them. I am trusting you to just... talk openly to me. Not to force me one way or another. But be who you are to me. So when the day comes, and I make that decision to go. That I can do it with a clear mind that my friends have challenged me on my conviction and have left me with no doubts as to my decision. I don’t want to do this half-assed. I want it to be thought through, with every fiber of me being. Please. I am begging you all. To help me.”

Derek replies, “Are you asking us to change your mind?”

“Only if you want to.”

“I see...”

“One thing Elliot,” asks Nimbus, giving him a concerned draconic look.

“Yes Nimbus?”

“Let me do another thorough brain scan. I want to go about this scientifically, as a scientist and as your friend. If I find something external that might be changing your mind... I’ll let you know.”

“And if there’s nothing?”

“Then there’ll be nothing to report.”

Elliot smiles, “Thank you,” he says, looking to Thorphax.

The red dragon takes a deep breath, “This is a terrible idea, but I won’t break your trust in me. The most powerful thing a dragon has is their word. Once broken it will never be forgotten for as long as we live, and we live for a *very* long time.”

“I appreciate it buddy.”

Derek takes a deep breath, pacing a bit more, “Alright, alright. But don’t think I’m going to go easy on you. I’ll be challenging you all along the way, while not committing you.”

“Glad to hear the good news from you too,” he replies.

“Yeah, yeah, but one thing, if you do decide to do this?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re going to be seeing you off, you got it? No sneaking off without us saying goodbye.”

“You have my word, that I won’t,” says Elliot, giving each of them a big hug. The next two days being full of debates, and slightly heated arguments, scientific tests of all sorts, and some private conversation between the Pflanze and Nimbus, all in an effort to dissuade Elliot, but with unwavering conviction, or perhaps simply not enough time to do anything about it.

Elliot the basics packed, standing with the Pflanze, on a hovering platform so he can move across the grass without disturbing it. He looks to his friends, the plants getting their ship ready for departure. The docking area for the Pflanze is rather devoid of people, normally having limited use or need for people due to how few their numbers are, making this large group of four plus Pflanze a bit unusual.

They look at him, with concern, worry, sorry, the emotion dripping from them. Elliot smiles, “You all tried your best. You didn’t disappoint me,” he says.

Derek approaches him first, giving him a handshake and a half hug, “You’ve always been one stubborn bastard. If you weren’t, we wouldn’t be here today, but be stardust.”

“Whatever happens, I will not forget what we talked about.”

“You better not.”

Nimbus approaches next, “Try to convince them to let us, the scientific community know more about them? There is so much that can be done with this, despite my concerns. Since I can’t stop you, we might as well work on this together, right?”

“I’ll see what they say, but in the end, I won’t go against them on it.”

“I understand. Take care, and be safe, okay?” she asks, giving him a big hug.

“I will, thank you.”

Thorphax then approaches, letting out a huff, “You’re really doing this, huh?”

“Yup.”

“You know if you become a plant, it will be difficult for you to play skee ball.”

“I’m not becoming a plant; I’m just connecting with them.”

“Still, how will you play skee ball when you have the voices of countless others going on in your mind? And you promised me a real re-match.”

“We’ll make it work. Don’t worry.”

He sighs, patting him on the shoulder, “You better. And whatever happens. You’re the best human I’ve met in a long time.”

“Coming from you, that’s saying something,” he says, patting his red scaled claw hand, “Be seeing you soon.”

“Good luck, safe travels,” says Thorphax.

“Goodbye all, and thank you again,” says Elliot, waving them away, the floor pulling away, moving onto the Pflanze ship, which is full of life, purple grass, plants that vine through parts of the interior, working with the ship itself and its construction.

Elliot looks at the inside with awe, the hovering metal stand, taking him along beside Breck, who says, **“We have made adjustments to a room so you may rest on the journey.”**

**You are free to decide against the connection at any time. This is a willing juncture between us.”**

He nods, heart racing, “I know, and thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

**“We will soon enough,”** Breck says, guiding him to his room, the Pflanze constantly rerooting themselves into the ground as they move about the ship.

Elliot finds his room half covered in the hovering metal plates with a bed and food synthesizer installed into the area. The makeshift room had the bare necessities for his survival and comfort. Nothing dreadful, but nothing fancy or luxurious either. Designed to be uninstalled easily at a later date. But for him, this was more than enough, and with no door to separate him from the rest of the ship, the room was open and connected, giving him a glimpse of the openness and reduction in privacy he’ll have once fully integrated with him, *“Trying to give me a taste, only to test my conviction. If this is really for me. Making me question myself. They have no idea that I’ve done that already. No matter, like what Breck said. They will soon enough.”*

The Pflanze homeworld, the only known planet to give rise to sentient plant race, had another unique feature that is a one-of-a-kind astronomical occurrence. One that few animal races as the Pflanze would refer to Elliot and the other species as, would ever see.

Their home world is smack dab in the center of two ‘small’ blue stars about three and a half times the size of earth’s yellow sun. These two stars are locked in an orbit between each other, but at incredible distances, with large Jupiter like planets and up orbiting around this giant solar system. The planet’s orbs are constantly shifting from one planet to the other, making it a crazy hellscape for any planet or life to exist, except the Pflanze homeworld. Tidally locked between the two suns. Making it the only planet in the known universe without a visible orbit, but rather making it appear as if the two suns orbit around this 1.3 times the size of the earth planet.

Formed at the very epicenter of the two suns tug of war, its core remains super-heated allowing for a powerful magnetic field to protect it from the constant bombardment of the two blue giants that bath the planet in sunlight every single moment of its endless day. But the suns are just far enough away from each other and this lone planet that its in the perfect goldilocks zone for habitable planets, albeit a bit hot. With the only “cool” periods is the low light of twilight which is close to dusk or dawn for any single solar world. Whenever one sun is about to go below the horizon, the other rises, providing a bright day, low light cycle twice a ‘day’ per planet rotation.

Getting closer, Elliot sees the purple covered landscape, the blue waters also hinted green and purple due to the plant life that lives on the planet. Magnificent structures built from the ground rise up over the endless forests that cover the world, proving more land, and raised highways that connect the core cities of the plant homeworld. Every technological advancement used to make their lives better, to better distribute sunlight and water to all, enabling them to grow and prosper even in areas that might be considered too hot or too dry for them. Deserts,

mountains, dried plains, all concurred by the Pflanze, to make every bit of land habitual to them, making it a wonderful purple and blue marble basked in a blue light.

The ship will dock at one of dozens of tall spires that reach up into the sky, basking in the sunlight, reflecting it across the land, limiting shade, letting the roots and connection between them grow strong and deep. The ship itself, docking, vines reaching out, connecting to the ship that were hidden away till just now. Something that Elliot has never seen before, **“You will need these,”** says Breck, his main Pflanze escort, a pair of sunglasses that will protect his gaze from the brightness of their stars, tinting his world blue, which then instantly fades the moment he steps outside, the tint of the suns melding out with the glasses providing a perfect crystal clear view of their world, which is all designed for function rather than artistic grandeur yet somehow encapsulates both.

Elliot looks at the world before him, taking a deep breath, feeling the warm air rushing into his lungs, feeling a little lightheaded, “Oh wow...”

**“Careful, our atmosphere is twice the oxygen level of your homeworld. Take simple breaths, no need to breathe deeply.”**

“Got it, got it, thank you,” he says, looking at the end of his platform, “I just step off?”

**“Yes.”**

Elliot takes a shallow breath, his shoes already removed, stepping down onto the cool purple grass, feeling just like the grass in the ship, “I can do this.”

**“Yes, we can. Are you ready to meet more of us? Our head branches are curious to meet you in person.”**

“As ready as I'll ever be. Let's do this.”

**“We know it will be a good meeting. You will be our esteemed guest and in a week we will begin the process. Till then you are free to change your mind. After will not be advisable.”**

“I understand. Thank you again for this opportunity.”

**“Thank you for saving us,”** Breck replies.

“We saved each other on the ship.”

**“We know, but we understand the necessity to vocalize our appreciate to others who are not connected.”**

“That's new, isn't it?”

**“Yes. Something we learned from you.”**

“Heh... didn't expect to teach an entire race something new.”

**“Neither did we. Come, we have much to do,”** says Breck, leading him toward his future.

A month and three days have passed since Elliot left with the Pflanze. The secret of his departure, though not spoiled by his friends, did get around. The Pflanze could not keep a secret that they are offering Elliot, the man of the hour, the savior of an entire ship for a pulsar star going supernova, now joining the Pflanze hivemind. Speculation and fear ran rampant, but that is to be expected. But news of it was quickly suppressed amongst the higher ups. The entire

station and the ship itself was put under a gag order, not allowed to speak a word of this to any of the outside world.

Elliot's return was also to be kept secret, but for the sake of the relationship between the other races and the Pflanze, his position for the time being was not to be stripped for him, but put under strict observation. An observation that his closest friends were given as their newest mission.

They waited at the spaceport, knowing the ship is going to be docking soon, they felt uneasy, looking at each other, Thorphax breaking the silence, "Can't believe it's been a month."

Derek nods, "Yeah, what do you think he's going to be like?"

Nimbus responds, "Part of me expects me to see him come out half plant half man. Full of leaves and vines, some crazed genetic concoction that combines the best of the world of animal and the world of plants! But then I think that's me reading too many classical sci-fi novels, and I am left without a clue. And that frightens yet excites me."

Thorphax nods, "I couldn't have put it better myself," he says, a vibration rumbles through the station, the ship docking. The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. They look toward the unloading area, the doors opening, connecting the purple grass pathways, Pflanze making their way out.

**"Greetings. Apologies for our delay. The trip back was longer than anticipated,"** said Breck.

Thorphax caught off guard by the Pflanze sudden greeting, "Ah... that's fine. Elliot?" he asks, leaning closer to the Pflanze.

**"No, we are Breck. We work with Nimbus and Drek in the labs."**

"Oh, Breck! Good to see you, sorry, I didn't recognize you without your uh..." says Derek.

**"We have grown back home."**

"If you're Breck, where is Elliot?" asks Nimbus, wings unfurling slightly.

"We are right here," says Elliot, walking to them, the human, walking across the grass with thin metallic tendrils digging in and out of the ground much like the Pflanze, but they quickly contract when he steps onto the metal walkway. At first glance he looks just the same. In need of a haircut, and a shave, but nothing otherworldly different. Even his voice felt normal, natural, a bit excited and happy.

"Elliot! You're still you!" exclaims Nimbus, rushing to give him a hug.

"Of course, we are still us," he replies, returning the hug, Nimbus feeling the outline of an exoskeleton along his back, spine and arms.

She takes a step back, noticing the silver metal outline along the top of his hands, like an extra metallic hand on top of his own, latched upon him, thin, flexible metal, following it she notices that it goes up along the back of his neck, into his uncut hair, to the back of his head, "Ah... so how do you feel?" she asks.

"We feel great, thanks for asking. It is so good to see you all again. We are all glad to be back."

Thorphax approaches, "You sound a little different there buddy," he says.

"We do? We didn't detect that with the others when we spoke. Though we haven't spoken vocally in over two weeks. We had no need to. Perhaps we didn't practice enough before our arrival," he says, his voice showing genuine concern.

Derek steps in, "You sound the same, but your speech pattern is different. Speaking in plurals."

"Ohhh, that. We understand how that can be a little off putting. We as the individual are here, but we are also connected to the others, a bit of them are with us. Meaning when we speak, we are speaking for ourselves and them. Using singular pronouns feels disingenuous. But we can speak singularly for you if you like."

Nimbus shakes her head, "No, no. Speak as you feel is right. We are here to see your return and welcome you back," says Nimbus with a smile.

"We are glad to be back," he says, giving them all a hug, "We have so much work to catch up on. Come, we can walk and talk, we have so much to catch up on."

"We do. The higher ups want us to improve our power output of our core by a full five percent, without using anything new. They say theoretically it should be possible, but you know how theory is."

"That does sound like a bit of a pickle to solve, but I bet we can do it."

"Yeah, as long as we put our heads together," he replies, feeling a little off by the statement, looking at Elliot, noticing he's not fazed by it at all.

"We couldn't agree more," he responds.

Derek looks to Nimbus, "What do you think?"

"Outside of the obvious synthetic enhancement and speech pattern, he sounds happier and a bit like himself."

"Hey! Gloria! How are you doing? Sorry we have been gone for so long, how's the kid?" yells Elliot to a female human crew member, who happened to be walking by.

"I'm doing good Elliot, and you?" she asks.

"We are great," he responds.

Nimbus looks to Derek, "Yeah, he does appear to be mostly his old self again, but how much is that true? We'll see. As his friends we'll do our best to help," she replies.

"Yeah, what I'm thinking. Come we should catch up to them, can't let the two engineers hog the entire conversation," he says with a chuckle rushing up to catch up with them.

"This is going to be an interesting half century," mutters Nimbus, running to catch up. A new stage in Elliot's life is just beginning, and the effects of it with the Pflanze, and other races of the universe is yet to be seen.