

# CHAPTER 1

## *Adveranau – The Northern Mines*

Addy was typing frantically at her hand-held as she walked, using mostly her memory and not-terrible sense of depth to navigate the tunnels in the near darkness. The Northern Mines were one of the first places the colonists had broken ground, so the first mile or so deep was a warren of empty tunnels. The site overseer's office was near the top of the dig itself, down deeper where the crystal was still flourishing everywhere.

She had mail from one of the women who'd been in her cohort during training, an irritating type who was determined to go into data-mining despite having no head for numbers. The mail was confusing gibberish for the most part, but seemed to be suggesting that there was something interesting going on, and she wanted Addy to have a look at it. But her own duties came first, and this morning, Addy's itinerary was blocked out with a meeting with Keshlar, whose office she was now approaching. The man himself was waiting outside the door for her.

"Adveranau! If it isn't my favourite techie!" He clasped her hand warmly and shuffled inside, into what was essentially a well-hewn cave, decorated with some pictures and trinkets Keshlar liked to have around him while he worked. As he took a seat behind his desk, Addy took the one in front of him and narrowed her gaze on the leg he seemed to be favouring.

"Having problems?" she asked. She went to make a note to have medical personnel come down and give the company a check-up, but Keshlar waved away her concern.

"You forget, I'm an old man, Adveranau. My blood pressure's getting low, and you know they say the leg plates are always the first to go." He rolled up his trouser leg to show the crystalline growths on his left leg had, indeed, taken on the much darker purple that showed they weren't getting the necessary blood flow to keep them supple. A small crack around his knee showed how badly the stiffness was beginning to set in. "I'll get retirement soon," he smiled, "spend my days up in the sun, being carried around and telling the young whippersnappers how much harder it was in my day." He laughed from his belly, reassuring Addy.

"Well, as long as you're keeping on top of your replacement, then I won't worry about it." She tapped through to the reports that had led her to booking in the meeting. "What I'm here about is your numbers." Keshlar looked concerned, so she quickly went on. "Your mine still has the best ratio of workers to productivity. It's the deepest mine we've got, but you're producing faster than some of the newest. Honestly, the only bad thing about it is that as long as you're running this place so well, the scientists who are meant to be refining the crystal farms are going to rest on their laurels."

Keshlar looked quite pleased with himself. "Well, I make sure these lads know what we're here for. Every one of them is passionate about the job. A few of them even have sisters working up in the spires. Every time they go home for a holiday, they hear about what you ladies in tech are doing with all our hard work. Little things like that help keep em going."

Adveranau nodded. “Well, actually, that’s what I’m here to talk to you about. Nursery 7, over in the eastern colony, is showing record high numbers of births, and nurseries 14 to 21 are all saying the same thing. Up until now, we’ve been funnelling a small percentage of crystal product from each mine into nutrition, but you’re the first person who’s going to hear the new strategy.”

Keshlar leaned forwards in pretence of privacy. “Oh aye?”

“In the next few weeks, we’ll be taking steps to see to it that our highest-production mine – that’s you – will be dedicated solely to infant nutrition. From now on only Northern Mine 2 will be routed for that purpose, as it’s been deemed that its will be able to handle the demand.”

The expression Keshlar wore was one of abject joy. “Oh, no, really? Oh, that makes walking around on this knee worthwhile to hear that.” He sat back in his chair. “I think I just might have to ‘accidentally’ let that leak to the lads. There’s a morale boost if ever I heard of one, knowing our mine will be wholly responsible for helping the wee ones grow their plates.” His greying moustache was quivering as his smile stretched. “Oh, that’s great news. There’s no more important a job for any miner than making sure the babies’ll have their nutrition.” His eyebrows lifted. “Not that what you ladies do up in the spires, giving us all the tech you’ve been coming up with, isn’t just as-”

Addy smiled and raised her hand at him. “No offence taken. After all, where would any of us be if we hadn’t gotten our crystals as children? Even if everything else fails, our plates are what keep us going. And that’s what your ... er, lads ... will be focusing on now.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, and the meeting ended much earlier than expected. Addy checked the time, and realised she would be able to go up to the spires before lunch and find out what those strange readings were about.

### *Cenec – The forest near the village*

“I love how the forest smells after it rains,” Cenec said with a sigh. He scratched at his irritated skin and pointedly ignored the incredulous look Fen was giving him. They were headed back home, taking turns carrying the mid-sized buck Fen had brought down around midday. Unfortunately, the weather had turned and they’d been forced to seek shelter until the storm had passed, and now it was nearly dark. Fen was in a foul mood, something Cenec, as his best friend, took as a challenge.

Fen dumped the buck on the ground, scratching furiously at the back of his neck. The deer’s fur had gotten damp in the rain, and it had raised a rash where it rested on his bare skin. Cenec took the signal to start his own turn at carrying. He shifted his headscarf down so it covered his own neck, leaving the front of his hair subject to the occasional acidic drip that still filtered down from the branches above.

“It smells like rain eating through tree bark,” Fen growled, stopping himself from scratching through the skin with some effort. He bent down to retrieve his burden and noticed it was already draped over Cenec’s shoulders. Without thanks, he began moving again.

“Exactly,” Cenec pointed out breezily. “Pine, wood, that green leafy smell and a just little bit of soured wine. Clears your nose right out.” Fen didn’t respond, so he changed tack. “At least it keeps the animals away. Makes my job easier. Don’t have to worry about running into something hunting *us* on the way home.” Being a spotter, seeing as he was useless with every weapon known to man, Cenec’s job in the hunting duo was to keep an eye on the path they were taking so they didn’t get lost, and to keep watch for anything dangerous nearby, while Fen was focused on his prey.

“Imagine if we hadn’t got that deer when we did,” Fen grumbled. “The rain keeping the animals away would have meant we went home empty-handed.” Cenec had never really understood Fen’s pessimism, and nor had most of the other villagers, making him a bit of an outcast. But even at twenty-two, he was still easily the best hunter the village had seen in the four generations it had been around, so everyone tried to just ignore the permanent black cloud that followed him everywhere.

“But we did get the deer,” Cenec reminded him. “So why worry about the ‘ifs’?”

“Maybe, but at least some of the meat will be burnt and tainted now, and the pelt’s as good as worthless.” The animal’s coat had indeed gone rather patchy in the places that had gotten wet, and pinkish red flesh showed through underneath.

“Good solid guy like this, though, he’ll have plenty of meat that we can use. Not to mention good bones for soup, and plenty of sinew for bowstrings and the like. No one’s going to be disappointed with him,” he encouraged.

“I am,” Fen muttered and then started walking faster, forcing Cenec to fall behind, unable to keep up with his pace.

“Well, I think you’re a beauty,” he said to the buck who, unsurprisingly, didn’t respond. It’s tongue was dangling out the side of its mouth in death. Not that animals could talk anyway, Cenec thought, considering the concept with a smile. Then, on the extremely unlikely chance that the creatures were smarter than expected and humans just hadn’t caught on to that fact yet, he petted the deer’s flank and said, “We really do appreciate this by the way. I know it doesn’t make being dead any better, but you’re going to feed a lot of people, and maybe clothe some, and be really useful in a lot of ways.” He glanced around to make sure Fen hadn’t heard him and, with a sigh, shifted the deer’s weight on his shoulder and tried to catch up.

### ***Jessup – City Slums***

Jessup skipped through an alley, the tech on his left eye whirring as it quickly adjusted to let him see in the dim light. It was nearly night, which suited Jessup just fine. He’d been holding out all day for the sun to set so he could head to the nearest repair shop, since he refused to go outside during the day. Too sunny, too bright, too many people. Adult people, from the young and fit to the old and nearly dead, or retired, same thing, running around to their jobs and their families and all the other crap people ran to when they got too old to realise they were just rats in a trap. Jessup refused to be a part of the day-folk.

He put his hand to the headphone over his right ear, intending to turn the volume up a notch on his music, but his fingers twitched like they’d been doing all day, and the station changed to some kiddy pop crap. With a wince, Jessup pulled the

headset off, fixed the channel, replaced it, and then glared at his hand like it was a separate entity that could feel his disapproval.

Of course, it wasn't his hand's fault. Something in his internal software was glitching, and had been sending errant signals to his fingers for days. He'd ignored the tingling at first, but then the spasms had started, and they were going to drive him crazy. He'd spent the morning having his computer run diagnostics on all of his tech, but it had shown up clean for bugs or viruses, which meant a coding problem. Jessup might have been all about sticking it to the man, but even he wasn't dumb enough to go screwing around with his own internal software, so he'd had no choice but to leave the sanctuary of his bleak, dark, messy one-room apartment and head for the nearest installer that also offered repairs.

He used a mom-and-pop type owner-run store, not only because it was a little cheaper, albeit the tech was less up-to-date, but also because he refused to give his custom to some big, corporation run, moral cess-pool of a big-name franchise.

Jessup shook his hand out, and then cracked his knuckles for good measure. He really hoped they'd be able to fix it on the spot. The other options were being told to come back, and he didn't think he could keep from going mad with another day of twitching, or having them wipe his hard-drive chip and having to download all his programing from scratch, which could take hours. And would cost more than he'd like, too.

With his fully-functioning hand, he shook the coke can he was carrying to see how much he had left, then then tilted his head back and emptied the cold, fizzy caffeine onto his tongue. The can dropped from his hand and he kicked it once before a cleaner snapped out of the drain and scooped it up. A flicker in the corner of Jessup's lens screen alerted him that demerits were leeching pennies from his account. A red message popped up in his field of vision to tell him that he was three minor infractions or one moderate offense away from a permanent reduction in allowance.

He swiped his hand through the air with a grunt, but as it was his left, twitchy hand, the screen didn't pick up the gesture or respond. He repeated the gesture more violently with his right and the warning slipped off his screen, but it had already made its point, and his mood had dropped even lower. He reached across to his headset with his good hand and turned the music up even louder, letting the screaming voice, the deafening bass, and the screeching, discordant guitar soothe his nerves.

### *Kintriell – The Palace gardens*

The gravel crunched under Kintriell's boots as she marched towards the Captain's office. She muttered to herself under her breath as she ordered her thoughts for her first disciplinary meeting as a Squad Commander. She had to appear tough on her subordinates, but not engender hatred.

She let out a long stream of breath that crystallised in the cold morning air. The gardens were unusually beautiful in the winter, with the frost lining the edges of every leaf and blade of grass. The busy colours of the summer had been buried under the cold uniformity. It suited Kintriell much better this way.

The added difficulty, she thought, returning her consciousness to the matter at hand, was that the officer to be disciplined was older than she was. A fresh recruit would be easy, but this man... For a start, she thought with a frown, he should have known better. But on a more personal note, some of the officers took issue with having such a young Commander. Kintriel didn't much care how they felt about it, as long as they did their jobs, but she wasn't naïve enough to think that their respect for her position went a long way towards morale, and morale went a long way in battle.

This particular fellow's infraction might have cost lives. Falling asleep on watch at the Lake Gate when there had been banshee sightings in the past weeks. What would the next thing be? Would he be so lax as to miss signs of incoming cat-folk hunters? Would he lose focus while guarding the Palace and allow assassins to reach the Empress? No, she needed to make sure that her squad were ready to work hard, and do their duties with all of the honour their position demanded, and for that, she had to get through today calmly but sternly.

She was only a few paces off the Captain's room when a young woman burst out with a look of panic. "Commander!" she gasped breathlessly. Kintriel took a moment to recognise her as the Captain's assistant.

"What is it,?" she asked. The young woman seemed too panicked to speak. "Take a deep breath. Where's Captain Tarren?" The CA shook her head.

"He was called away. There's something happening, out on the plains. At first they thought it was cat-folk magic, but then ... the cat-folk seemed afraid of it, they've all fled. Even the kitsune won't go near it. All the Captains been called out with their squads, and Tarren said I was to wait for you and tell you to go too!"

Kintriel processed this speedily in her mind. "Where on the plains?" she asked, grabbing the CA's upper arm and forcing her to march alongside as she veered back towards the direction of the barracks. The woman gasped in pain and tried to keep up without the guiding hand.

"They said it came out near the cat-folk village."

"What came out?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. It was a recruit stationed on watch over the village. He ran here as soon as he noticed the changes." Tears were running down the young woman's face and Kintriel realised she might have been gripping a little too tightly. She stopped and turned to put her hands on the other woman's shoulders.

"Okay, just breathe. I'm going to go to the stables and head after the Captains. I want you to go to Barrack 12 and tell my squad what you've just told me. Tell them that they are to prepare for battle and follow their Commander and Captains with all due haste."

Her eyes went wide. "But, Commander Kin-"

"Go, now. There's no time to waste." She shoved the woman off in the right direction and started marching towards the stables, but couldn't keep herself from breaking into a jog within a few steps. Yes, she should have given the order to her squad herself. Yes, she should ride out with her squad *or* her Captain and she was instead catching herself alone somewhere in the middle.

Kintriel had her position for a number of reasons, but taking risks wasn't one of them. As she saddled her horse, part of her mind, the soldier part, was able to take a step back from her own actions, and watch with detachment. So she was still a little

girl after all, chasing after her Captain in the hopes of keeping him safe from a world he was far better equipped to handle than she. But logic didn't come into it. No matter how many times she tried to convince herself she should just wait and lead her squad out, that it would be morale-boosting and team-building and all the things she'd been working so hard on, she still couldn't bring herself to lose a moment. Her mind was full of Tarren, facing unknown danger somewhere in the plains, danger quite possibly magical in nature, something no human could face on equal terms.

She rode her horse hard out of the city gates and towards the danger. She was almost in sight of her superiors and their squads when the earth began to shake. The trees nearby were wrenched from the ground, she was flung from her horse, and a great howling set up so loud it seemed like the planet itself was screaming as the world ended.

## Chapter 2

### *Advaranau – The Upper Spires*

“Disaster. End of the world type stuff.”

Addy rolled her eyes. The young woman in front of her was swaying dramatically in front of her computer. “Maybe you should tell me what you’ve found?” she said pointedly. She had little patience for dramatics. Ikka looked despondent at the shut down of her hysterics.

“Fine,” she grumbled, rubbing her head plate with a hint of embarrassment. “Look here.” She pointed to the monitor she’d been working on, covered with seismic readings from just south of the spire. “We’ve been getting this on and off for most of the day, and it looks like it showed up first last night. Little rumbles, on and off.”

“Earthquake?” Addy asked, using one of the old worlds left over from the place the first colonists had come from. They’d never had anything like an earthquake on this planet, but there was plenty of literature about the homeworld still floating around.

“That’s what we thought,” Ikka said, looking overjoyed that she didn’t have to explain the concept. “But wait.” Her voice was hushed and the crystal tips of her nails clicked on the keyboard as she swept through a number of reports. “Look, see? We sent a couple of older woman down to have a good look, get some on-site readings. There was a spike while they were there, showed up on the computers but-”

“But they didn’t feel any tremor,” Addy finished, leaning over Ikka’s shoulder.

“Right,” Ikka muttered, angry Addy had stolen her punchline. “Whatever we’re picking up on, it’s not on the physical plane. Apparently our tech went a bit funny in the area, and one of the women said it, and I quote, ‘made her crystals feel funny.’”

Addy’s brow furrowed. “If it’s giving off crystal resonance that suggests there’s something wrong with the energy field, but we’re not showing any unusual activity at the poles.”

Ikka shook her head. “I know. I can’t figure it out.” She ground her teeth in frustration. “It’s like nothing we’ve ever seen before. It’s ...” she paused, but she didn’t need to finish her sentence.

“Have you shown the quantum researchers?”

“No,” Ikka assured her. “I wanted your opinion first.” Addy looked at her in surprise; she’d always thought Ikka resented her place at the head of the class in the academy. “It’s just,” Ikka added, blushing, “you always seem to know how to handle things. You’re a problem solver, Addy.”

The nickname, from someone she hadn’t given permission to use it, made her bristle, but she swept the feeling aside for more important matters and shook her head. “The multi-verse theorists will have a field day with this. They’ve been pushing that that idea of parallel universes for years, but this ... this could be some kind of proof.” She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. “I suppose you should send them the data and let them figure it out.”

Ikka nodded, but didn't move. "One problem." She bit her lip, and Addy saw she even had crystalline coverings on her teeth, an unusual attribute. "It's just, like I said, it's been going on all night, and so far today. But ... it's getting worse. Whatever is happening, I think it's on its way. Or, getting worse. Or something. I don't think we have time to figure out what's going on. I think it's going to happen whether we know about it or not."

Addy pushed her aside, finally getting the feeling of urgency that had been radiating off Ikka since she'd arrived. She plugged her hand-held into the main computer and swept the data over. "These echoes," she said, touching three fingertips to the screen to highlight them, "these are distinct, but they each repeat." Ikka waited for her to go on, but Addy was just thinking out loud. "The bounce-back is getting shorter, the energy signals ... that's why the tremor readings are getting faster." Her brain was going a million miles an hour now as she racked her memory for the multiverse theory she'd paid attention to in school. Physics had been one of those classes she never studied for, just finding the answers without having to think about them. But the only answer her brain was providing was one she didn't want to think about.

She stood up, pushing the chair into Ikka again, who looked pained. "I'm going to the site. We need to have someone there when it happens."

"When what happens?"

Addy was already out the door as she yelled, "We're going to collide."

She knew, as she raced down the stairs, jumping and skipping to speed up, jarring the weak, barely formed plates in her toes and ankles, that she was guessing. She knew that it made no sense. But that was just how her brain worked, and if – when – she was proved wrong, she would take all the teasing necessary for her over-reaction. But on the off-chance that her mind wasn't lying to her, she wanted to be at ground zero.

She was panting by the time her hand-held told her she was on-site. She wasn't built for physical exertion, her crystal plates mostly internal and cranial. She was a scientist, and the run had her dizzy from lack of oxygen. Her head-plate ached. But after a minute or two, she realised it wasn't just her. Her hand-held was emitting a soft screech and the screen was flickering through the colour spectrum for no good reason. As her breathing returned to normal, she realised the headache wasn't going away. Placing a hand to her head, she felt the vibrations of her own plates.

"How," she said out loud, even though there was no one to hear her. The other women had said they'd felt something in their crystals, but this, this sensation was too intense to be the same thing. As Ikka had said, the event, whatever it was, was becoming more imminent. Addy took a hesitant step forwards, listening to her own plates make a humming noise she'd never heard outside of a mine as her crystals picked up on something she couldn't.

She waved a hand through the air in front of her, and the small crystal scars on the back of her hand tingled. Another step forwards, and another. Then, though nothing she could see had changed, the solid-ness of the ground beneath her disappeared and she fell into darkness, clutching her hand-held to her as her crystals screamed.

## *Cenec – Home Village*

Cenec licked meat grease off his fingers and belched contentedly. Beside him, Fen had fallen asleep, tired from the day and comforted by a full belly and a warm fire. The rain had stopped just in time for dinner, so the whole village had come out to help clean the deer and divide it up, cooking it on spits over a number of fires dotted around. Cenec and Fen had gotten first choice of cut, and had gotten their fill of dark, crispy meat, still hot enough to burn their fingers as they tore into it. Even Fen hadn't been able to find something to complain about after that.

The village was beginning to quiet down now. The other hunters had taken themselves to bed early, knowing tomorrow would be another full day, while everyone else took the day's various catches – rabbits, fish, a few turkeys and other game-birds – to be pickled or salted according to need. The deer's hide, missing a few small patches where the rain had burned it out, was stretched out on spikes, ready to be cured in the sun tomorrow, looking impressive despite its injuries next to the smaller pelts from the other catches.

Cenec looked up at the stars, visible now that the sky had been cleared of clouds. Away off in one direction, he could see the hulking shadowy outlines of buildings that still stood, even after all this time. They blotted out the stars, and it amused him to play join-the-dots around them, tracing pictures with his finger.

Beside him, Fen started snoring, and that was Cenec's cue that it was time to go to bed. He leaned over his best friend, bundling him up in his arms. Fen was a heavy sleeper, and didn't stir once as Cenec lifted him up, his shoulders offering protest at this new burden, and carried him back to his family's hut. Fen's mom, a sleepy-eyed, sharp-tongued woman, was still awake and she nodded to Cenec as she watched him carry her son into his room and roll him onto his bed. After a moment of thought, Cenec tugged Fen's shoes off, tutting over the small holes in the soles where he'd stepped in a puddle because he was too busy grumbling. He tied the laces and draped the shoes over his own neck, determined to patch the soles before Fen woke in the morning. It was, after all, half his fault they'd been out in the weather. He stooped again to pull Fen's shirt over his head, eliciting an annoyed sound that didn't come close to being words, before Fen rolled over and pulled his blanket over on top of himself.

With a smile, Cenec backed out and shut the door, throwing Fen's mom a wave as he left and trudged back to his own hut. The main room was empty, as usual. Cenec's mom had been killed when he was still so small that he didn't remember her, and his father had never quite gotten over it. He put a smile on each morning and went about his work, but as soon as it got dark, he turned into someone else, someone who said Cenec reminded him too much of his wife, someone who took a bottle of white liquor into the forest at dusk and didn't return til the moon was high in the sky, stumbling into the hut and falling asleep on the rug.

Cenec put Fen's shoes down near his door to remind him about them when he woke, then went to the shelf his father had put up for him to keep their books off the floor in case of floods. Most of the pages were crinkled and yellow, and a few of their

covers had been pilfered, the hard cardboard being useful for other things. Cenec felt bad doing it, but he knew he be stripping another one tomorrow, to repair Fen's boots. He was sure his father wouldn't notice, and his mother would have understood.

He lifted down one of the soft-covered ones, with a picture on the front that had faded to obscurity but that he could still remember. He lay back on his bed, fully clothed, and opened the book, even though he had it, like all the others, pretty much memorised. He opened it and left the soft feminine voice in his memory read the first few paragraphs to him. Ideally it should have made him sleepy, but the candle was low, and he found himself straining to make out certain words, interrupting the flow of the voice.

He struggled on for a while, determined that getting up to change the candle would only wake him more, but eventually the light flickered and went out and Cenec found himself staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, more awake and tired than before and, to cap it off, he needed to pee. With a loud sigh he stood up and, eyes having long since adjusted to the dimness of his room, was able to put the book back where it belonged on the shelf. He still had his boots on, which made him curse when he realised his bed would be muddy, but at least he didn't need to try to work the laces in the dark.

Cenec left the hut and wandered through the village. Most of the other buildings were dark, just a few lamps and candles showing the other can't-sleepers and the odd night-owls still going about their business. When he got past the knee-high wall that marked the edge of the village, he through his eyes back up at the sky.

Everyone always called Cenec a dreamer, because he liked looking at the stars, but the way he saw it, everyone else had their little quirks too. Some people sewed, some people swam, some people liked to mix random substances to see if they could make something from a recipe they'd found in old books. Cenec liked to look at the stars. He'd had a book once, that he'd since lost but still remembered, that said before things had changed, people used to use the stars when they went out into the ocean in big ships, so they wouldn't get lost. Cenec was only half-sure he knew what an ocean was, and he could hardly get lost in the nearest lake, but he used to dream about taking voyages like that book had described.

He had to take more notice of his surroundings while he did his business, but on the walk back, without the urgency of his bladder pressing him on, he walked slower, and didn't take his eyes off the sky. He tried to remember the story of the book, but he never could. Maybe there hadn't been a story, just words about the stars and the shapes they made. Some of the shapes had stories of their own, but he hadn't understood those at the time, so they hadn't stuck with him.

He was making up stories of his own, about him and Fen discovering an ocean and building a ship to cross it, Fen complaining all the while, when his foot came down on ground that wasn't there, and he pitched forwards into nothingness.

## *Jessup – City slums*

The puncture on Jessup's neck still hurt where the repair guy – Jessup hadn't bothered to get his name – had stab him with a large-bore needle to inject repair nanites. He said that a few people were showing problems with the latest update patch, and the nanites would fix it up overnight. When Jessup had complained about the needle, the huge bear-like man had laughed and said he'd like it even worse the next day, when the nanites had done their job and left his system. Just thinking about the fact that he was going to have to piss out the tiny robots made Jessup wince. Supposedly the whole process was pain-free, but no one had believed that little marketing lie in a couple decades.

Shoving computers into your body hurt. It wasn't exactly a surprise. Jessup had been in bed for days after he got the 'pain free' implant in his eye, blood pouring down his face in his tears. But people put up with it, because a couple days of pain after the surgery were a good price for living with tech. Jessup didn't even want to think about living without it. He'd left his folks as soon as he turned eighteen because they were part of that old generation that didn't trust the tech and forbade him to have it. He hadn't seen them in six years, but the tech was worth that too.

He rubbed his neck, wondering if he was just trying to convince himself, when something pinged in his eyescreen. He tried to focus on the disturbance, but the vision in his left eye blurred til he couldn't make out a thing. He yelled wordlessly, wondering if this was something the nanites were doing, when his right arm flung violently away from his body. But his right arm wasn't the one that had been malfunctioning. And it wasn't so much like it was jerking, but more like it was being pulled.

Jessup tried to pull his arm back, but it was like trying to pull two magnets apart, if the magnets weighed fifty pounds each. His other arm started hovering in front of him, pulling in the same direction. He tried to step back, but his feet wouldn't obey him. He was leaning forwards so far that he was going to fall if he didn't move forwards, and instinctively he took a step.

Immediately that same pull registered all over his body. He could feel himself being tugged and guided forwards, no matter how much he tried to resist. He tried to look around, but his eyescreen was still out and it was too dark for his unimproved eye to see anything.

"Help!" he called, his voice coming out scared and weedy. There was no way anyone would have heard him. He cleared his throat and yelled again, but it seemed like his vocal chords had restricted and he could barely make a noise. He started to panic, pulling back.

He made the mistake of stepping forwards, trying to lean back at the same time, hoping to gain enough traction to pull back. Instead one of his feet lifted off the ground, the other bumping and skidding as he slid unerringly forwards, towards some unknown point. No matter how he tried, he couldn't regain his balance, and eventually he pitched forwards, nearly falling on his face but twisting at the last moment to come down heavily on his ass. A squeak escaped him that should have

been an angry, pained yell, but he still couldn't make the noises come out the way he wanted them to. His eyescreen was coming back online now, showing a reboot message that he didn't have the wherewithal to read as he careened across the asphalt, scraping his palms and knees to hell as he tried to stop himself, impelled by some unseen force.

Finally his eye booted up and he could see, but now he was rolling and tumbling. He could feel the strength of the force and his screen helpfully informed him that he was 'too close to an electromagnetic field. Please retreat to a safe distance.' He would have laughed if he hadn't been crying as he fell forwards one last time, sure he was about to break his face as he bowled towards the ground face first. He shut his eyes and braced for impact.

Except the impact never came. When he opened his eyes again he was in blackness. And all-surrounding blackness that even his hardware couldn't see in. He was falling, but he no longer felt pulled like he had a second before. It didn't even feel like gravity, really, except he was sure he was falling down. He panicked for a moment, wondering if he would fall forever, or worse, if he wouldn't.

But the falling sensation slowed, more like floating, or maybe he had just reached terminal velocity. He figured hitting the ground at this speed couldn't hurt – he'd die before he had time to register pain. It wasn't as comforting a thought as he'd hoped it would be.

It felt like he'd been falling for minutes when he became able to make out shapes in the darkness, his eyescreen picking up slight alterations in the shades of black around him. His other eye was still completely blind, but he got the impression of a world around him, or worlds, really. His heart raced as something swooped towards him, passing right through him and out the other side. Jessup wriggled and writhed so he could turn around and watch it, but it passed out of sight almost the second he found it again.

He realised he wasn't falling straight down. With no sense of gravity or motion, he'd been unaware that he was, in fact, being tossed violently in first one direction, then the other, all the while falling inexorably further down. He began to see buildings, their shapes contorting and twisting as they merged and melded with each other. He could almost sense the way the air bent around him, twisting this way and that, as too many things tried to take up too little space.

He recognised some of the buildings. His apartment high-rise. The local bank towers. But others were alien to him. There was a castle, wide and low, with turrets, and gates, and, it looked like gardens surrounding it as it fell through the air with him. It morphed suddenly as a pale tower, looking sleek and metallic even in the lack of light, fell through it, getting stuck on the battlements and spinning end over end until a passing tree, something huge that had been extinct for centuries, crashed into it and all three went flying.

He was almost too busy watching the spectacle around him to notice the ground that seemed to appear out of nowhere, approaching fast, but his eyescreen was kind enough to inform him.

*Impact imminent. Life expectancy failure.*

Thanks for that, he thought, a little of his nihilistic sarcasm finally returning to him now that the wonder had worn off. He shut his eyes and, for the second time, braced for impact.

### *Kintriël – The Nexus*

The impact had knocked the breath out of her, and Kintriël squirmed on the ground as she struggled to open her lungs. After what seemed like an eternity, she gasped raggedly, air whistling down her throat. She took a few deep gulps of air and sat up slowly, her head spinning.

The ground under her was not the grassy dirt of the plains. It was hard and cold, like gravel, but softer than stone. There were darker flecks in it that shone like glass. When she was able to, Kintriël stood and took in her surroundings. As far as she could see, the world was dark, but after the pitch-blackness of her endless fall, she could at least see well enough here, though the world seemed to be shades of grey.

She could make out the palace, far in the distance, but something seemed to be wrong with it. It blinked and flickered, and there was a tree growing out of the roof. The unbroken roof. It was more like the tree was part of the building. She blinked a few times, straining her eyes, but the image became no clearer.

Closer, she could see more unexplainable things. A hole in the ground, like a warren or den, but bristling with black crystals. Or maybe they weren't black; there was something of colour in them, but it was too dark for her to see properly. Buildings made of steel, a metal so rare that even her sword wasn't pure, but laced with silver. But these buildings were huge, rising up into the sky so she couldn't see the top of them, the metal glinting in light that she couldn't see the source of. The windows shone similarly, made of some material she could see straight through. Pure glass, perhaps, though that seemed as foolish as pure steel.

She barely had time to take this in when she heard that whistling noise again, followed by a humming sound that was like a kitsune cub screaming. Kintriël covered her ears but kept her eyes wide open, finding the source of the sound. Something was falling out of the sky, tossing and tumbling as it clutching something to its chest. It looked like a cross between a person and a rock, and when it hit the ground, a cracking sound came from it.

When it stood, Kintriël's breath caught again. She thought it was a woman, perhaps, but no magic could have prepared her for the sight of her face. One of her eyes and the majority of her head were covered in the same kind of crystal that Kintriël had seen in the pits nearby. She was wearing clothes of a soft, flowing fabric, and when she stood, seemingly not as winded as Kintriël had been, her first concern was for the object she carried.

Kintriël didn't have time to ask questions, because the noise started up again. This time, though, only the air was whistling and screaming. The other noise this shape made was ... laughter? As she found the falling creature, she watched as it spread out its arms, controlling its flight by turning and twisting, throwing its head back in delight as it veered towards the earth much slower than the other two had, the coat covering his body flapping and catching the breeze as he circled over and over, coming in for a landing for more dignified than Kintriël's had been.

The man bounced on his heels when he touched down, and immediately looked over at Kintriel and the other ... woman. He waved, his face alight with wonderment as he moved towards him. Kintriel couldn't help but notice his ragged clothes, the scar that marked his left eyes, the broken, yellowed teeth behind his smile. She took a step back as he moved forwards, wondering if he had some kind of disease. The man's face fell momentarily, but he was distracted the next second by a fourth shape descending from the sky.

Kintriel's keen hearing made out sobs, and another kind of humming, different that the woman. Sharper, more piercing. She thought she heard the person speak the moment before he made impact, but she didn't make out the words, and the next moment he was landing poorly, worse than Kintriel had. At least she'd crashed down and stopped. This one seemed to have gained too much momentum, and bounced when he hit, then went rolling and bouncing for another twenty or thirty paces before he came to a stop and groaned.

The needlessly cheerful man went to help him up, but the man on the ground seemed to take offence and shoved him away, dusting himself off and limping back towards herself and the ... she honestly didn't know what to call it.

"Just what the hell are you people doing?" the angry one yelled. His accent was strange, and the way he held himself was nothing like royalty *or* commonfolk. He moved like a child, aside from the painful wince every time one of his feet touched down.

"We're not doing anything," came a – definitely feminine – voice from behind Kintriel. The man didn't even seem to register her appearance, although that could have been because his own face was marred with some kind of metal, not unlike the woman's was.

"Bull. I get sucked into some kind of vortex and thrown down on asphalt after the acid-trip fall from hell." Kintriel had little to know idea what most of those words meant, but the sentiment behind them was clear. "And you tell me-"

"My name's Cenec!" the diseased-looking man yelled, trying to distract the other one. All three of them turned to look at him and he blushed. "I mean. You know. If anyone wanted to know."

The metal boy narrowed his eyes. "Jessup."

They looked at the two women and Kintriel muttered her own name. Now all of them were looking at the crystalline creature-girl.

She was distracted by the thing in her hand but she looked up briefly and waved her hand dismissively.

"Yes, yes, and I'm Addy. But we have more important things to deal with." She looked up and her eyes travelled to each of them individually, seeing them for the first time. She glanced around at their surroundings and then back at the thing she held. "Four. Four readings, four of us. I guess we're all here. Now we just need to find out what 'here' is.