

**City of the
Forgotten Sample
Dan Thornton**
Exiles War - II

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CITY OF THE FORGOTTEN

SAMPLE

Exiles War

Book Two

Dan Thornton

Chapter 1

From afar, it could have been mistaken for a fragment of an ancient celestial body. A vast, hollowed shell of rock and crystal drifted silently through the void. Its surface was a maze of jagged spires, and age had worn deep scars into its skin. The ship bore no engines, no ports, no windows, just a shell that held a fragile world.

Nearly forgotten, in a disused section of the biosphere, a lush jungled wetland surrounded the warm waters of a small brackish lake. Near the shore, shrubs and reeds gave way to sedges and grasses of all types. Tucked into one of these thickly grassed areas was a small clearing of moss, spongy and burbling. A perfect place to get away from the noisy bustle of the city that dominated the center of the ship.

Aela'ris lay hidden on the comfortable mossy bed. Her delicate hands cupped, supporting her head, she sighed heavily in contemplation. Overhead, past the blades of long grass, the sky glowed a deep purplish red, signifying the dawning of their home star of Veyshara. A disk of dust and rock around this ancient flame caught the light and cast it back, spilling a pale glow that left her wide, sensitive eyes barely aware of the dawn shadows.

Aela'ris belonged to the Currents, young adults on the cusp of completing their education and entering society. Before them had come the Guides, and before them the Elders. It was the Elders who had begun the perilous journey, believing their descendants would one day stand upon a real world, one of water and rock and salt beneath a warming star they could finally call home—not this simulation of one.

This little hidden corner of the fen was where she came to think.

"Ancestors, what should I do?" She let her thoughts drift into the void, hoping for a sign, some spark of inspiration to guide her. The night before, her father had all but commanded her to abandon the School of Science, where she had studied for the last eight spans of her life, and instead begin training as his assistant and eventual successor. Among the Krynnid, such a

post was one of the highest honors, something her peers envied. Yet to Aela'ris, it felt like betrayal.

Unbidden, her mind wandered to the final verse of her soul-song.

Shora-thyn vela'sharan veynira—"Guide me through the shadowed waters, until dawn's first light."

The song was sacred to her. Her mother had given it to her at birth, as mothers had done throughout history. Others might someday hear it, but only those she trusted with the deepest parts of herself. One day, if fate allowed, she would pass it to a Newling of her own.

She lingered on the idea.

Which soul would return?

The genetic archives still held the patterns of generations long gone, many from before her ancestors had fled Kryn aboard the city ship. Since leaving the birthing waters of their home planet four generations ago, no Krynnid had ever been born naturally. Cloning had sustained their people for a time, but even that miracle was beginning to fail. Now, not a single successful Newling had been birthed in quite some time.

She pushed herself up from the sedge, stretching her back and slipping her legs into the warm waters.

Could she tell her father the cool, never-changing certainty of science was the only thing that gave her even the smallest bit of happiness? Should she just admit she wasn't like the older generations who longed to live in harmony, lost in a sea of anonymity? That she just wanted to be herself and not what he and society expected her to be?

By the time she had become a current and gathered with the other young adults, she had learned to hide herself, putting on a mask of togetherness with the others and keeping her irregular views silent.

Aela'ris had found some measure of comradery in the halls of science, but even there, her strong individuality had become apparent to any of the elders who looked too closely, so she kept everyone at a comfortable distance.

She remembered her first days at the school, where she had learned of the universe's vastness, of stars burning in endless rivers of light, and of the distant world their people were meant to claim. That world teemed with life, species spun out of the cosmos in forms both strange and beautiful. The thought of stepping onto its soil after such a long journey was exhilarating. It was the one dream that kept her heart fixed on the future.

In the study of the cosmos, she'd accidentally connected with several other like-minded souls who, like her, felt that there was something else. Something beyond the cloth and rigid societal structures that bound them all together so tightly. Something beyond the collective society of the Krynnid.

Among them, none had become closer to her than her best friend, Thal'ara. The daughter of her father's assistant, she possessed the same quiet curiosity that had drawn Aela'ris toward the study of the cosmos. Far more outspoken, she delighted in pushing the boundaries of what their society considered acceptable, though experience had taught her how far she could go before drawing unwanted attention.

The soul-song bubbled in her thoughts again.

Something about the last verse brushed across her inner being, calling out, pushing her to hum the sacred song once again, the pigments along her arms shimmering pale pink as she gained a measure of peace.

Suddenly, her mind became clear. The song sounded loudly in her mind. She could no longer take the shadowed way of deception.

"I must tell him the truth," she said aloud, rolling to her side and then rising to her knees. "Whatever might happen." She lifted her head, peeking above the tall grasses. The first light of their simulated home star warmed her face, filling her with a quiet sense of peace. She drew a deep breath and dipped her fingers into the lake, tracing gentle lines from her forehead down the sides of her eyes, ending near the corners of her mouth.

She silently thanked her ancestors and stood. With a light leap, she landed on solid ground and followed the narrow path back toward the city, passing

old equipment long forgotten and slowly being claimed by moss and creeping vines, the heavy vegetation engulfing her.

A part of her ached at the decision. Her father had said he wanted her close, that he wished to reconnect after so many years of distance. The words had surprised her, warmed her even, but they tangled her mind with confusion. He'd always dismissed her, always regarded the School of Science with veiled disdain, and yet now he expected her loyalty?

"I must trust in the truth," she said, repeating a mantra that had been instilled in her by every teacher, every elder, every guide within the collective for as long as she could remember.

Her pace slowed, a feeling playing at the edges of her thoughts. Doubt swirled in her soul.

"Perhaps I should speak to Mother first," she said, padding along the nearly invisible path that cut through the dense greenery.

She stepped onto the elevated walkway, instinctively avoiding the worst of the pitted, cracked stone. More than once, she'd neglected to do so and spent the evening picking chips of stone from the soles of her feet.

The light of Veyshara grew stronger, warming the tops of her feet and the stone beneath them. She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the soft breeze ease her uncertainty before continuing.

Walking at a brisk pace, she followed the winding paths through the greenery that ringed the city. Towering fronds and broad-leafed plants crowded close, many growing far beyond where the guides once would have trimmed them. As a child, she remembered clear sightlines through the vegetation. Now thick vines draped from branches overhead and crept across forgotten stone borders. The air felt heavy with moisture and the scent of growing things. Somewhere nearby, water trickled through hidden channels beneath the undergrowth.

The growth seemed a little thicker each cycle. There were fewer guides tending it than there had been when she was young, and many of the pathways had begun to disappear beneath creeping roots and tangled foliage, especially near the edges of the dome.

Before long, the vegetation began to thin, and the pale towers of the city rose ahead of her.

The light, now unchecked by the dense growth, strengthened noticeably, and the air warmed. Here and there, small clusters of older Krynnid walked the pathways. Several noticed her and watched with quiet suspicion. A young woman wandering alone was still unusual enough to draw curious looks from the older generations.

The city unfolded around her as she continued. Smooth towers of pale stone rose from pools and gardens, their curved surfaces catching the strengthening light. Walkways wound between them like strands of kelp drifting on a gentle current. Water spilled from narrow channels carved into the architecture, though several now ran slower than she remembered, feeding terraces crowded with flowering plants and hanging vines. Everywhere she looked, the city had been shaped to remind its people of the oceans they had left behind.

A familiar scent drifted across the walkway and caught her attention. Sweet, warm, and faintly salty.

Aela'ris slowed despite herself.

Nestled beside a reflecting pool sat a small food stall woven carefully from green and silver reeds with a base of pale stone. Several groups of older Krynnid stood nearby, chatting amongst themselves while the stall caretaker carefully arranged rows of steamed cakes atop broad green leaves. Their surfaces glistened with the syrup made from pressed sea-fruit—the same recipe Aela'ris had been eating since she was just a Spring.

She should probably keep going, but instead, she found herself joining the short line.

A few moments later, she continued on her way, one of the cakes wrapped in a leaf, its warmth seeping into her hand. She tore off a piece and smiled despite herself. The sweet sea-fruit glaze gave way to a soft, steaming center that tasted exactly as she remembered. For a brief moment, thoughts of her father, the School of Science, and the uncertain future

ahead seemed a little less overwhelming. Before she realized it, the cake was gone. So too was some of the weight she'd been carrying.

Crossing an arched stone walkway, she finally saw her home. It was one of the largest in the leadership cove of the city and something, they said, befitting the Speaker of the Tides.

She suppressed her emotions as best she could, taking a moment before passing through the shimmering fabric of the portal.

"There you are." Her mother's tone was soft. There was a familiar strength to the richness of it and not a hint of anger at catching her daughter, who hadn't spent last night at home.

Aela'ris put her hands across her chest, bowing her head. "Mother. Are you at peace?"

"Please, child, save the formal greeting for those who don't know you."

Aela'ris looked up to see a slight smile from the woman, a glint of mischief in her eye. For the first time that morning, she found herself smiling in return.

"Now tell me where you were and don't you say with Thal'ara." Her mother sighed in mock exasperation.

"I was..." She paused, trying to think of what to say. The emotions that swirled around her mind also reflected on her skin. The dull muted greys and pale blues shifted and spiraled, fading in and out like drifting ink in a current.

Her mother gave her a knowing look. "Out with it now."

"I was in the fen near the edge of the dome. I needed some time to think... alone." She cringed looking at the floor.

Her mother touched her shoulder and guided her to the sitting area where they both sank into the firm but soft green surface. "Is it the Dance of Acceptance?"

Aela'ris shook her head. The ceremonial dance was the capstone to her education and the mark of becoming an adult. It also served as her

induction into the School of Science. All her friends would be there, and while she was excited, it was tempered by her father's disapproval.

"Father doesn't understand. He wants me to work for him at the council, but I don't want that. I don't want to be some great leader or politician; all I want to do is..."

Val'yra leaned over and placed an arm around her. Almost immediately, Aela'ris's skin rippled in bands of cyan and gold that moved in gentle waves across her head and chest. Like the fading light of sunset across the sky, her mother's skin mirrored the pattern. They remained like that for several minutes until her mother gave her a comforting squeeze and then released her.

"You know how traditional your father is..." She thought for a moment.

"You should go and speak to him." She gave her a curt nod.

"I... I thought maybe you would?"

"Aela'ris," her mother said sternly. "You are nearly as old as a guide. Before long, you will have to mentor someone as I have mentored you. Part of that is standing up for yourself." She reached out and helped Aela'ris to her feet, looking somewhat saddened. "Go now, before he leaves for the council chamber."

Val'yra shooed her toward her father's room down a small hallway near the back of their home.

"How am I supposed to tell him?" she mumbled. "I don't even know what I want." She walked to the rear of their home and stood outside his office.

She could hear him speaking to someone through the thin door, so she decided to wait and gather her thoughts.

From within, it was clear he was speaking to someone else from the council, the formality of his tone leaving no doubt. His words were firm and commanding at first, but then, his voice dropped, soft and secretive.

"We must convene the council immediately, Sea'tah."

Aela'ris perked up at the name. Sea'tah was head of the School of Science.

“We knew this was coming.” His voice lowered. “The city stopped collecting fuel three spans ago, and now even the reserve stores are nearly exhausted. You assured me the school would find another answer before it came to this.” He sighed. “Now we no longer have time. If we do nothing, the city will be ripped apart by gravitational waves and we will all perish.”

Aela’ris froze, her pulse hammering in her ears. No. That wasn’t what he meant. It couldn’t be.

“No, the council called it sacrilege when we fed colony equipment to the reactors. If we consume what remains of the colony stores, our people will know there is no home waiting for them anymore. I do not know what that revelation will do to them.”

Her skin rippled with confusion. Could this possibly be true? The city had been trapped by the intense gravity of the rogue black hole for generations. While the rest of the universe sped by, they had remained stagnant, forever on the edge of oblivion, but there had always been hope. The council regularly told the people the city was slowly rising from the grip of the singularity. Had it all been a lie? A lie her own father had helped tell?

Her father’s voice dropped. “Every cycle we delay increases the tidal stress on the shell. We don’t have a choice. We either sacrifice the future of our colony or we die.” He exhaled through his nose. “Is there anything else... anything we can do?”

A heavy silence followed. At first, Aela’ris thought perhaps her father had ended the link, but then something shifted as if he’d straightened in his seat.

“So this detection...” His voice, moments ago resigned, now held something close to hope. “How certain, Sea’tah? If this is truly a ship...”

“Well, then why haven’t you attempted to contact it?” His frustration bled into his voice.

A pause. Longer this time.

“Yes, I understand the configuration of the craft is unfamiliar. That alone isn’t cause for alarm. So much time has passed outside in the normal

universe, who's to say that our own people aren't still searching for us? The only thing that matters now is that our city is dying and this may be our only hope of escape."

Sea'tah must have objected again.

"Then I will assume responsibility as Speaker," he said. "Prepare the signal. We must transmit before the ship moves too far away; I'll inform the full council."

He paused again. "Be happy, Sea'tah, our time here is finally at an end."

Aela'ris stumbled back from the door, fighting to breathe. The hall seemed to tilt beneath her feet as she turned and hurried away. Her mother stood in the living area, a swatch of golden iridescent fabric draped across her arms, but Aela'ris couldn't bring herself to meet her gaze. She rushed past, the patterns of her skin a raging storm.

"Where are you going?" her mother called after her, worry creasing her features.

Aela'ris didn't slow. The words barely reached her through the pounding in her head. If she stopped, if she even looked at her mother, she would crumble. She bolted through the entryway and into the open air, running from the house, from the questions, from a truth she wasn't ready to face.

Chapter 2

Aela'ris drifted down the arched path, her steps unsteady, as if a current was pulling her along without any direction of her own. The polished white stone beneath her feet shimmered with reflected light, each ripple from the shallow streams along the walkway dancing like playful specters at her side. The soft pattering of water cascading from nearby fountains filled the air with their normally soothing melody.

Her mind spun, trying to untangle the words she'd overheard, but they slipped further away, distorted and echoing like fragments from a dream.

She turned in place, looking at the high white and sand-colored spires of the buildings and the gentle almost impossibly thin arched bridges connecting them. This was the only home she'd ever known. Tens of thousands of Krynnid have lived and died here all in hopes of reaching their new lush and verdant home. They had placed their futures in the hands of the engineers and architects that built the city ship—and in the leadership of the council.

Could we be the last? she thought. *Have we failed so completely that there is no hope?*

She pressed her palm to her chest, feeling the flutter of her heart that refused to calm. Her father, the Speaker of the Tides, the very voice of unity among her people, had hidden the truth from those who had placed their trust in him. And Sea'tah, head of the School of Science, the one place where truth was held as the most sacred thing, had helped preserve that lie.

The city was dying.

A hollow dread settled over her.

She turned a corner too quickly and nearly collided with a group of elders. They moved as a single formation, their robes flowing in the gentle air currents. When they noticed her, suspicion flickered through their shared

glance. Though their skin remained neutral, the tightening of their eyes told her to move on quickly lest she be questioned.

“Forgive me, elders,” Aela’ris murmured, stepping aside quickly. Her voice came out thinner than she had intended, emotions still raging. Skirting around them, she hurried past until she reached the bridge that led to the School of Science.

Arching over a wide stream, she gripped the railing tightly. Crystalline water glided over polished stones below, carrying the familiar scent of fresh water and blooming flora. She focused on the gentle rush of the current, willing her breathing to slow, but the sounds no longer brought the comfort they once had. Around her, ivory spires glinted like pearls while delicate winged creatures drifted from branch to branch, yet the city suddenly felt hollow, its beauty like a painted mask hiding cracks beneath.

On top of everything else, a nagging dread kept tugging at her mind. A slow, steady trickle of dark emotion that started several turns ago was like a thorn stuck in the soft parts of her foot that she couldn’t dislodge.

Clenching fingers gripped the railing until they ached, the cool stonelike material biting into her palm until she pushed back and made for the school, slowly at first, but each step bolstered resolve in her mind, spurring her to action.

Turning the corner, she stepped onto the wide courtyard that wrapped around the front of the school. Her fellow currents walked in small groups of twos or threes, hurrying along the many crisscrossing paths amongst the lush greenery and water features that were a hallmark of the city ship. The guides who taught them walked with no less than three others, the natural tendency to move in groups much stronger in that generation.

Aela’ris walked quickly, avoiding the gaze of the guides and crossing through the large arched entryway that led to the common greeting area of the building. The familiar soft hum of conversation and shifting light helped ease her frayed nerves.

So many years ago, she had wandered across this same open space, away from her mother, as she often did. She’d been young enough that the

stares of the guides and elders didn't matter to her a whit. It was Sea'tah, head of the school, who'd found her. The guides accompanying him had glowered, but he had simply taken her aside and held her attention, speaking of the stars and the great rivers of gas and dust that wandered the lanes between them.

They spoke for what seemed like an age before her mother finally found her. Only later did Aela'ris learn that she had come there that day to be evaluated for admission into the school. With Sea'tah's endorsement, she began her studies only a few cycles later.

That made his part in the deception all the more painful.

Now, nearly finished with her education, whenever she walked the familiar halls, she found much of the magic still remained. Gone was the wide-eyed wonder of youth, replaced by the hard work of experimentation and the occasional exhilaration of discovery.

Moving through a twisting series of hallways, she finally crossed the threshold into the Hub, a compact laboratory filled with computing devices and links to the machinery they used to study the mysteries of the surrounding space. The room stood empty. No doubt the others were preparing for the Dance of Acceptance, a concern she found difficult to care about at the moment.

If the city was truly dying, the data would prove it.

She moved to a row of interface devices near the entry and lifted one free. It consisted of crossed bands of wiry green strips, soft to the touch yet springy and dotted with tiny nubs. When worn, the device stimulated the regions of the brain responsible for information processing. Any Krynnid could benefit from its effects, but those trained by the School of Science could use it to absorb and analyze enormous amounts of information.

She settled the device onto her head and calmed her mind, feeling the familiar tickle as its fields intertwined with those of her brain.

"Caught you." A voice came from behind, causing her a small start. She slowly turned, her heart beating faster, colors flashing across her skin.

“Thal’ara!” Aela’ris exhaled, jumping out of the seat, her breath finally catching up to her. “You frightened me!” She reached out, bringing her in close, touching cheeks and sending warmth flowing back to her heart.

Thal’ara always pushed the envelope when it came to acceptable dress, and now with the dance coming up, it seemed she had thrown caution to the wind. The normal deep green and blue school outfit now sported yellow and red slashes crisscrossing the thick woven bands.

“Aren’t you supposed to be practicing for the dance?”

Her best friend smiled. “Aren’t you?”

Noticing her distress, her smile weakened before she cocked her head.

“What’s wrong?” She stepped back but still held Aela’ris’s shoulders.

“It’s. Well, I just...” She struggled. How could she tell her friend, tell anyone that her father hid truth from the people? She could scarcely believe it herself.

“He lied.” She finally forced the words from her mouth.

“Who lied? Is this about Astr’yn?” she said, referring to her on-again, off-again suitor.

“No, the council... my father. They’ve been lying about the city—they... I overheard him talking to Sea’tah. He says the city is falling into the black hole.”

After a long moment, they both sat.

Aela’ris tried to gauge her friend’s reaction. Would she hold her father’s lies against her?

“That can’t be right. We’ve been making progress every turning—they said.” She went silent.

Aela’ris could see the emotions playing on her friend’s skin. She’d always been skeptical of the regular updates, the optimistic projections that never seemed to materialize.

“I knew it.” Thal’ara finally let out a long breath.

A soft chime sounded through the space, signifying to anyone nearby to connect to a terminal for an important announcement. They both turned toward their workstations automatically, waving a finger through the interface control to activate the screens.

When the announcement chime ended, the picture resolved, showing the council chamber. Each of the elders that represented the seven schools of the Krynnid sat arrayed around a central seat. There, her father stood, full ceremonial robes hanging from the dark green straps of his clothing.

“People of the City,” he started, holding his arms wide as if embracing all who watched. “I bring exciting news. Just this morning, as we slept, our School of Science detected a ship transiting the space near the Great Maw.

“I personally authorized a transmission, and they have responded.” He smiled broadly, taking in the looks of the other council members—some glad, but others, like Sea’tah, more concern than anything else. “As we speak, several shuttles approach the docking structure—thank the ancestors.”

He drew a line down his right temple to his mouth.

“I and the other members of the council have declared today a day of reflection. All work is to cease, celebrations will be organized, and we will greet these newcomers with open arms. We will show them that even trapped here so close to oblivion, we have not strayed from the Krynnid way—the way of peace and unity. We have endured these many generations, but now that trial has finished, and we have been found worthy of rescue.”

Thal’ara looked at Aela’ris, eyes wide. “Is this real?”

Her father continued. “The council and other leaders will meet with the ship soon to negotiate assistance. As always, the truth will be shared with the people as soon as possible. Thank you.”

The message ended, leaving the two of them in silence.

Thal’ara snorted. “As always? I told you the council was hiding something. Hey! We should go see the aliens!”

“What are you two doing here?” A stern voice from behind caused both girls to freeze.

Thal’ara, always the bravest of the two friends, turned. “Apologies, Guide Lyss’ander, we were just listening to the announcement.”

Lyss’ander turned her gaze directly toward Aela’ris, her wrinkled skin and pursed lips reminding her of a bog skater, a leathery reptile that could be found near her favorite pond. The old woman clasped her hands in front of her under the folds of her shimmering robes. “The both of you should be with your schoolmates. You of all people, Aela’ris, should know how skipping the practice would look. What would your father say?”

Before Aela’ris could answer, their teacher grabbed both of them by the arm, pulling them from their seats and toward the hall. “You’re both late, and I won’t have any interruptions getting in the way of the dance. Aela’ris, you have a place among the first movement—imagine the scandal if you stumbled?”

They both tried to speak but were shushed immediately by the stern woman.

“You will practice with your peers, or you won’t find a place in the school when you graduate. Would you both rather start with a batch of Newlings at another school? I thought not.”

She led them to the ceremonial courtyard at the center of the school where the dance would be held. Opening the thick doors, they saw the rest of their classmates, moving in groups, swinging their arms in careful unison, walking slow patterns. The beautifully choreographed dance was the final test and the culmination of their years of study.

“Didn’t you see the announcement? An alien ship will be here soon! What’s the point of thi—” Thal’ara said right before Lyss’ander closed the door in her face.

“That old fish wouldn’t get excited if the council authorized uncontrolled breeding.” Thal’ara moved toward the door. When it didn’t open, she passed her hand over the control nub several times. “She locked us in!”

Beyond a broad swathe of dense jungle-like greenery, a large clearing near the edge of the dome had been hastily prepared for the ceremony. Zeph'ryn adjusted his ceremonial headpiece, its flowing tails stirring lightly in the breeze.

The location wasn't ideal, but given the circumstances, it was the best they could manage on such short notice. Tradition dictated the ceremony be held in the heart of the city, beneath the light of Veyshara, but tradition had become another luxury they could no longer afford.

Life aboard the city had become a long series of compromises. Zeph'ryn could only hope this would be the last.

Around him, the other seven members of the council stood patiently, each in their colored ceremonial regalia. To either side stood rows of protectors bearing banners of friendship, a visible declaration that they lived in peace.

Behind them gathered the city's administrators, guides, and senior functionaries, clustered according to their schools and responsibilities. Beyond them stood the citizens. Hundreds at first, then thousands as word spread through the city. Their voices remained subdued, but the growing murmur drew down the corners of Zeph'ryn's mouth.

Too many he thought, trying to block out the rising chorus of voices.

He considered ordering the protectors to push them farther back. Under normal circumstances, he would have. But the appearance of an unknown vessel had given the people hope—something they had not possessed in many cycles. Sending them away now would only fuel rumors, and the city already had enough of those.

As tradition demanded, a lone greeter would welcome the newcomers into the city and put them at ease before introducing them to the council. That honor would fall to his assistant, Lyr'essa. She had faithfully preserved the ancient ritual for years, never believing she might one day perform it for living visitors. Only afterward would the visitors be brought before the gathered citizens, and the true celebration could begin.

A gentle breeze swept through the assembled crowd. Robes rustled softly while the low hum of chime bugs drifted through the air.

A sound from within caused everyone to straighten in anticipation. Zeph'ryn smiled broadly before a crash and thud furrowed his brow.

Then, a lone figure stepped out into the light of the midday sun. It was large, quite obviously a person, but blocky, wearing some kind of hard covering over its body and face. At its side it held what looked to be a weapon. Soon several other similarly dressed figures emerged, each with a weapon of their own.

Zeph'ryn's mouth went dry, his instincts screaming as he forced himself to step forward.

"Greeting, friends," he said hesitantly, holding his breath.

"Greetings," the newcomer said, looking at the assembled people. The modulated voice seemed to indicate pleasure. Reaching up, the figure removed its face covering in one easy motion.

Zeph'ryn relaxed slightly when he recognized the woman as Krynnid. She was remarkably tall and broad for a woman, standing nearly half a head taller than Zeph'ryn himself. Her flawless skin bore the same coloring as his own, though a few shades darker, and her eyes were sharper. Her long cephalic strands had been pulled back and secured with a simple strip of fabric, exposing high cheekbones. Whatever their differences, she was unmistakably Krynnid, and that brought a genuine smile to his face.

"Are you the leader of these people?" she said, her voice smooth and strong but somehow unsettling to his ear.

Zeph'ryn closed his eyes for a moment, collecting himself. "Yes, I am Zeph'ryn, head of the council of elders, and leader of this expedition. We have been trapped here for many—"

The newcomer held up her hand, forestalling his words. Taking a deep breath, she raised her voice for the assembled crowd to hear.

"I am Kor'vek, First Claw of the mighty ship *Ruin*. You are now all property of the Vekari empire. Submit and some of you may keep your lives."

She looked directly at Zeph'ryn and the assembled elders. "Kill them."

Before Zeph'ryn could speak, something struck him with crushing force, hurling him to the ground in a flash of heat. He tried to gasp, but his lungs refused to obey. Numbness spread through his limbs, crawling steadily higher until all he could feel were the narrow leaves of silver sawgrass brushing against his face as the world erupted around him.

The screams of his people and the sizzle of weapons assaulted his ears. Kor'vek stepped up to him, using a booted foot to push him onto his back.

She motioned to another armored figure. "Send out the Drask."

She looked down on Zeph'ryn, watching as his breath slowed. "Kill the old, collect the young."

"At your command, First Claw. What of the city?"

"The war leader's orders were clear. Take what we can and return to the ship."

A low, wet moaning echoed from the docking center. Quiet at first, then rising in pitch as more voices joined it. The sound built into a chorus of throaty wails before it was drowned out by the crash of metal and stone from within.

A heavy impact reverberated through the front wall. A second followed moments later, harder than the first.

The entire entrance erupted outward in a spray of shattered glass and twisted metal. Hunched, muscular creatures spilled through the breach, their thick corded appendages propelling them forward. Chattering bellows burst from nightmarish, tooth-filled orifices as they poured into the open.

They stampeded around Zeph'ryn and Kor'vek, ripping the remaining elders limb from limb and giving chase to his people, whose collective screams echoed in his ears.

Kor'vek leaned down, pulling a wicked-looking blade from behind her back. "I think you'll be my favorite trophy, Zeph'ryn of the Krynnid."

Her beautiful face twisted into a harsh smile.

Chapter 3

Aela'ris glided through the second movement of the dance, trying to keep her feet and her mind planted firmly in the here and now. The news of the city ship's fall into the black hole pushed back, leaving only the joy of the dance and the proximity to her classmates to fill her heart.

Thal'ara approached with her group from the other direction, moving in sync, arms swaying as they inclined their heads to the left, then reversed moving to the right.

Everything flowed with perfection.

A crash outside the courtyard startled them, breaking the rhythm of the dance and sending concerned looks flashing around the group.

"I just got that right," Thal'ara said, crossing her arms as the door to the courtyard flew open.

Through it, Aela'ris's mother, Val'yra, strode flanked by several others who looked to be mechanics from the School of Making, their clothing dirtied, streaked with grease at the arms.

Several instructors moved to greet Val'yra as she scanned the crowd, but a hand forestalled their approach as she locked eyes with Aela'ris, who moved forward quickly with Thal'ara in tow.

"Mother?" Her voice wavered, her colors flashing concern.

"Aela'ris, these are two of my friends." She gestured to the people who'd accompanied her. "They will take you somewhere safe."

Her mother's friends nodded, not making Aela'ris any calmer. She couldn't even fathom how her mother would have friends who looked like they spent most of their time in the rougher areas of the city.

Another crash outside and the sound of faraway screams caused nearly the entire gathering of students and instructors to move backwards away from the door as a group. Only Val'yra and her companions stood fast.

Grabbing up Aela'ris by the arm, she led her through the large double doors away from the ceremonial courtyard and prying eyes.

"Aela'ris, there has been an attack on the city, and we must get you to safety. These two will take you to a safe location."

"What? Mother, I don't understand. What kind of danger?" She paused as the realization struck her. "The alien ship... what's happened? Where is Father?"

"I will find him, but I can no longer reach any of the council members or the protectors at the ceremony." She softened her expression and cupped Aela'ris's face in her hands. "We need to get you to safety. I've heard... disturbing reports."

"What about the others?" Aela'ris glanced toward the courtyard. "If there is danger, I can't leave them here."

Val'yra looked to the people who had accompanied her. They needed no words. Each gave a quiet nod before turning toward the gathering crowd.

"Yes," she said. "We'll find shelter for as many as we can. But we must hurry."

A group of people milling nearby caught her mother's attention.

"Protectors," she called, causing several young men wearing the dark uniforms of the School of Protection to turn. Almost immediately they recognized her.

"Lady Val'yra," the older of the two said, his eyes flicking toward her rough-looking companions. "Do you require assistance?"

"I do, Protector..."

"Arv'andis." He dipped his head.

"Arv'andis, I need you and your companion to gather as many currents from this area as you can and escort them to safety. These men are from the School of Making. They know of a place where people can hide."

"Lady Val'yra, we haven't been able to confirm what's happened. It could simply be a communication failure."

“Arv’andis, I do not make such requests lightly, nor do I believe this is a simple communication failure, though I dearly wish it were.” Her voice hardened. “Take these children away from here and arm yourselves. Not with shock sticks but with real weapons. I have already lost contact with nearly a third of the city, as well as the council. Until we know otherwise, we must assume these aliens are predators.”

The words rippled through the nearby crowd. Gasps rose from those close enough to hear, flashes of color spreading outward as whispers passed from one group to the next. Within moments, people were pressing forward, desperate for answers.

Aela’ris knew her mother would never use the word “predator” lightly, nor would she cause a panic without reason. More than anything else she had said, that single word unsettled her to her core. It stirred something ancient deep within, an instinct passed down through countless generations. Their shared history had only truly begun after the great predators that hunted her people vanished millennia ago. Yet the fear they inspired still lingered, buried deep within every Krynnid.

“This is my daughter, Aela’ris.” Val’yra rested a hand on her shoulder. “She will speak for me while I am gone. Protector, keep her safe until I return.”

Arv’andis bowed curtly, and the two protectors took up positions on either side.

Her mother wrapped her in a tight embrace.

“Our generation has been too bound by tradition,” she said softly. “We had so many chances to change, so many risks we could have taken. Now it’s up to you. Find the rest of our people... save our future.”

Before Aela’ris could ask what she meant, the quiet bustle of the city was replaced by crashing sounds and distant screams of terror.

The supplies left behind by the two guides from the School of Making had lasted far longer than Aela'ris would have imagined. At first, they shared the meals freely. Then, as the days stretched into cycles, the screams of survivors outside their cloister became less frequent, and every portion grew smaller than the last.

Eventually she stopped counting the days. Later, she stopped counting the meals she'd skipped as well.

Now she could no longer guess how much time they had spent hiding beneath the ruined city. Her clothes hung more loosely than they once had. The supplies were gone. Hunger had become a greater danger than the creatures that hunted them.

Aela'ris picked her way through the wreckage of the administrative building, careful not to make a whisper of sound. Dust coated shattered chairs and overturned tables. The building had been silent so long that even the echoes of the attack felt like distant memories. Still, she paused every few steps, listening for the hunters.

She pulled the bag from her back around to her front, moving as slowly as she could.

This was the closest place anyone in their group believed might still hold food. Workers often gathered here during the day, and supplies were sometimes left behind. She opened one storage cabinet after another before finally finding a cache of small wrapped protein spheres. One by one, she lifted them from the box, taking care that the wrappings made no sound. Each one made her mouth water as she slipped it into her bag.

A low clicking sound from the room beyond stopped her cold. She waited, long moments, until she started loading her bag once again. When it was full, she removed a scarf tied around her leg and carefully stuffed it into the bag, holding the food securely in place and damping any sound they might make when she moved.

The clicking sound again.

She froze a second time, then slowly moved toward the doorway, stepping over a fallen chair and weaving around a smashed table streaked with dark

stains she refused to look at. Something drifted in from the next room on the currents of air, a smell unlike anything she had ever encountered. Dark, like rotting organic matter from the swamps, but tinged with something foreign.

Steeling herself, she peeked around the corner as carefully as she could.

Monsters.

A dozen of them. Thick, misshapen bodies supported by smooth tentacles that draped to the floor like the limbs of some deep-sea creature. They breathed slowly, every one of them in perfect rhythm.

She eased back until they were just out of sight, not daring to exhale. Every instinct screamed at her to run, but she forced herself to take one careful step after another. Turning, she nearly brought her foot down on a jagged piece of broken stone.

She stopped.

Slowly, she shifted her foot to one side.

She continued back the way she had come, every step measured, ready to bolt at the slightest sound. Only when she had put several rooms between herself and the creatures did she dare take a deep breath. Her entire body trembled.

#

By the time Aela'ris climbed back down the old drainage tunnel toward the collection basin, she understood something she hadn't before.

The monsters that had torn through the city, chasing and killing her people—Reapers, they had come to call them—now slept.

She tapped lightly on the heavy door of the room that had become their refuge.

It slowly, quietly swung open, the smiling face of Thal'ara peeking out, beckoning her inside.

She smiled back but said nothing until the heavy door clicked shut behind her. Only then did relief wash over her.

The chamber had once served as little more than a maintenance basin carved from stone. Fresh water still flowed through the pipes that lined its walls, providing everything they needed to drink. Above them, a narrow grate admitted just enough filtered light to keep the room from falling into complete darkness, yet it sat high enough that no sound from below seemed to reach the surface. She wasn't sure how long they had been hiding, but the trickle of survivors had stopped, and now more than twenty of them called the cramped chamber home.

"Aela'ris, don't ever do that again!" Thal'ara said, keeping her voice low. "You don't know how many of them are out there, they could just be waiting to snatch you up!" Her friend gave her a tight hug.

Aela'ris swung the bag off her back and pulled out the scarf along with a handful of wrapped protein spheres. Soft gasps spread through the room, accompanied by ripples of bright color across tired faces. One by one, they stepped forward as she placed the precious food into their hands.

"Make sure the sick have them first. I'll go back out tomorrow and see what else I can find."

She trusted her people to do what they always had—care for one another before themselves. It was the only reason they had survived this long.

"The Reapers are asleep," Aela'ris said quietly.

Thal'ara frowned but said nothing. She unwrapped one of the protein spheres, broke it cleanly in half, and pressed one piece into Aela'ris's hand before taking the other for herself.

"You saw them?" Thal'ara asked, her eyes wide.

Aela'ris nodded, chewing hungrily before answering. "Some of them. They were in a room in the administration building." She shuddered. "We'll have to find food somewhere else, but they were definitely asleep. I think it would be safe to move around as long as we keep quiet."

They had all been as silent as possible since the attack. The dash from the School of Science had been horrific, blood and gore smeared across the streets as they fled. With the help of the two mechanics her mother had sent, they finally found the hatch leading to the old waterway. They'd arrived with supplies and a city Link—a small handheld communication device with independent power supply—but after a single conversation with her mother several hours after the attack began, they'd heard nothing more.

The two men eventually ventured out after several days of waiting.

Neither had returned.

One of the Links sat nearby. The only sign it still functioned was the dim blue light glowing along its side.

Since then, others had looked to Aela'ris for guidance after learning who she was. It felt unfair, but she did her best. It was only Thal'ara that kept her own spirits from sinking too far.

A few survivors had ventured out to this point, some to find family or friends, others because they could no longer stand being confined. None had ever come back, with only the memory of their far away screams left behind.

"Aela'ris, forgive me." An older Krynnid woman stepped up, keeping her eyes downcast as their generation was wont to do.

"Cael'an, be at peace, what do you need?" Thal'ara said. She'd become Aela'ris's de facto co-leader in the time they'd been trapped, often fielding questions from those who didn't feel comfortable speaking to the daughter Zeph'ryn, for whatever that was worth now.

"It's Syr'on, his fever has risen again. He won't even eat the food you brought." Her shaky voice sounded heavy with concern for her grandson.

They moved to the far side of the room where people slept. Small areas were cordoned off with whatever they could find, giving them a modicum of privacy.

Syr'on was no more than half Aela'ris's age. He lay on a bundle of clothing, donated by others so he could rest peacefully. His complexion was flushed, his breathing rapid. Aela'ris laid her hand on his neck, shaking her head when she felt his temperature.

She calmed herself, making sure the concern didn't rush over her skin before turning to the grandmother. "He needs treatment," she said, trying to be positive. "I will go out again."

When Cael'an started to protest, Aela'ris wrapped her in her arms. "You saw the food I brought. The danger is all but gone. I know there is a healing device at the School of Science. I'll get it and perhaps some tastier morsels for us to eat. When Syr'on is better, I'm sure he won't want to eat some tasteless protein sphere. Now sit with him, and put a damp cloth on his neck. I'll return shortly."

Thal'ara followed her back to the doorway as she pulled her bag back over her head.

"Is it bad?" She looked in Aela'ris's eyes. "Bad enough to go back out there?"

"Yes," she said, cinching the bag tight so it wouldn't make any noise as she moved.

A low rumble tickled her bare feet.

"Another tremor?" Thal'ara looked toward Aela'ris. Others must have felt it too because uneasy murmurs spread through the shelter.

"It's all right," Thal'ara called, keeping her voice low. "Just another shake. Everyone stay calm. It will pass."

Aela'ris leaned closer. "It's getting worse."

The tremors had begun almost imperceptibly, little more than faint vibrations beneath their feet. Over time, they had grown stronger and lasted longer. Small cracks had even appeared in one corner of the shelter.

At least the trip to the School of Science would give her a chance to access the sensor network and test the theory forming in the back of her mind. One she hoped beyond hope was wrong.

Motioning to the door with a nod, Aela'ris took a deep breath. The room went from quiet to dead silent as Thal'ara unlocked the hatch with a soft click. "I could come with you?"

Aela'ris shook her head as her friend slowly opened the doorway.

#

Sometime later, Aela'ris padded carefully along a side street, keeping to the shadows. The gentle burble of decorative streams and ponds provided just enough cover to mask the sound of her footsteps. At last, she reached the front entrance to the School of Science.

Seeing it like this brought tears to her eyes. Memories of happier days flashed through her mind before a breeze carried the stench of death to her nose.

She crept closer, pausing outside the entrance to listen for the faint clicking sounds she had heard in the administration building. Hearing nothing, she slipped inside and headed toward the small medical station near her old classroom. At every doorway and every corner, she stopped to listen. After a while, the blood pounding in her ears was the only sound she could make out.

On the way to the office where she knew one of the medical packs was stored, she hesitated. If the tremors meant what she feared, the medicine would matter little. She turned instead toward the Hub.

It was the very workspace where she and Thal'ara had watched her father's message of hope broadcast to the city. The discarded interface device still lay on the workstation where she'd left it, now covered in a layer of dust.

She slipped the narrow green band over her head and reached out through the city's systems. Seismic sensors, structural monitors, and mechanical subsystems all told the same story. The city was under increasing strain.

She called up the gravitational sensors and overlaid the data. Her stomach sank as the final pieces fell into place. There was no longer any room for doubt. The city had fallen deeper toward the singularity.

The immense gravitational forces pulling on the side nearest the black hole had begun to outpace those acting on the far side. With every passing cycle, the stresses increased, squeezing the city ever tighter. Soon the crystal shell would no longer withstand the strain. It would fracture, and the city would die.

Aela'ris lowered herself into the chair, unable to tear her eyes from the cascading streams of data.

Perhaps it was a small mercy. When the shell cracked, the atmosphere would rush out of the dome. Death would come quickly, unlike how it had come for the rest of her people—with gnashing teeth and long tentacles.

Both of her eyes stung as long-absent tears welled. She wiped a dirt-stained hand across her face, ready to shut the terminal down for the last time.

That was when she noticed it.

An alert blinked quietly in the corner of the display, its timestamp dating back several cycles.

Despite everything, she couldn't ignore it.

Data streamed down the screen in another torrent, filling, resetting, then filling again. She opened herself to it, the interface band helping the flood of information resolve into a coherent picture.

"A ship," she whispered, instinctively clamping a hand over her mouth as she realized she had spoken aloud.

Had the invaders returned?

She called up the archived sensor logs from the first attack and began comparing them with the new readings, letting the data build into a picture inside her mind.

It not the same. It's different, simpler and so... alien.

She twitched her fingers under the control sensor, focusing her scan. What she saw there made her mind blaze with questions. The ship was composed of a mixture of the most basic elements—nothing like the

advanced crystalline structure of the Krynnid or of the attackers' ships. It was little more than a cylinder of metal holding an atmosphere. She delved further, seeing the telltale spike of low-level radiation. Its power production was miniscule, barely reading above background.

Perhaps it was derelict—a probe or long-range drone?

Strangely, it trailed some small bits of debris that spoke of damage.

Had they also been attacked?

The thoughts swirled in her head. Could it be that another craft had found them? Perhaps her father had sent out a call for help after he realized that the invaders were unfriendly—before he... She pushed away the notion.

As much as she begged the universe for a lifeline—no, help wasn't coming.

She reached to shut down the terminal, but curiosity stayed her hand. If nothing else, she wanted to know where the ship had come from. Her fingers twitched again, this time checking its course.

When the data reached her mind, her legs nearly buckled. Right there, on the screen, the data was clear. One moment there was nothing, just a smattering of free atoms, caught by the singularity's gravity, then without warning or preamble, the ship winked into existence.

As implausible as it seemed, the readings could not be wrong. No fewer than seven independent instruments had recorded the event. On any other day, it would have been the most extraordinary discovery in the history of the School of Science. Instead, it had sat in silence for cycles, waiting for someone to find it.

She paged through the sensors again, gravitational first, seeing a slight warping when the ship arrived. Then to the electromagnetic where it recorded a slight shift, no doubt when the ship seemed to envelop the space where free atoms were present a moment before. One final anomaly caught her attention. A low-frequency transmission repeated over and over, broadcasting in every direction.

Her first thought was some kind of control signal or scanning pulse, but it was dense and modulated in such a way that had to be some type of

communication. Whatever it was saying, it wasn't Krynnid, nor from the invaders.

The despair that had threatened to consume her receded, replaced, if only for a moment, by something warmer. Could the ancestors have answered her prayers? Had they, in her darkest moment, shown her a path forward?

Sitting in silence, she weighed the risks. If the newcomers were like the invaders, she would only hasten the end of those still hiding beneath the city. But if they were not...

Her eyes drifted back to the structural data still filling the display. The city was dying. Soon the shell would fracture, and every soul still clinging to life beneath it would perish. Her father had chosen to risk everything to save his people. Now, without realizing it, she found herself standing before the same impossible choice.

Our lives are already forfeit. What more can they take from us?

She crafted a careful message, one that could easily be mistaken for an automated beacon still dutifully performing its function. Short, simple, maybe just enough to invite a response without revealing who—or what—had transmitted it.

Ancestors, guide my hopes. Deliver my people as they were delivered so long ago.

She commanded the external transmitter to activate. The reply came almost immediately—the answer to her message, and with it, hope.

#

As quickly as she dared, Aela'ris moved over both path and rubble. The pain in the soles of her feet was transitory, her focus solely on getting back to the shelter.

The door swung aside on the second tap, all of her people looking up at her as she breezed in, her face full of excitement.

“Thal’ara, take the medical pack.” She unslung her bag and handed it to her friend, who seemed to catch her excitement before passing it to Vir’elia, an older woman from the School of Population.

“What is it?”

“Come.” Aela’ris moved to the far side of the room away from the crowd who surrounded the healer and the boy. “I found something... something remarkable. While I was at our school, I discovered a ship—”

“The invaders?” Thal’ara’s colors flared in alarm.

“No.” Aela’ris stepped closer, glancing over her shoulder. “It’s alien. Unknown. Neither the invaders nor Krynnid.”

Thal’ara nodded. “Maybe the Skelen?”

They were the only other intelligent species the Krynnid knew of, but Aela’ris had seen images of their strange translucent ships. This was nothing like them.

“No, nothing like that. Listen, it wasn’t the ship, it was how they got here.” Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. “One moment there was nothing. The next... they were simply there. The sensors all agreed. There was no reaction drive, no faster-than-light signature, nothing we’ve ever studied. They just... appeared.”

Thal’ara’s colors darkened. “We should be cautious, Aela’ris. We know nothing about who they are. We can’t risk making the same mistake twice.”

“I’ve already directed the city to allow them to dock.”

Alarm flashed across Thal’ara’s skin, but Aela’ris held up her hands.

“We don’t have time for caution. I accessed the city’s sensors...” Aela’ris swallowed. “We have only a few sunrises left.”

Her own colors darkened. “The city has fallen too deep. The stresses are already building, and soon the shell will fail.” She drew a slow breath before looking back at her friend. “The scientist in me says it’s coincidence. But I’ve prayed every day since the attack, asking the ancestors to show us

a way forward. And just when I'd given up hope, another ship appeared." She shook her head slowly. "Perhaps there is no connection. Or perhaps this is the answer I asked for. Either way... we no longer have the luxury of waiting."

Thal'ara remained silent for several moments before nodding reluctantly. "Where will they dock? And what do you plan to do? I doubt they speak Saelvar."

"I directed them to the cargo dock near the pond. It's the closest entrance to this shelter. If they prove peaceful, I'll bring them here and show them our situation. There will be no need for words once they see our condition. Half our people can barely stand."

"Then I'll go with you." Thal'ara straightened, determination replacing her uncertainty.

Aela'ris shook her head. "No. Stay here. If something goes wrong, someone must keep them safe." She looked around at the weary faces gathered in the shelter before turning back to her friend. "Don't look at me like that. You know as well as I do that this must be done."

She made for the doorway, glancing back one last time. Warm bands of gold rippled across her people's skin for the first time in many cycles as the medical device started to heal the young boy.

"Watch for me." She rested her forehead gently against Thal'ara's. "I'll return soon."

#

Aela'ris moved steadily along one of the paths that led to the outer edge of the ship. The smell of death wafted on the currents of air blowing through the habitat. Earlier when she was foraging, she had crossed near the path that led to the docking port, and the stench coming from that direction was overwhelming. She didn't know exactly what happened the day the invaders arrived, but she could guess.

Her father and so many others had been there.

She skirted the small lake where many turns ago, she'd fixated on her acceptance dance and her future as a member of the School of Science; now she wanted only to save the few of her people who survived and escape before the city was torn apart.

Arriving at the other side of the lake where it touched the outer wall, she scanned for the telltale raised protrusions of a control interface. She knew it had to be close. A thick layer of grass had overgrown everything, but she could still make out the raised edges of the hidden pathway leading to the door.

Even though she knew the monsters slept, she still worriedly glanced over her shoulder each time the tall sawgrass swayed. She strained her ears but could hear nothing but the water, breeze, and chattering of insects.

They sleep, Aela'ris, focus, she chided herself.

Lumps of blue-tinted epiphytes covered the wall below the holographic panels that made up the false sky of the dome. The creeping plants normally clung to trees to harvest their hydration directly from the morning mists, but as time had passed, they had begun to spread everywhere, working their way up the sides of buildings and taking hold of any surface where they could find a foothold.

Brushing them away, she found what she was looking for, a seam surrounding an inset cover. Pressing it, the panel slid down, revealing the disused mechanism. After manipulating the unfamiliar control, the flush doorway moved outward with a puff of organic material and a hiss of stale air carrying the scents of machinery and decay. She cringed as it ground to a halt with a thud.

Moving quickly inside, her eyes adjusted to the dim blue glow of the backup lighting nodes. She scanned the nondescript room before touching the interior control. The door slid shut behind her, sealing tightly once again.

Aela'ris took a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves.

Another low groan shuddered through the city, followed by a faint shower of dust drifting from the ceiling. Her eyes closed.

Not yet.

Whatever fate awaited them, she still had work to do. She opened her eyes and scanned the room. The far wall appeared blank, save for a small pedestal off to one side that barely stood out from its surroundings.

She crossed to it and waved her hands beneath the recessed control sensors. The display sprang to life, presenting a series of unfamiliar commands. After studying them for a moment, she found one labeled “Illumination” and selected it with a twitch of her left hand.

The wall flickered before suddenly becoming transparent. The sight there nearly stole her breath.

Outside in the cold vacuum of space, the sleek alien craft slid to a controlled stop near the cargo hatch, guided precisely by the fields of the automated matter ramp. The ship wasn't overly large, perhaps a third bigger than the cargo sleds that had long ago moved bulk materials to the city ship, though it was shaped in a way that made any comparison difficult. Its hull was composed of broad, flat plates of silvery metal, each panel distinct. Along its length ran a dark band of blue, broken only where the hull was interrupted by access points or protruding structures, each of those places marked with sharp red coloring.

The rear of the craft ended abruptly, squared and blunt, with four identical openings arranged in a precise line. Unlike the symmetrical and bulbous craft of the Krynnid, there was nothing ornamental about them. No attempt to disguise their function or soften their shape.

Small points of light glimmered along the vessel's exterior, some constant, others pulsing. Their beams touched the city ship's inner hull and returned, faintly illuminating the alien ship in reflected light.

There was something so profoundly unfamiliar in its form. The Krynnidian ships she'd studied were harmonious, built not only for function, but their shapes felt part of nature, the delicate flowing lines of their shells symmetrical. Sometimes translucent, often opaque, they were meant to absorb and reflect the light to capture the essence of the vast ocean between the stars. This vessel looked, and more importantly felt, different.

It was longer than it was wide and shaped almost like it was meant to push through an atmosphere, or water. Perhaps they came from a water world like her own.

She queried the panel once again, this time asking for the entire control dataset, which would allow her to understand its function. The raw cascade of information flashed, allowing her mind to fully engage and comprehend the many controls. She closed her eyes as her neural pathways absorbed the data and imparted some measure of understanding.

Now somewhat less lost, Aela'ris twitched her fingers in the control field and scanned the ship more closely. Near the front of the craft was clearly an entryway. She flicked her fingers, and the matter ramp adjusted the ship's position slightly until the entryway was aligned with the cargo ramp. Each moment brought the ship and room closer together. Energy surged to emitters along the room's outer surface, rearranging the outer material to lock tightly around the ship before flooding the interior with atmosphere.

She then studied the alien signals. They were strange, yet the School of Science's systems had easily broken them down during their initial contact and had decoded their simple obfuscation patterns. Now their entire control structure lay open at her fingertips.

Hesitating a moment, she queried the sensors to analyze the atmosphere within the craft. Surprisingly, it was a close match to her own. Slightly different pressure and composition, but breathable.

The details about the mix of gasses was familiar to her; it tickled at the edges of her mind, but she couldn't remember what it was or where she'd seen its like before.

Dismissing the thought, she delved deeper. The vast stores of information contained within their systems were breathtaking, yet deeply mysterious. Everything seemed inexorably linked to the computers themselves, as though the aliens relied on the machines to perform the translation for them. Krynnid systems merely transmitted raw information; their minds performed the final step, absorbing and interpreting it. Perhaps not all species were so equipped.

Eventually she found what appeared to be an inactive language model.

At first, she thought it incomplete.

She searched through other files, then broader archives, but found the same thing everywhere. Their written language contained no emotional particles, no contextual colors to guide the reader toward the author's intent.

How could they know whether a statement was spoken in joy, grief, anger, or compassion? How could they understand one another without that shared context?

The thought lingered only a moment before necessity pushed it aside.

She instructed the School of Science's systems to construct a translation matrix, treating every phrase as emotionally neutral before compressing it into a form her mind could gradually absorb. The process would take time, allowing her neural pathways to adapt as the unfamiliar language slowly became her own.

The data splashed down the screen in a torrent. Her eyes widened as her brain caught and parsed page after page.

Another standing in the room might think her in a trance as more moments passed. Aela'ris herself was unaware of how long she'd been standing there until it was finished, the sheer volume of data pressed uncomfortably against the sides of her temples.

Like a sudden breath after a shock, she returned to the present and blinked away the remains of the data. She could feel it unfold in the recesses of her thoughts, slowly working its way across her neural pathways.

Deciding not to delay any further, she sent the commands to the door of the alien ship to start its opening sequence.

As the portal material around the newly grown entryway dissolved back into the walls of the room, a grating series of clicks emanated from the hull of the craft, which put her nerves on edge. Beyond the portal, the slick metallic exterior of the alien craft lay exposed, close enough now that she could make out details she hadn't seen before.

Her attention was drawn to a single feature that dominated the section of hull before her: a tall, wide doorway framed by a bold band of red pigment. Its surface was interrupted by numerous small, circular indentations, each slightly larger than the tip of her finger. They were arranged in careful patterns, and within each sat a rigid, six-sided form—geometric, repeated, and unmistakably intentional. These weren't flaws in the material; they seemed like points where the structure had been pieced together, held together by something external rather than grown whole.

The red pigment wasn't decorative, she concluded. It was too deliberate, too sharply defined. It was meant to convey some meaning.

Across the surface of the door and its surrounding plate were clusters of symbols rendered in what must have been the alien script, each placed against blocks of contrasting color. Thin lines extended outward from the symbols, terminating in broad pointed shapes that directed the eye toward specific seams, panels, and recessed ports along the frame.

The opening retracted inward with a hiss that nearly set her running. Then it slid slowly into the side of the craft with a heavy grinding sound. She was amazed by its thickness. From the sound alone, it seemed solid all the way through.

She cringed as it loudly vibrated, deep sounds that conducted through the walls and floors of the space. She hoped they were far enough away that the Reapers would not be awakened.

Thank you for downloading this sample of City of the Forgotten.

Aela'ris has sent a desperate call for help. Her city is dying, her people are running out of time, and a mysterious ship has just answered.

Who, or what, is waiting on the other side of that airlock?

Keep reading to find out.