

## Chapter 1 - Reflection

The High-Energy Las-beam, also known as a HEL-beam, unleashed its built-up energy store. It sounded like the continuous rumble of an oceanfront storm as it tore into the Woland Heavy Cruiser drifting from engine failure, precisely slicing the cruiser in half.

OTKE CEO Ryan Hunt stood in his command room at the OTKE battle base, watching the live feed of the space battle from the lead OTKE ship as if he was standing on its command bridge.

A small Woland attack squad, backed by Karyot warships, ambushed an Earth Consortium strike force during a dropship landing to defend a key ore processing center on the rocky planet Creaga. Luckily, an OTKE fleet making a sweep of a nearby system picked up the distress call, and Ryan ordered the fleet's commander to assist the out-gunned Earth Consortium troops.

*How many lives were lost on that Woland ship? Did they have families? They have shown themselves to do horrid things. Should I even care? Did—*

Ryan's thoughts were interrupted when OTKE fighters flew past the screen to dive into the battle, making odd turns with thrusters and whatever tech they had to counter Newton's laws. The battle looked nothing like the dog fight videos he watched in old war documentaries.

It had been about two months since the attack on Gliese Major killed over twenty million people and destroyed the OTKE main headquarters. The attack caused a complete system failover to a backup base on a planet in an uncharted system that he and Kat happened to crash on. Since he had assumed the duties as proxy CEO for the base inspection, and with most of the senior OTKE staff killed along with CEO Klein in the attack, he became the new Chief

Executive Officer of OTKE Corporation, and Kat the new Chief Operating Officer.

Ryan walked out of the command bridge hologram to lean on his desk and continued to watch the battle over a virtual screen. One of the OTKE light cruisers was in trouble, and additional fighter support was heading to intercept the Woland craft heading in that direction. Closer to the planet, an OTKE cruiser engaged a Woland frigate firing on the planetside troop garrison. It looked like a space battle from one of the many science fiction movies he had enjoyed watching in his first life, but he wasn't enjoying watching this one and hoped the battle would end soon.

In a few hours, he would leave for Earth on the Heavy Destroyer *Tolerance*, escorted by its contingent of battle cruisers and support ships, to participate in the grand opening of the new OTKE main headquarters on Earth. Ryan thought it was overkill, but since Fredrick LaRue was out there with a powerful alien energy orb that could wipe out entire cities, Nora wanted to ensure Ryan was adequately protected.

Ryan had argued that it was not a good time to cut a ribbon for a new building with all the chaos. He and Kat had recently failed to save Commander Tucket's brother on an uncharted planet. On top of that, they could only somewhat stop a Nilorian butcher named Uphir, who had killed most of a religious colony to bring back his scientific staff using mysterious alien technology. In the end, Uphir escaped with about half of his scientists, and four brave soldiers died trying to stop him.

Then there was Kat's missing uncle, Commander Seymour, who was in the clutches of Fredrick LaRue. They had yet to find where he was being kept, plus an escalating galactic war, plus a—

Ryan turned when he caught the door to the room sliding open. He smiled at Kat, who

returned the smile before entering. She wore a green stripe in her hair that matched the long green glove on her left arm. It was around the Christmas season Ryan celebrated, and Kat thought to brighten up his mood by changing her hair and glove color to Christmas-themed ones. The holiday was not normally celebrated unless one was a devoted Christian, but Ryan enjoyed the gift-giving and goodwill to everyone and slowly started bringing the holiday back.

Kat walked to stand next to him and took in the space battle. Both of them squinted from the bright flash of an exploding Earth Consortium Cruiser that had been twirling out of control. One second there was a flash, and then nothing but pieces of its hull, which caused a light show on the shields of nearby ships.

"It looks like reinforcements are arriving. The remaining Woland and Karyot ships are leaving," said Kat, pointing to the bottom left of the virtual screen.

Ryan watched as an Earth Consortium fleet entered the system from multiple wormholes, and the fleeing ships escaped through wormholes of their own.

"A victory for the good guys, I guess," said Ryan. "Close screen."

The virtual screen closed, and the lights in the room brightened.

"If it wasn't for you ordering the OTKE ships to intervene, the troops on that planet would have been killed, and there would have been nothing left of that fleet in orbit," said Kat.

Ryan dropped his head and ran his hands over his head before looking up at Kat.

"Yeah, I guess, but now I need to inform the family of the people on that OTKE cruiser that their loved ones are not coming home...and just before Christmas. Now I know how families felt during World War Two."

"I'll help you with that. I've had to give that news more than once, and it's not something that ever gets easier."

"Thank you."

"If anything, make sure you eat. It's not like you to leave a half-eaten waffle like that."

"Now you sound like Nanny. No matter the stress around me or how bad it was, she would always tell me to eat."

Kat tilted her head and squinted at him.

"Sorry, Nanny is what I called my grandmother."

"She's right, you know."

Ryan smirked, took a bite of the waffle, and pointed to his mouth.

"Keep that up, and I'll hint to Nora that you're looking weak from not eating."

Ryan raised his hands. "Fine. I'll make sure I eat. She hounds me enough on OTKE issues, and that would put me over the edge. On another note, how is everything going in the medical and scientific labs these days?"

"Nice segue, CEO. You're on your way to being a corporate leader. As it relates to medical, I rechecked the results of our scans again. I compared those we took after our adventure in the town and the Crystal City to the previous ones. It appears that we picked up high concentrations of a crystalline compound from drinking Uphir's spiked fruit juice Syl was giving everyone. The compound connected to our genetic makeup at a rapid rate. Not sure it's from our modern genetics, or the odd genetic makeup you and I already have from being spliced with alien DNA, or something else."

"Oh, joy, another genetic change. Just what I needed. Any clue what that will do to us?"

"I'm not sure, but it may explain how I was teleported when I jumped on that creature taking the girl. The scientific lab determined that the teleportation tech Uphir found was coded to teleport people with the Crystalline race DNA. Adding it to the townspeople over time allowed

him to teleport them as well."

"Are we able to recreate that?"

"I was speaking to Gavesha about it. She's very knowledgeable about the topic. I hope you don't mind. I hired her to work with the OTKE archeology team."

"No, not at all. What did she say?"

"Besides being excited to have resources she's never had before, nothing significant yet. Some of the team recovered pieces of the crystal energy tech, but since the building was mostly destroyed and what remains is unstable, it may take some time."

"OK. Keep me updated. I'm curious about what she discovers. Teleportation sounds cool."

"I will. How is your new tech?"

Ryan opened his left hand, and a virtual screen emanated. With just a thought, it closed.

"Appears to be working. I've been practicing with it."

"Now, if you would let me get rid of that archaic comm pad and implant a neural comm in your head, we could have private conversations."

"As much as that sounds cool, I'm not implanting that thing. From what I've read, that is a lot of brain tech. Be happy I at least got the screen that connects to my comm badge and can now see people when they talk."

"Fine, but eventually, you'll give in."

"Yeah, yeah. So, how is everything else?"

"Always changing subjects when you know I'm right, but we'll move on. For starters, Kren is picking up his medical duties very well."

Kren was from the nearby religious town and worked in the medical area of the

community. He suffered a spinal injury trying to save a friend from being kidnapped. Since the community considered AIs blasphemous, Ryan and Kat snuck Kren over to the OTKE Battle Base, where Kat used the medical AIs to repair his spinal and nerve damage. Once he was up and walking again, Kren decided he wanted to stay, and they gave him a job.

Ryan pressed his palms together, shook them, and looked up. "Finally, great news from that town. Kren was eager to learn and—"

"And, some more people from the town have arrived asking to either stay with us or for transport back to their ancestry home worlds."

"Yikes, at this rate, that town is going to become a ghost town."

Kat nodded. "Yep, we got another stern warning from their leader Eldred about not helping his community, but I feel they're adults and can make their own decisions. Although, he asked again if you would come by and maybe talk to the remaining people about staying. He thinks a visit from the High Priest would help."

Ryan sighed. Some of the townspeople were with him when, in the heat of fighting demon-like creatures, his body radiated a blue fire that ignited the creatures or disintegrated them.

"Fine, when I get back, I will pay them a visit and bring Nora along."

Kat started laughing. "I want to be there for that! The thought of her eyes turning red when they insult AIs will b—"

"What have you done now that would make me want to kill you, Dr. Kat?"

Ryan and Kat turned to see Nora in the doorway neither of them had heard open. She was in lightweight body armor with a plasma pistol on her right thigh. Ever since she was officially made the personal assistant to CEO Hunt, she took her protection duties very seriously.

"Someone remind me to have the sliding doors make a louder sound when they open. Something like a loud *ShhhhhT* sound," said Ryan.

"I will make a note of it, sir," said Nora. "Even though it is impractical."

"Thank you," Ryan said with a smirk. "And Kat did nothing to make you want to kill her. I want you to go with me to the town nearby when I meet their leader."

Nora tilted her head. "You mean the intolerant group of AI-hating people?" Her eyes flickered red. "I cannot wait to assist you in that *discussion*."

Kat and Ryan made eye contact and looked back at Nora.

"On that note," said Kat, "I have some things to follow up on."

"Probably a good idea," said Ryan. "Oh, by the way, did you ever get Brian a place to stay?"

Brian Thorngood was Kat's longtime archeology friend and the person who had discovered Ryan's urn in an old Earth cargo container. His storefront was obliterated in the attack on Gliese Major. Kat was worried he had died, but he had been off-planet on tour with all the old Earth artifacts found with Ryan's urn.

"Yes, I was able to find him a place. I'll fill you in at dinner later tonight."

Ryan and Kat shared a meaningful glance before she left.

"I see the relationship between you and Dr. Kat is progressing," said Nora. "Am I to assume I will need to post additional guards at your quarters since the CEO and COO will share the same bed?"

Ryan blushed and shook his head. "Our relationship is not at that...stage. And if it was, it's none of your business. So let's just move on to more pressing details."

"If you say so, sir. I find it odd that two people experienced in human courtship have not

progressed to the intimate, pleasing nature of the relationship, where I, who only recently became sentient, have already surpassed you with Commander Tucket."

Ryan opened his mouth, pointed, stepped back, and then threw his hands in the air. "I got nothing, but only to say I may have to make a rule that my personal assistant can no longer have conversations with Victoria Van Buuren. She's rubbing off on you."

Nora smiled, something she normally would not have done, until she recently discovered spontaneous emotions.

"Vicki and I share a bond of battle. Since she assisted me in rescuing Commander Tucket from Fredrick LaRue's men, we have grown closer and routinely have conversations. Plus, we both share similar disgusts with Dr. Kat and feel you could do better."

"Even as CEO, I can't win. Let's move on. You came here for something?"

Ryan moved to sit behind his desk while Nora sat in one of the chairs in front of it.

"Sir, in our last meeting, you asked me to follow up on CEO Klein's dedication plaque. Unfortunately, he left instructions that upon his death, there were to be no plaques or memorials. He stated he does not deserve it."

"Kind of harsh, but if that is what he wanted, we'll obey his wishes."

"I agree, sir, and I will cancel your dedication request."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, also from our last meeting, you disclosed odd things that have been occurring to you over the last year or so... Ability to open a portal from another universe via water. Ability to drain the life force from a tree to heal yourself. The control of plant life. The uncontrolled ability to wield blue fire from your body and exude it through a pistol to its ammo. Are those the correct items?"



Ryan took a deep breath. "Yeah, those were them. I must sound crazy."

"Anyone else would think you are crazy, sir, but since you are my friend, I believe you and thus used your CEO credentials to gain access to the OTKE systems and discovered some interesting information. It is not much. More tales and journal entries than practical science."

Ryan's head perked up. "Go on."

"Relating to opening a portal, there's not much on this other than documentation of a woman who claimed she could contact beings between universes to generate a gate. It was never proved valid, but they determined it might be possible if someone's natural energy frequency matched that of someone or something in another dimension. Again, only speculation."

Ryan laughed. "I have no rhythm, so not sure how I could be in sync with anything or anyone. What about the plant stuff?"

"Florariens are known to have the ability to connect to plant life for such a purpose, and you have some of their DNA after the procedure to upgrade you to a modern-day human. This may have something to do with it, but you would be the first non-Florarien able to accomplish this."

"That is a possibility. At least it gives me something to talk to the Florariens about if I ever take them up on the invitation to visit their home world. What about the blue flame stuff?"

"I had a look at that ornate pistol. It is made of a material I have never seen before. Even the lab AI could not identify it. We noticed it conducted energy and amplified it somehow. I know you will not allow us to take it apart, so there is not much more I can determine. As for the blue flame, I found a few references to an organization called the Order of the Blue Flame. Their symbol matches the blue fire symbols on the statue of Father Nettle outside the OTKE Battle Base."

Ryan leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head, pondering the information.

"Did they give any details of the order or other members?"

Nora placed a folder on his desk and slid it over.

Ryan looked at it and then back at Nora. "Seriously, with virtual screens, datapads, and lifelike hologram imagery at the touch of my fingers, you created a file folder and printed out a document?"

"I did not want to leave a digital trace. The data was beyond your CEO access, and I needed to hack the system to retrieve it. The hack was just milliseconds. Any longer, and I would have been discovered."

Sitting back up, Ryan pulled the folder towards him and opened it. His eyes opened wide and shot back and forth from Nora to the folder.

"As you can see, sir, I am not as unique as we had once thought."

The picture Ryan was staring at was the exact likeness of Nora. Right down to a small freckle on her upper right cheek.

"Who is she? Where did this data come from?"

"I could only get a small amount of data. Her name is Lonnie, and she was a member of the Order of the Blue Flame."

"So this order may have been bigger at one time. I think—"

"One more thing, sir. The data was encrypted by CEO Klein. Flip the photo over and read the back."

Ryan flipped the photo. "To Randy, you will always be in my heart. Lonnie."

"Is Randy who I think it is?" asked Ryan.

"Yes, sir. Based on this information, we can conclude that Randy is CEO Randolph

Klein, and he was part of this order as well."

"I knew there was something else going on with him. What year did Lonnie die?"

"Her death was recorded in 47,342."

"That would make CEO Klein over 2,600 years old. Is that possible?"

"Not for a normal human descendant."

Ryan leaned on the arm of the chair and rubbed his chin. His thoughts were moving miles a minute.

"OK, keep digging, and let's keep this information between us for now. Too many unanswered questions."

"One more thing, sir. The Christmas cards you requested are complete. Here is a draft copy."

Ryan took the card from Nora. It depicted a large cabin in the mountains. Snow was falling, and a sleigh was outside with a Christmas tree on it. Inside it read: *Merry Christmas!*

"This is great, just how I wanted it."

"Sir, you just mentioned document sharing is more practical by using a recorded message, sending a hologram, or—"

Ryan held up his hand. "Stop, this is more personable, and I will sign each one."

"As you wish, sir, but might I ask, why this scene?"

"I always dreamed of a cabin in the mountains of Montana where I could go for Christmas."

"Interesting. I was not aware of that."

"We all have an imagination and dreams of things we would have done or would like to do."

Nora stood. "I will have the cards sent to you soon, and I will keep digging for information about the Order."

Ryan followed her to the door. "Thank you for all the help over the last few months. I wouldn't have been able to do it without you."

"No need to thank me, sir. It is my job."

Nora spun around and left the office, and Ryan returned to his desk to review some documents, but was interrupted when the office AI chimed in.

"CEO, there is a secure communication from the board of directors. Should I play it?"

"Yes, please."

"CEO Hunt, a representative of the Board will join you when you get to Earth to help guide you in the corporation's day-to-day operations. Please meet him as soon as you arrive. Sincerely, the Board."

Ryan leaned back in his chair, placed his feet on top of it, and closed his eyes. *A representative. This can't be good.*