

## Chapter 1 - Bonding

The figure crouched in the rafters tensed as the bedroom door creaked open. A burly man entered holding a candle that flickered in the dim room. He slid a hefty wooden beam across the door with a resonant thud before turning to scan the room. After lighting additional candles, he peered out the ornate windows before drawing the drapes closed.

With a weary sigh, the man removed his cloak and plopped it on the bed. He dropped his head, closed his eyes, and ran quivering fingers through the sparse remnants of his hair before rubbing the back of his neck. Taking a deep breath, he shuffled to a nearby table. His unsteady hand grasped a decanter and poured a drink. He downed it in one gulp, and by the time he finished a second one, the trembling in his hands began to subside.

Above, the shadowy figure observed. His muscles coiled, ready to propel him down, but he froze as the man below unsheathed a small knife. With deliberate motion, the man drew the blade across his palm, a line of red forming in its wake. This unexpected act sparked a surge of curiosity in the watcher's eyes. Motionless yet alert, he continued to observe, his intentions momentarily swayed by this unforeseen development.

The man crossed to the other side of the room, and using his weight, he leaned into an ornate armoire. With a grunt of effort, he pushed, and the armoire groaned in protest before sliding aside. Nestled in the stone wall was a circular panel, its edges sharply defined against the rough stone. At its heart lay a small, unassuming silver disk.

Pausing, the man inhaled deeply and pressed his freshly bloodied palm against the disk. The seconds dragged on—one, two... five—before he withdrew his hand. Crimson droplets trailed down the wall, stark against the gray stone. Then, with a mechanical precision that contrasted its ancient appearance, the dark circle rotated, slowly twirling open and unveiling the mysteries it had kept hidden.

Before the man could reach for the wall's hidden secrets, he went rigid, turned, and fell to the floor. The hilt of a dagger protruded from the base of the man's head, the skin and clothing sizzling around it. After a few seconds, the hilt fell to the floor, no longer attached to its blade.

Farlow the Magnificent loomed over the dead merchant, a grim satisfaction in his eyes—satisfaction that the extra coin spent on the rare venom that paralyzed its victim and stopped their

heart was a worthy investment. The only drawback being the loss of a good dagger.

He had been hiding for eight long hours. His muscles ached from crouching in the same cramped spot, and each passing moment made him doubt the merchant would ever show. Infiltrating the estate once was hard enough—he had no desire to do it again. The place was teeming with guards and watchdogs.

Assassination was a departure for Farlow. He was a creature of shadows, not a bringer of death. But when he'd learned of the merchant's unspeakable crimes—the abduction of orphans for slavery or worse—his path became clear. The merchant trafficked in innocence and despair, and Farlow, an orphan himself, felt no remorse at ending the man's life.

Farlow had been born into a world ruled by the enigmatic Cyber Queen, a ruler who held an iron grip over the fractured realms. Rumors swirled about an ancient magic she wielded that could dominate both beast and soldier. It was this arcane Cyber Magic that had decimated the old kingdoms, leaving them under the indifferent rule of regional governors, each concerned only with their survival. Farlow knew that if he didn't act against this merchant, no one would—in these forsaken lands, heroes didn't exist.

Farlow lowered the hood of his cowl and scanned the candlelit room as he rubbed his goateed chin. The lucrative yet suspicious job had come from an anonymous employer: assassinate the merchant, strip him of valuables, and conduct a thorough search. Though wary, Farlow couldn't deny the practicality of the payment—food and coin were a necessity he couldn't ignore.

Kneeling next to the lifeless merchant, he took the coin purse, two rings, and an opal necklace. Pulling out a dagger, he sliced through the merchant's garments, looking for hidden pockets or concealed pouches, but found nothing.

Farlow's code was simple: stick to the parameters of the job. If he was hired to grab the chest on the right, he took the chest on the right and never bothered with the chest on the left, regardless of its value. This principle had kept him alive all these years. However, the secret compartment in the wall intrigued him. He had heard tales of keys and blood rituals but had never seen one in action. Whatever the merchant was hiding must be important or precious.

Approaching the hole with a candle in hand, Farlow illuminated a small thin rectangular case resting inside, barely the length of his pinky and surprisingly lightweight. He fiddled with it, twirling it around while he pondered its contents. Holding it close to the candle, he discovered it

could slide open. After placing the candle down, he opened it a bit, and a faint red glow emanated from within. Carefully, he slid the top off to reveal an unusual key: a square base from which a glowing red rod extended, devoid of the typical teeth.

He scanned the room, contemplating the key's purpose. With its vastness and myriad secrets, the room presented an impossible task for a thorough search in the limited time he had. Deciding against the fruitless endeavor, Farlow slipped the key into his belt pouch, perhaps to trade it later.

He swept the drapes aside and unlatched the ornate double window, swinging each side open, then reached outside and grabbed the rope he had hidden earlier. Taking a step up, he froze at a sound like a muffled bell behind him. He turned, scanning the room, but everything appeared as it should. Then, his belt pouch vibrated. Reaching inside, he felt the strange key trembling in his hand.

When he removed the key, a beam of red light projected from its end, startling him. Raising the key, he watched in fascination as the light beam fanned out, sweeping up and down across the room in sync with his movements, as though it were searching for something.

*What odd magic is this?*

The beam of light suddenly narrowed and angled sharply downward to his left, pinpointing a stone on the floor. Curious, Farlow approached and probed the stone, his fingers tracing a seam. Using his dagger, he carefully pried the stone loose, revealing a hidden chamber. Inside, a small chest lay waiting, its surface covered in dust. He gently lifted the chest, placing it on the bed near the table where the candle flickered.

The chest bore no visible lock, nor any keyhole that might accommodate the peculiar key. With caution, Farlow stood to one side, flipping open the lid of the chest with his dagger. Instantly, a small dart shot out from the front, whistling through the air to clang harmlessly against the far wall.

With a slight grin, Farlow peered into the chest to find a small octagonal box. Its material was similar to the key. Carefully lifting it, he noted its seamless design, save for a tiny hole on one side. Intrigued, he inserted the key. An odd whining noise filled the room as the box's top split into equal sections, retreating into its sides to unveil a small bronze-colored pendant, unlike anything he had seen before. It was round, about two inches in diameter, with a slightly raised center. From this center sprouted pulsating green tendrils.

Farlow instinctively tossed the pendant, which abruptly levitated, causing him to drop the box and recoil. A green beam emanated from the pendant, sweeping up and down his body.

“Damn the old gods. Cursed magic.”

A disembodied female voice that Farlow couldn't understand came from the pendant.

“Sorry, not sure what you're saying, but if you could get back in the box, we can leave.”

Various words were spoken until they matched the language Farlow spoke.

“We can now communicate properly,” said the aristocratic voice. “I am Pela Montaview of the Montaview Corporation. It would seem my host has passed on without the proper transfer of myself into a new host. Now, if you would be so kind as to... to—”

A new voice broke over the static that cut off Pela. Farlow slowly inched to the side and kept moving.

Turning toward the window, he found himself immobilized, unable to speak or move.

*This is what I get for breaking my code.*

The pendant hovered around Farlow, finally stopping at eye level. “System override,” said the deeper voice in a tone Farlow had never heard before. “Alerted to control system malfunction. Need to return... scanning life-form again.”

The green beam flashed again, sweeping around Farlow's body, sending waves of pain crashing through his head.

“Scan complete. Antiquated life-form. Unable to comprehend advances in technology, and moral compass: gray. Integration compatibility within specs at sixty-one percent.”

Farlow tried to move, but not even his eyes would blink.

“Male life-form,” said the voice from the pendant. “I am required for incident resolution, and I will integrate with you until the others arrive. Once resolved, Pela will be restored, and I will go dormant again.”

The pendant exploded at Farlow, piercing his leather jerkin and tunic, embedding itself into his chest. He tried to scream, but his voice was trapped in his head. Clawlike tendrils sliced into his skin and he smelled burnt flesh as it fused with him. Farlow's world became nothing but pain and confusion, his body a prisoner of this mysterious entity.

His head throbbed with agonizing pain, and before he could react, the green beam vanished, and he stumbled forward toward the window, his screams piercing the silence of the room. Desperately, he lunged for the bottle of alcohol on the nearby table. Ripping open his

clothes in a frenzy and exposing the seared flesh and bronze pendant now embedded in it, he doused the affected area with alcohol, gasping from the stinging sensation.

Breathing heavily, his heart pounding in his ears, Farlow stared in disbelief at the pendant. It lay flush against his skin as though it had always been a part of him. Frantically, he clawed at it, but it was immovable, fused to him as if he were born with it.

He tensed at a knock on the door, his hand tightening around the bottle.

“Master Chivren, is everything okay? I heard a scream and—who are... by the maker... um, sir. You—you... um... have... gu-gu-guests...”

The nervous stuttering in the voice jolted Farlow. His head snapped toward the door as footsteps shuffled and heavy, uneven breathing echoed behind it. There was a low growl—something massive and not human. His heart raced, and he took a hard swig from the bottle, the liquid burning down his throat.

“Out of the way, you twit,” said a new voice.

The door vibrated with a slam from the other side, and the beam across it snapped.

“Stop that! You’re breaking the door. You—”

The scream of the merchant’s assistant was not a good sign. Farlow raced toward the window and grabbed the rope. The door splintered, and a creature about seven feet tall with a bull’s face stood there sniffing around. It had yellow eyes and radiated an aura of black shadowy flames.

Farlow, known for his calm demeanor, froze. He had heard tales of such a vile creature, but had never seen one until now.

Following the creature was a slim man with hair slicked to one side. He wore a long olive-drab coat with four large gold buttons down the center. A curved sword hung from his belt alongside a flintlock pistol, and an icelike gem adorned his coat.

The man scanned the room, smiling at the open wall safe and the displaced stone on the floor. His smile vanished when his eyes met Farlow’s, and a twitch contorted the right side of his face, tilting his head.

“It seems our assassin has exceeded his contract.”

“Off day, but another time perhaps,” said Farlow, leaping out the window and swinging away.

The thin man ran over, drawing his flintlock and cocking the hammer. He leaned out the

window and fired at Farlow, forcing him to release the rope, drop, and roll.

Farlow clutched his arm, sprinting into the darkening day. The man holstered his flintlock, then moved to the center of the room and kicked the dead merchant.

A smoky apparition projected from the gray gem on his coat, materializing before him.

“You failed to retrieve the item, Ludwig.”

Ludwig’s face began twitching again. “High Mother, what a surprise. Farlow broke the rule he was known for, and the item bonded with him. Ludwig was told it wouldn’t bond with a man of his character.”

“Yes, Ludwig. Make excuses for your failure, but it is unprecedented that it connected to him. Perhaps you underestimated his purity. How do you plan to remedy the situation?”

Ludwig wiped the sweat from his brow. “Sway Farlow to our side or kill him.”

“You know he would never work with you.”

“Then Ludwig will place a bounty so large on his head that he won’t have a friend in the world that will protect him.”

“Acceptable,” said the apparition of the High Mother before dissipating.

Ludwig snarled as his face twitched, and he spun toward the door.

“Find him,” said Ludwig, waving a finger at the creature that had busted the door down earlier.

The creature nodded and obeyed.

## Chapter 2 - Mortality

Ryan and Kat had a magical Christmas, which flowed into an amazing Earth New Year, followed by another week of relaxation at his cabin in the mountains of what was once Montana. The cabin was a picture-perfect replica of the one on his Christmas cards. What made the place special to him was that his best friend and personal assistant, Nora, had the cabin created as a Christmas surprise.

A wave of sadness washed over Ryan as he surveyed the cabin. His gaze drifted to the floor-to-ceiling windows, and he walked over to watch the snow drift down in the pale midday light. He thought about Nora, light-years away, clinging to life on the Florarien homeworld. Her AI core had intertwined with living tissue, making her a new life-form that few could

understand.

They had planned to leave right after Christmas to see Nora, but the Florarien queen denied their request, insisting that both he and Kat required rest. Ryan had argued, but the queen was firm, swearing on her soul that Nora was stable and they had time. Reluctantly, they'd delayed their trip.

Ryan was still in shock at what had happened to Kat and Nora. During a visit to the secret Citadel of the C-Tecs, they'd discovered the leader was a tech-ual predator. In his lust for Nora's AI integration with the organic, he'd triggered a series of events that left Nora on the edge of death and almost killed Kat.

Around that time, Ryan was thrown into a game of death alongside Vicki. Both of them barely survived. If not for a special ability Ryan had yet to fully understand, they would have perished. In the end, they managed to escape, and Earth Consortium forces rescued Kat's uncle, Commander Seymour, who had gone missing at the hands of Fredrick LaRue.

He kicked himself for coming so close to capturing Fredrick but swore he would get him next time. There was a positive to all this: He and Vicki had become closer. Despite his aversion to vampires, he made an exception for her.

A ding alerted Ryan that his breakfast of waffles covered in maple syrup was ready. He picked up the plate from the kitchen's wall station, grabbed his datapad, and sat down to eat. A slight pain in his head made him take a moment to close his eyes and rub his temples. Before he knew it, the pain was gone, and he was on to cutting up his waffles.

On top of all the stress, he and Kat had recently been fired from their CEO and COO positions. However, they were appointed to oversee the construction of the new OTKE headquarters on Earth and were made ambassadors to the Earth Consortium. The new roles still granted them access to OTKE classified information.

Once the datapad completed its biometric security scans, he scrolled through recent updates. Most were routine, but one report about the battle on the world where he had been thrust into a deadly game caught his eye.

The space battle at Kura Prime pitted the Earth Consortium and OTKE forces against the Wolands and Nilorians. It shocked Ryan—and everyone else—that the Nilorians, a race long thought destroyed in the great galactic war centuries ago, had returned. While technology across interplanetary civilizations had evolved, the report indicated the Nilorians were far more

advanced, especially in the area of wormhole tech.

As he scrolled through additional notes, Ryan learned that Fredrick LaRue had escaped from Kura Prime, and his whereabouts were unknown. Additionally, the C-Tec leader was on the run with a large bounty on his head. A message from the new, unidentified C-Tec leader, relayed through Kat's friend Eyeball, revealed that the C-Tecs were relocating to a secret backup location. They were also rebuilding their old base to hand over to Saasha and the Order of Eir as a goodwill gesture.

Ryan leaned back in his chair and smiled. He was shocked and overjoyed when Saasha, an ally and dear friend, had shown up when he had docked with an Earth Consortium ship. The last time he had seen her, she'd sacrificed herself to destroy the Nilorian facility that was resurrecting dematerialized Nilorians by breaking down humanoid life-forms and re-forming them using ancient portal tech. Her survival was nothing short of miraculous.

"Smiling at breakfast," said Kat, walking over in one of Ryan's t-shirts. "I'm not sure if you're reminiscing about our recent time together or the waffles."

Ryan pulled her onto him as she walked by and kissed her. Kat grinned and jumped up, taking his fork with the last piece of waffle on it.

Ryan smirked. "Believe me when I say the evenings have been memorable, but the waffles are also good."

"You can try that, but the way you're blushing tells me it's not the waffles."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well... let's just say we need another long vacation with all that is going on."

"I'm game if you've got the stamina," said Kat with a wink, running back to the bedroom.

Ryan shook his head and yelled down the hallway, "Well, Miss Stamina, we'll have to test that, but in the meantime, you have less than forty minutes to get ready, and then we're out of here."

He took his plate back to the kitchen and placed it in the dishwasher. When Nora had designed the cabin, she'd included some modern technology but kept it retro to remind him of his first life. He wanted to experience the future, but it was nice to do things the way he remembered doing them.

"Mr. Hunt," said the cabin AI. "You have a priority-one call from the Earth Transport

Authority.”

Ryan looked up, contemplating what they were calling for, but he hadn't a clue. “Put them through.”

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Hunt. We have an issue with someone on an incoming ship claiming to know you. Before we intercept, we wanted to verify.”

The man's tone made Ryan a little worried. “I wasn't expecting anyone. Who is it?”

“She stated her name was Victoria Van Buuren. Her ship entered the system at full speed and has not slowed down for proper approvals. She said her destination was wherever you are and warned that we'll face a woman's wrath if we don't provide your location.”

“You toned that down for me, didn't you?”

“Yes, Mr. Hunt. Ms. Van Buuren was a lot more vocal and colorful. I even learned a few new terms, and I come from a long line of Planetary Merchant Mariners.”

“Well, then. I know Victoria Van Buuren and that does sound like her *dark* side. You can give her my cabin's landing coordinates. Is she alone?”

“Yes, she was not blocking scans, and we confirmed she was alone. We will provide her with the details, and she will be there shortly. Good luck. Earth Transport Authority out.”

“Cabin AI, there is a ship landing soon. You have my permission to give its occupant, Victoria Van Buuren, access to the house.”

“Approval for access acknowledged.”

Ryan looked around, shrugged, and went to pack.

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He paused at the doorway, observing Kat clean her las-pistol for the umpteenth time. Based on the clothes strewn about, she had gotten sidetracked. Since her harrowing escape from the C-Tec Citadel, shadows made her nervous, and he couldn't blame her. Her recount of the ordeal left a vivid image in his mind that made him nervous as well. It brought back memories of his encounter with the creatures he'd faced on Kura Prime. Like her, he now watched shadows, always expecting to see red eyes peering from them.

A creeping unease settled in his bones, and he jumped when the cabin AI spoke.

“Mr. Hunt, Victoria Van Buuren's ship is landing. I will prep the tram for her arrival.”

“Thank you. Let me know when she reaches the ela-tube,” said Ryan.

“Why is she here?” asked Kat.

“Not sure. Maybe to personally thank me for the outstanding Christmas card I sent her. Although I sent them late, I wouldn’t have expected anyone to have gotten them this fast.”

“I’m still leery about her,” said Kat. “And we never really talked about our *disagreement*.”

Ryan recalled the last time Kat and Vicki met in person. It was after Vicki had turned on them in favor of Fredrick LaRue, a betrayal they never understood, but Vicki had eventually turned on Fredrick. When Vicki exited the shuttle with Tilli, Kat immediately blasted Vicki a few times with her innate energy blasts. If it wasn’t for Ryan jumping in to stop Kat, Vicki may not be alive.

“Well, things have changed. I trust Vicki. I don’t think we’ll have any issues. She—”

“Mr. Hunt, ela-tube from the tram is on its way up,” interrupted the cabin AI.

Kat raised an eyebrow.

Ryan moved his hands toward Kat in a calming gesture. “It will be fine. Let’s go see our guest.”

Kat grinned, holstering her las-pistol. “I’ll be there in a second.”

Ryan took a deep breath and headed back to the living room just as the door to the ela-tube hissed open.

“Merry Christmas, Vicki. I hope—oh, my. What the hell?” Ryan’s eyes widened.

Vicki stood there, staring at him with narrowed eyes and lips pressed tightly shut. Her hair was a wild tangle, sticking out in disarray, and her skin glistened with an oily sheen as if she hadn’t showered or slept in weeks. Her clothes were creased and stained with dark patches of sweat, and there was a foul odor.

“You!” said Vicki, stepping out of the ela-tube, pointing at him with a trembling finger.

Ryan half smiled and pointed at himself.

“Yes, you!” She poked him in the chest, and he wrinkled his nose at the odor coming from her.

“I... I guess Christmas was a little rough? Ummm... I—”

“Don’t you even try to talk your way out of this!” Vicki moved her hands up and down her body.

“I sense I’m in trouble and would apologize if I knew what I did.”

“Typical man. You said on Kura Prime... and I quote, ‘trust me.’”

“I believe you when you say I said that, but I’m still not sure what I did.”

Vicki grabbed Ryan’s hand and slapped it onto the left side of her chest.

Ryan blushed, and then his mouth fell open. He pulled his hand away and then placed it back, pressing harder and leaning in.

“Okay, not what I expected to walk into,” said Kat, entering the room. “A normal girlfriend would fly off the handle if she walked into a room and saw her boyfriend with his hand on another woman’s breast, but I have learned that life with my boyfriend is going to be odd, and I shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Especially when the woman looks like she crawled out of a sewer.”

“Kat, come here,” said Ryan. “You need to feel this.”

Kat bit her lip. “Again, not jumping to conclusions.”

Ryan walked over and pulled Kat over to Vicki. He grabbed Kat’s nongloved hand and placed it on Vicki’s chest.

“Yes, they’re firm and—”

Kat’s face went blank, and she pulled her hand away. She then slowly placed her fingers on Vicki’s neck. “She has a pulse,” said Kat, turning to Ryan. “This can’t be... and for future reference, I’m the only woman you can check for a heartbeat with the hand on the chest. Everyone else, neck or wrist.”

“Well, not like I... never mind. Noted.”

“Now that you two are done,” Vicki said. “You, sir, need to fix me!”

“How? I’m not even sure how I broke you.”

“It was your damn blood. That damn blessed blood. Normally, it would kill or severely wound a vampire, but since I am all ‘reformed,’” said Vicki with air quotes, “it not only saved me, it cured me.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” asked Kat.

“Dr. Katalina, I have lived centuries in the darkness. I was fine with who I was. Now, I am a mortal little ant. I have no DNA or genetic enhancements. No built-up antibodies for the millions of intergalactic flus. My body is craving water and food. Hell, I had to use the toilet for the first time since I was turned. Now, I may need to wear a mask and alcohol wipe my hands all day like the mortals I once mocked during all those Earth plagues. Plus, I can’t sleep. I keep... keep reliving every person I have ever killed... and there were a lot. If death does not take me,

loss of sanity will.”

Vicki whipped her head to look at Ryan. “God help you if I get cramps and—” She shuffled over and plopped herself on Ryan’s couch, her sobs cutting through the tense air. “I’m done for. Once people and creatures find out, they will come out of every shadowy hole to kill me... and in some instances, I would deserve it.”

Ryan opened his mouth to respond, but Vicki’s crying intensified. Helpless, he exchanged a glance with Kat and shrugged.

“Vicki,” said Kat. “Ryan and I won’t tell anyone.”

Ryan nodded. “Just as Kat said. We won’t tell anyone, and you’re free to stay here for as long as you want. Once we get back from seeing Nora, we’ll figure this out.”

Vicki’s head perked up. “Hell no! You’re not leaving me alone. Until this is figured out, I’m going with you... everywhere.”

“I... ah...”

Vicki stood, walked over to Ryan, and poked him in the chest, making Ryan flinch and rub the spot, and then looked up at him and mouthed slowly, “Everywhere.”

Ryan gulped. Vicki may no longer be a vampire, but the look she gave him made him squirm.

Kat put a hand on Vicki’s shoulder. “You can come with us. I’m sure you want to see Nora. Now come with me, and I’ll show you where you can wash up, help you with your hair, and get you some clean clothes.”

Vicki slouched and nodded. “I have clothes on my ship.”

“Ryan will get those for you.” Kat looked over at Ryan, who nodded and headed for the ela-tube.

Vicki patted Kat’s hand. “At one point, we wanted to kill each other, and now there is no way I could stop you.”

“People and situations change. I’m not going to kill you. Now follow me. Ryan’s bathroom setup is very retro. I think you’ll like it.”