

## Episode 3.15

### Alone and Three

A small red ship dodged many moving asteroids to get to the other side. Once clear its impulse engines fired up and shot away. Two similarly sized ships emerged as well from different parts of the field and gave chase.

"They've got too much of a head start," one of the pilots said. "We're gonna need to do something drastic in the next lap if we're gonna win this."

"There's a sun nearby. Maybe we can slingshot around it when we get back in range," the second pilot said.

"Right, I'll take the graveyard track then," pilot one said.

The two ships tried to close in, passing through the two pillars marking the start of another lap. The star close by temporarily blinded them, the pilots looked down at the sensors until they were out of the blind spot. Doing so they completely missed another ship use this to its advantage, flying down in front of the first place's ship. It fired a barrage of weapons in its face.

The two pilots didn't see any of this until it exploded. The attacker flew through the wreckage and flames with little care.

*Game Over!*

A brief flash of purple blocked all of their view. Once it had gone the sight of debris at their feet took their cockpit's place. The smell of fires smouldering in the distance got the attention of one of them, she looked around at many surrounding buildings, all burning and crumbling to bits. Her two teammates were a little distracted to notice.

"What the hell James?" Lena angrily snapped. James shrugged indifferently, he wouldn't even look at her, let alone answer. "What did you do? That was a racing game!"

"So?" James finally said in a bored tone.

"So? You cheated. That could've backfired on us," Lena grumbled.

James shook his head, "it didn't."

Jessie thought to interrupt them after getting her tricorder out. "Guys, take a break. Look around."

The bickering pair did just that. The devastation around them temporarily made them forget their dispute. "What the...?" Lena mumbled.

"Yeah. I'm picking up the usual craters and building collapses," Jessie said, pointing down a street.

As they followed her gesture, they all grew aware that eyes were on them, hiding behind debris or inside of alleys.

"It's okay, we're not gonna hurt you," Lena said with a friendly smile.

A man around four foot tall with cat like ears shuffled out from behind a dumpster. "Are you here to invade us with your cube ships?" he asked timidly.

"No no," Jessie quickly replied, she discreetly glanced at the tricorder. "We're not responsible for those things. We were picked up by one against our will, and now we don't know where we are."

"So they do kidnap people. Told you," a woman said from an alley. A few people bought it and slowly emerged from their hiding places, the rest remained where they were. The trio noticed that the aliens were all of similar height to the man.

"Another pre-warp planet?" Lena asked in a whisper, even though she knew the answer already. Jessie reluctantly nodded. Lena wasn't surprised, only a little disappointed. She turned to address the aliens. "We've been lost a while, can you tell us where we are?"

"This was the city of Terya," another woman replied. "From the looks of you, you're from the uncharted lower continent on the other side of the world. We hear gravity's a lot lighter down there."

"People can live there, woah," someone said from the crowd. "Who are you people?"

"I'm Lena. This is Jessie," Lena said as Jessie slid her tricorder into her sleeve. Lena then gestured back at a disinterested James, apparently staring at one of the many burning buildings. "And this is my brother, James."

"Do we really need to do this everytime?" he muttered still with his back on them.

Jessie shrugged, "it's a few seconds, where's the harm in it?"

Nearby bricks broke free from a nearby building, and tumbled down to the ground. Startled by the sudden noise, James drew out a sword and pointed it in that general direction, yet he had a look of disinterest on his face. If that wasn't unnerving enough for the smaller aliens, the scar coming down from his forehead to the top of his cheekbone coupled with the bloody red left eye would do the trick.

When he realised what the noise was he put it away and acted as if nothing happened. The natives didn't though, it freaked the already wary ones enough to make them run off. The others retreated back to their hiding places.

"James," Jessie said softly as she placed a hand on his arm.

James flinched, breaking his almost bored facade. "Sorry," he said with a tiny touch of shame.

"You've got to work on the everything's a threat, jumpy thing," Lena said.

"No not really. So another pre-warp huh?" James said.

"Not just any. It looks like that wasn't the first Game," Jessie said. "I've already detected two loss spots."

Lena sighed tiredly, "another one. We must be in a busy Game sector. We should check this out before we leave. Maybe one of us can chat to the leader."

"Do what you want. I'm gonna look around," James bluntly said.

He walked away without waiting for a reply, at the same time slipping a pair of shaded glasses over his nose. Jessie and Lena shared a look that wasn't surprised, but a little disappointed. Lena shook it off. "Let's go. Where's the most likely command building?" she asked.

Jessie shrugged and turned to the still remaining people. "Who's in charge around here?"

"You missed a perfect *take me to your leader* moment," Lena smirked.

Jessie pulled a disgusted face, "good. Well?"

"City hall, but I don't think they'll be too welcoming to cube visitors," the first man answered. "I'll show you though, come."

Commotion up ahead changed James' casual stroll down an abandoned street into a run. Eventually he reached the cusp of a hill, the source of the noise came from the bottom. A young man, likely a teenager from the sound of his voice, kept taking swings at a slobbering creature that looked like a preying mantis. Only this one was seven foot tall. It got him to back off temporarily by slamming one of its front legs into the concrete.

"You coward. Face me in your own size!" he shouted at it, clambering backwards to get safely to its feet. Another foot slam stopped him. "You'll pay for this!" He slashed at its leg with a piece of debris, the creature roared at the insult more than the pain. It aimed another strike.

James sighed like all of this was nothing. He unhooked a UZI looking gun from his trouser leg sheath and fired a short energy pulse at the thing's general direction. Further roaring, its attention was diverted to him. The creature then shivered and squeaked in fear, which considering its size and deadly form looked very funny to the boy. "A Slayer? Here," it whimpered. It turned to hurry away.

The boy looked on in amazement as the new giant-to-him stranger threw a sword straight into the thing's back, forcing it to drop where it was. Only it was still alive, groaning in pain and squirming until James got to it and pointed the gun at the thing's forehead.

"No don't, let me go! I was only trying to scare the boy, I mean no harm," it pleaded for mercy.

"Oh sure, I make a habit out of letting Softmicron go on their merry killing way," James said.

"I only wanted to hide, I swe..." the creature stuttered, but it was shot before it could finish. Its head slumped to the ground, its form reshaped and shrunk down to the tiny, cute little creatures Damien had been ordering around.

The boy only knee high compared to James stood up, hiding his awe with an annoyed, cocky mask. "That thing smashed up my home. It was my kill."

James laughed as he retrieved his sword. "It doesn't work that way, kid. You're welcome." He continued on his way.

"Hmph!" the boy turned his nose up at him, at least until James fully had his back on him. Then he was back to awe.

Jessie and Lena felt even more alien than they did before, sitting with a dozen of the shorter aliens in a waiting room. All of them staring fearfully at them. After two more people separately walked into the only office, Lena grew more and more sick of waiting and got up to follow the third.

"What..." Jessie barely had time to protest as she looked on helplessly.

"Excuse me, you can't..." the alien protested once they noticed someone following them.

A man inside the office held up a hand. "Jichel, if this is about your usual, come back at thirteen."

The alien Lena followed in turned around and looked up. His eyes widened at the woman twice his size. "Fine," he trembled and hurried back into the waiting room. Jessie took that as a cue to get up as well to join her.

"You're the rumoured aliens I've been hearing about, welcome," the man in the office said politely. "I'm Mayor Thorget."

Lena and Jessie looked on worried. "Uh, aliens?" Jessie voiced it first.

"I hope that isn't offensive. We've never met anyone from the south continent, until today they were only a myth," Mayor Thorget said apologetically.

Lena thought it would be best to change the subject. "How many of these cubes have you had?"

"Three, four if you count yours," Thorget answered. "Tell me, how did you come from one and why didn't it destroy the landing area like the last two?"

"Has no one ever survived one of these things?" Lena asked.

"Not until today. My police force are having difficulty rounding up today's survivors for testimonies. The media will likely get to them first," Thorget replied. "Now, answer mine."

Lena hesitated again, she looked to Jessie for help. "Well..."

Jessie noticed it and stepped up, "these cubes don't kill its captors immediately. First they make them play a game. If you win, you live."

The mayor's cheeks lost all colour, "who would make something so barbaric? We have lived in peace with the Light Continent for as long as we've been aware of their land. Why would you..."

"We're not responsible for the cubes," Lena blurted out to avoid him calling for guards.

The suspicion though didn't go away, "then who are?"

Jessie cringed, Lena looked away awkwardly. "Please, we're as much of a victim as you. These things took us away from our family and friends. We have no choice but to use them as a means of transport, but we've had no luck. I've lost track of how long we've been lost," Jessie said.

The mayor looked sympathetic, the tension the two women were feeling eased. "My apologies. I've lost many people to these cubes."

"It's fine. It's understandable," Lena said. "Maybe we can help."

"Oh?" the mayor said hopefully.

Jessie winced once more. "We know how these cubes basically work. We can tell you, you could train volunteers to win. It's not a guarantee though, otherwise we wouldn't be here."

Lena nodded, the memory of the big loss still lingered, it annoyed her. "Yeah, you never know what Game you're gonna get. You should be aware of the risks before you send anyone in. For the time being all I recommend is evacuating from any landing spots."

"We do try. There isn't much time though," Thorget said wistfully. "I would appreciate any information you have on these games. My people will need to be informed."

"Okay. First..." Lena began to explain. It took her a while since a few details had to be avoided, all of which involving aliens and ships, to the pre-warp leader. She knew he was struggling to understand the stuff she could tell him. In the end she described some of the types of games they've had to play in the past.

"Wait, so when it's over they go back into this tiny ball?" Thorget said in disbelief.

"Yeah," Jessie replied. "But I wouldn't feel too bad for them, the ones that were real designed the whole thing anyway."

Thorget nodded slowly. He looked confused, if slightly curious all of a sudden. "The people who make these cubes. You know of them?"

"Very little actually. Sorry," Lena sighed. "I wouldn't worry though, they can't get through lost games, and we were the only people in that one."

"Actually. The first game appeared in the mountains. No damage, no missing people, remote location, only a couple of witnesses saw it from a nearby lodge," Thorget said.

The news rendered Lena mostly speechless for now, "huh? Why would a Game land in the middle of nowhere?"

"They're really changing their tune lately. I wonder if it was carrying any visitors," Jessie said.

"One at least, but I wouldn't worry about it," James said as he walked into the office.

"I'm afraid our biggest problem are the cubes themselves. We couldn't convince you to stay and deal with them, can we?" Thorget asked.

Jessie looked down at her feet guiltily, "we can't. We've already been gone too long. We need to find our people."

"But we do need to go into the next one to continue travelling. We could show you how they work, some hints and stuff," Lena suggested.

"Oh great," James groaned, prompting a glare from his sister. "This is going to end in tears, just like the zero seconds to win time trial with the balloons and birds."

"That game was rigged. And why are you complaining, your contribution was punching out the other racer," Jessie reminded him with a playful smile.

"It's a little harder to shoot attacking birds when you're depth perception impaired, especially when their draw distance is two centimetres," Lena ended up giggling.

James still kept a straight face, although his not scarred eyebrow twitched from the need to rise. "I prefer punching anyway."

"We know," both women said in unison. Lena shook her head and turned her attention back to Thorget, "as long as you don't look to him as an example, you should be able to repel most games."

"Most means all but Mortal Kombat rip offs," James mumbled. Lena elbowed and shushed him.

Thorget either didn't notice or brushed that off. "I'm grateful. I'll get the word out right away. I should warn you, most people run from these cubes. It'll be hard to find a few brave souls willing to give this a go."

"Die vile fiend!" a man dressed in a wizard's outfit screeched. His opponent; a blowfish looking thing with three eyes and a mouth that could swallow the Delta Flyer. It floated out of the dreary swamp ahead. The odds weren't in the man's favour anyway, but his weapon of choice was a measly bird's feather, reducing it further.

A chubby man ran past behind him, screaming in a butch deep voice while waving his arms around. He eventually hid behind a woman busy scribbling in a notebook, occasionally looking up to watch everything.

"This can get worse," Lena said pathetically.

Jessie gave her a sympathetic glance, "jinxing never works like that."

"When Thorget said brave, he meant nuts right?" Lena wondered.

James meanwhile looked on at the scene, his lack of patience already long gone. "They're never going to learn if they're dead. Can I..." He was cut off by the sound of little footsteps rapidly approaching from the marshes. All three were on their guard.

"Hey, large guy!" a teen boy's voice shouted from it.

"Who?" James asked legitimately. A tiny figure leapt out of the grass twice the alien's height to tackle him. Only he ended up bouncing off his leg and landing on the muddy ground with a thud. James looked down, groaning as he instantly recognised the boy as the one he rescued earlier. "Oh you, what are you doing here?"

"I figured, since I'm good at games so..." the boy answered as he sat up. He grimaced in pain, it took what little of his breath away. "You'd need me, and it'd be fun."

James scoffed, "Cubes aren't fun. Stay well away next time."

Jessie flinched, the words and even his tone reminded her of his scolding of Duncan not long ago. If he noticed it, he was hiding it very well. Still she thought to change the subject. "What do we do about Nemo here?" she said, gesturing at the fish. The siblings looked, only then noticing the fish had a hold of the wizard in its mouth. It wasn't too bad though, it only looked like a dog with a squeaky chew toy, shaking him around as he squealed. It was fortunate the fish didn't have any teeth they could see.

"I'll..." Lena said awkwardly while drawing her game character's weapon. It was only a wand to her disgust. Still she took it and hurried off to the side out of sight of the creature.

"While she's doing whatever, we need a way across the swamp. Neither of us are swimming," Jessie said.

The kid instantly perked up, "oh, maybe we could tame it. That'd be so cool."

A loud thud and splash distracted them once more. Everyone looked to find Lena already sitting on the fish's back, the wand hovering over its head, its eyes rolled to one side as it lay in the filthy swamp. "Uh er nope, too dumb," Lena said nervously as strange fanfare music blared out from nowhere. Text saying Level Up displayed over her head.

Since she was covered in sludge the aliens were more than happy with the no swimming plan. All that was left was to walk around the shore, single file so the Humans who could see over the grass wouldn't lose sight of anyone. Lena lead the way, grumbling as she tried to pick off the grime from her clothes. Jessie hung about in the middle of the pack, and James followed behind everyone. Their destination; a towering castle in the hills.

They weren't on the *road* for long when the teenaged boy heard a rustling sound flying above him, so he looked up. His face lit up, "ooh look a birdy," he grinned gormlessly as an eagle sized bird scooped him up and flew up into the sky.

It happened so fast the two witnesses barely had time to blink. "Well shi..." James muttered.

"What?" Jessie asked, having missed the whole thing, as she looked behind her.

"The kid's gone. I'd better go find him. I'll meet you there," James replied. He wandered off in the same direction he saw the eagle go.

"Uh sure," Jessie said uneasily. She stopped to allow the two left behind her to get by. One did, but the woman walked straight into her with her head and pen still buried in her writing. "Hey, can you stop doing that?"

"Can you stop..." the woman mumbled, hastily scribbling something down. "Doing that."

Jessie groaned impatiently. "God, with this lot the city is doomed."

"Tell me about it," Lena said, gesturing to the final member of the original team behind her. Clearly she was going too slow for the man, since he was running side to side and jumping on the spot. Even his talking was sped up to a ridiculous speed. "He makes mum look normal."

"Come on we should hurry the game is super interesting look at the sky it's cool the monster was scary Lena is badass I like the air here so clean I need to pee I'll be right back," he said with no pause whatsoever until he disappeared into the grass again for a second. "Better."

Jessie shuddered. "James and the kid left us to put up with them, I knew it."

The kid hung over a metal grate, ready to break any second and drop him into a deep bright pit. "Help!" he screamed more than enough times. The grate lifted up high, bringing the kid eye level with an unimpressed James. Since he had been logged into a medieval type RPG game, his injuries could no longer be hidden behind glasses.

It clearly didn't bother the kid though. "Woah, that was so cool!" the kid said, gawking at him.

James tried to avoid rolling his eyes since it still hurt to do it, but this time he really couldn't stop it. "You're easily impressed," he said as he lowered the kid down to safe ground. "And annoying."

"But you saved me anyway. That is so awesome, you're like this super..." the kid rambled on, his eyes getting all starry. James quickly shushed him and the boy froze. "What, is something coming? Is it another shape changing monster? Can I help you kill it, can I, can I? I told you he destroyed my house right. Said he was hiding in it, but he dropped the cube and ran off. I showed him!"

"Um," James said, staring at him blankly. "The *monster* was hiding and then it ran away from the Game? That's... that's weird."

The aliens looked up at the castle towering over them. Their only way into it blocked by a closed drawbridge.

"It bugs me, okay," Lena said impatiently.

Jessie shrugged, "I see that. So one Game missed the city and no one got hurt. Isn't that a good..."

"Missed the city? I don't remember seeing a mountain anywhere," Lena protested. "One 'Micron picking a fight with a kid hardly screams invasion. Something's off about the whole thing."

"Um, how are we going to get over this?" the butch voice man asked.

"I know," the wizard gleefully said, producing the feather from out of nowhere.

Jessie and Lena shared a look of mental exhaustion. Lena then changed hers to a more innocent expression, eyebrows both up, lips pursed slightly. Jessie knew what that look was, she intended to ignore it as she usually did.

"I know watch this I'll jump and lower it wait here," the fast guy said. Next thing everyone knew he was hanging off the edge of the drawbridge by his fingertips, feet kicking so fast they blurred. "Oops I missed it a little how far is it can I drop to the ground I'll try again."

The wizard flapped the feather while staring at it expectantly. The woman continued to scribble, laughing to herself.

Jessie sighed in defeat, "fine, go ahead."

Lena's innocent look vanished, instantly replaced by a smile and mischievous glint in her eye. "Two minutes." She then jumped on top of the bridge, narrowly missing the fast man's fingers, and climbed over the wall.

The strange fanfare music rang out, startling all of the aliens into dropping everything. For the fast man that was himself, he fell into the stream below.

"That was fast," Jessie commented. Then she noticed the butch sounding man posing stupidly with the text and numbers displayed above his head. "Oh, it wasn't her. Wait, how...?"

"I stepped forward a bit and this monster appeared," he replied, pointing at a dazed bunny like creature on the ground. Jessie shrieked and side stepped away a few times.

"Eek she exclaimed. It's just a cute little hisha, I said," the woman giggled while writing.

"All right I learned a new spell," the butch man said proudly.

Jessie didn't really care to know but she asked anyway, "what?"

"Leviathan's Gaze!" he proudly belted out as the fast man climbed back up to shore in front of him. Light overwhelmed him for a second, freezing him the entire time with blurry text hovering over his head.

"Hey, what was that?" he asked, then gasped. "Oh my, I'm normal again. What a relief, after this I'm going to get my wife back and..." The text Effect Expired flashed over him. "Start over get a new job maybe get a pet... aaaw!"

Jessie looked confused, "wait, why would him being super fast at everything make him lose his wif..." The group looked at her at the same time she got it, she blushed and laughed it off. "Oh right."

The kid swiped at his opponent with a sword over and over. "Yeah take that, and this! I'll kick your ass." He briefly looked back, "James, how am I doin'?"

James elbowed a weird bear looking creature with wings, knocking it back slightly so he could finish the living gargoyle creature in front of him with a neck snap turned decapitation. That done he stabbed the other one behind him. Both creatures joined the sea of dead weird looking creatures around him as he turned around to check on the kid.

He was more than relieved to see he was still where he left him; swatting a statue of a soldier holding a sword with his own. Occasionally stopping to catch his breath.

"Yeah, you're doing fine. Keep it up," James said right before ducking an attack from another gargoyle flying toward him. It swung around to gun for him again in overdramatic slow motion. "Yeah, I'm not doing that," he said. He waited for it to get to him and swung his sword once more. Another head joined the pile.

"Die scum, you're no match for Enzup the Gargoyle Slayer!" the kid grunted in between sword swipes. He looked over his shoulder to make sure James was watching.

Unfortunately he was since there was nothing left to kill. James looked around awkwardly for something, anything else he could hit.

The woman gasped in absolute horror as her notebook burned in one of many torches shaped like bowls that lit up the room. A tall man in full armour laughed mockingly at her. The others gasped as well at her reaction. All except Jessie who had given up by this point and had rested against the wall to fix the hairstyle the Game had given her.

"Oh my god, maybe this is it. You pissed her off, she'll take this final boss for sure," the wizard said.

"You... destroyed... my... story," the woman snarled in between angry gasps for breath, eyes burned. The others waited for her to do something. Only instead she dropped to her knees to sob.

"Never mind. I'll use my magic," the butch guy said. The fast guy looked on hopefully. He ran in front of him when he uttered the words, "Swallow's Haste. Oh what the hell Turbo!" he shouted at him, not that anyone could see the fast guy as he was now a blur around the room. The armoured man tried to watch him but it ended up making him dizzy.

The wizard shook his head, "looks like it's up to me." He ran up to the armoured man and attacked with the feather. At least it helped this time. His dizziness made him confused as to what he was being attacked with, he tried to deflect it with a shield.

Lena used the distraction to drop down behind him.

The kid apparently called Enzup burst into the room and posed dramatically, "you can't handle the tooth... er I mean truth. Damn it! I'll do that again." He stomped off back the way he came, leaving James behind with his very little will to live.

"What's he talking about?" Jessie groaned. Then she noticed the woman lugging the bowl of fire, still producing black smoke from her notebook, up to the man. "Uh, Lena!"

James noticed as well. "Get down!"

"What?" Lena said. The smoke smell clued her in, "hey!" she dove out of the way.

The bowl hurtled toward the armoured man, quickly engulfing him in flames. He ran around the room screaming.

Just then the kid burst back in with the same stupid pose, "it's time to take out the coffee in the nebula."

James tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention, the boy looked up as he pointed to the statue at the edge of the room holding a golden vase. He hurried over to pry it from its hands.

Lena and Jessie looked on bemused, but mostly a little shocked.

"They did it? Maybe we can go after all," Jessie said, bringing out her tricorder from a pocket.

"I don't think we needed to stay anyway," Lena commented as she walked over to join her.

James headed over as well, glancing briefly at the kid to make sure he could actually move the vase before he left him to it. Enzup shimmied it mostly all the way out, stalling when he noticed what was happening. "Hey James, where ya going?"

"We can't stay here. This Game might be the one that gets us back," James replied.

The boy's face flooded with disappointment, bringing his head down.

"Hey," James said with a smile. Jessie and Lena were more shocked at that than the aliens helping to win the Game. Enzup meanwhile looked back up hopefully. "You got this."

"Yeah," Enzup smiled back confidently, then down at the vase he grasped firmly. He waited for James to reach Lena and Jessie to pull it away completely.

Jessie tapped at the tricorder, creating a little bubble around the three of them. Seconds later the Game announced it was over.

In the alien's perspective the trio disappeared with the scenery as they returned to their city. Enzup looked sadly onto the ground, "aaaw, now who am I gonna project my hero worship issues onto?" It looked like he was about to cry until the fast guy, having lost the Haste spell effects with the Game Cube, looked like he dropped out of warp in front of him. "Oh my god so coooooooooo!"

Meanwhile Lena, James and Jessie appeared back in their normal gear in a bizarre red and blue tunnel. They checked their surroundings before walking down it.

"Wow, that was hard work," James groaned.

Jessie giggled as she wrapped her arm around his, "what, you don't like people admiring how wonderful you are?"

"Don't," James almost gagged.

Lena shook her head, struggling not to smirk herself. "It's time to take out the coffee in the nebula?"

"He wanted *badass* catchphrases. The best I've ever come up with is *mind my fist*," James explained reluctantly.

"Funny, I've never heard that one," Lena teased him.

Jessie laughed quietly to herself, her attention fell to the tricorder in her other hand. "I'm not picking up much of anything around here. Some lifesigns hanging around a few hundred feet back that way," she said, gesturing her head back a bit. A grumble escaped her, "and they're moving toward us."

"What else is new?" James sighed.

Lena nodded, the light mood already faded away. "Then we keep moving. Nearest Game?"

"This way, we'd better hurry," Jessie answered, pointing straight ahead. For a while it looked to be a singular path until they were right on top of a split in the road. Their choice was keep going straight ahead or go left, almost back on themselves. Jessie lead them down the left path.

The further down they went, the wider the corridor got. Lena and James' pace slowed, put off by it. Jessie hadn't noticed with her attention only on the tricorder.

"Jess," he warned her.

The tricorder seemed to do it too. "Ohno. The Game's being programmed in what looks like a busy sector. I don't see any lifesigns but the space is huge, probably been many Games there before," Jessie said.

They kept going, knowing well they couldn't go back the way they came. Lena looked around rapidly for another path. She grew annoyed when James increased his speed to pull ahead of them. "What are you doing?"

"You don't see it? The blue's fading," James replied, gesturing to the walls around them. Sure enough he was right, the tunnel they were in appeared to be getting more red the further they walked.

"That doesn't mean..." Lena said little too late, he turned a corner. She and Jessie hurried to catch up with him and do the same. They were greeted by a huge open space, all of its edges churning a vibrant red. "... It's the planet. It didn't look like this when we were taken away."

James' shoulders slouched, Jessie watched him carefully, noting his fists clenching and unclenching over and over again. "Lena, he wouldn't have noticed that," she whispered as a warning.

"I know. He was badly injured, I haven't forgotten," Lena said despondently. "The red's gotta mean something. We should go in anyway, maybe we'll find out."

James looked over his shoulder back at her. She gave him a half smile mostly apologetic. He nodded, accepting it or saying sorry himself, she wasn't sure.

They didn't have to wait very long. A purple cube emerged up from the floor. When it finally stopped, the trio walked straight through its walls.

### *Game Over!*

The Game Cube pulled away into the sky, leaving the three behind in an advanced and colourful city contained in a circular dome. The red fiery sky above them looked like a waterfall being stared at with a titled head, spraying a smokey mist over the mountains that seemed to be everywhere they looked.

Jessie looked around, not feeling the need to scan this new place from what she saw. James though hinted for it so she instead handed it over.

"There's got to be transport here, surely," Lena commented.

James didn't like the scan results he got, his grip on the tricorder tightened. He tossed it away before he crushed it.

"That's a no," Jessie mumbled. "I don't get it. This clearly isn't a pre-warp planet. It's a colony on some hellhole."

Lena walked over to pick the tricorder back up. She partly understood James' response but she felt more confused by the results. "It's not even that. The buildings, the scenery, the pavement, trees and stuff. It's all holographic. The only real thing looks to be a control building, and the emitters I guess but I can't detect them."

"It being a Holodeck on some Demon like class planet doesn't mean they're not space faring," Jessie pointed out.

James sighed while turning around to face them, "if they are, their ships aren't home. Sorry."

"It's okay. We're getting tired of this too," Jessie smiled toward him.

"Yeah but I won't be help..." James said, interrupted by the need to duck as a glowing ball of energy flew at him. "What the hell?"

Lena and Jessie glanced upward, catching more of the things buzzing around above them. They flew off having been spotted. Or so the three thought. Shouts from all around them closing in seemed to be the real reason.

James reached for his gun whilst turning around to point behind them. Lena brought out a small pole from her back, a thumb flick made it extend outward and turn into a three pronged spear. She looked around to the side.

Jessie though hesitantly only put a hand across her own weapon, glancing around rapidly.

Humanoids in garish outfits appeared from the streets around them, some approached, two chased after the floating lights.

"We don't know what side we're on here," Jessie warned her two companions. Lena's defensive stance relaxed a little, but James continued to use the gun to follow the people coming for him. She placed a gentle hand on his forearm, hinting for him to calm down.

"Who are you?" one of the new arrivals asked.

"You first," Lena snapped.

"You came from the Game didn't you? You're the Slayers right?" another asked, stepping forward.

"And they won it, do you realise that..." one of the guys started to say. A woman shushed him harshly.

Any progress Jessie made with making James less on his guard flew away, he sharply pointed the gun towards the one who stepped forward. "She said you first. How do you know who we are?"

He immediately raised his hands, "we apologise for the cold welcome. We're not used to visitors here."

"James," Jessie whispered, it sounded gentle but there was a glint in her eye that was anything but.

It didn't put him off in the manner it usually did. James looked more annoyed than scolded as he lowered his weapon a little.

"My name is Birk Tiberas, this is my team the Earth Slayers," the man said warmly.

"That name is all kinds of stupid," Lena remarked in disgust.

"The team or him?" James said.

One of the women chuckled, "we had to make it simple for our clients."

"Clients?" Jessie asked.

"I'm still hung up on them knowing who we are," James muttered impatiently.

"Why wouldn't we? You're the reason we're in this gig," a very large man grunted bitterly.

Lena narrowed her eyes in his direction, "I'm sorry?"

"Ignore him. He's forgotten the better days," Birk said. "I'll be more than happy to explain, but we can't do it here," he said, pointing ahead of him and behind the trio. They looked around in time to see the two people who didn't confront them return with two of the lights trapped in a sparking metallic net. "They'll come for them."

"Who's them?" Jessie asked.

"They're called the Esapils. This is their world. Like I said I'll explain in a safer place. Follow us," Birk replied.

None of them were surprised to find their hosts' lair was as bright and loud as their costumes were. Jessie had spent the entire journey literally biting her lip so she didn't criticise every single one.

Lena's head instantly began pounding when they arrived. She envied James a little with his shaded glasses. If he didn't need it she would have snatched them.

The two holding the strange net hurried over to two floor to ceiling sized glass tubes. Merely shoving the net toward them forced the balls of light inside them.

"This isn't the real building then, clearly," Jessie said in distaste. "Somebody wanted a base of operations, programmed it and said yep, this is it. This is perfect. Weirdos," she mumbled the last word before going back to biting her sore lip.

Their escorts dispersed around the room, a few in particular headed for what looked like a bar. Birk and a woman who appeared Vulcan remained with their guests.

"So, what's the story?" Lena asked.

Birk gestured for them to sit at the table. He did so even though only Lena did it. James remained where he was, while Jessie paced slightly whilst looking around with squinted eyes.

"How long has it been T'nai, two years?" Birk questioned.

"I'd estimate it to be within one and two, Captain," the woman replied. "It is difficult to say on this world with its exceptionally long days and our time between Games."

"Hmm," Birk nodded. "Sometime ago we decided to leave Earth to fight the Games on other worlds. We had heard about the exploits of the Slayers and wanted to be like them, or rather you."

Lena scowled a little, "it's not like we do this a lot, before we gotten lost anyway. Within two or so years we encountered only two cubes and a sphere."

"And I doubt the news of them spread to the Alpha Quadrant," James said.

"The Captain means your entire race, in a manner of speaking," T'nai said. "The Federation were unable to contain the information once a Game Cube was reported in a busy populace."

Jessie stomped back over, "excuse me, Slayers are not a race, it's very rude to..."

"It's okay," Lena quickly said a little nervously.

James seemed to everyone that he was staring straight ahead in the general direction of the table, but he had stared at the floor since T'nai spoke. "A Game landed in Federation Space? Was it won?"

"I'm afraid not. It's why I was compelled to join the team," T'nai replied.

Birk smirked, "most of the team joined for the exact same reason. For adventure, thrills, fame, you name it. It gave us all of these things, until we got here anyway."

Lena's interest in his story had vanished as soon as he said adventure. Her expression was mostly blank. "Oh?"

"You see, the Esapils cannot go inside the Games. We agreed to stay here for a while to win a few, thinking it would put them off sending more," Birk replied.

"It didn't?" Jessie asked.

"It did. The quantity of them has been reduced drastically. When we arrived we were playing them mostly non stop. Nowadays it feels like weeks, months pass before we get one," Birk answered.

"Despite that, the Esapils blocked our way to the Game Cube we chose to leave in. They've been doing that ever since," T'nai said.

Lena's face scrunched up, she thought she misheard. "But if they block you, you can't protect them. What's the point?"

Jessie paced over to the tubes, watching the light floating inside them intently. Typically that's when a booming male voice came from one, "you sully the name of the Game Slayers. Unlike those who are gifted with the power, you volunteered to protect people. That is your sole purpose. You seek to leave only for your own amusement."

A younger woman swirled around to snap at it, "by trapping us here, we cannot help anyone else. You are not the only target of the Games!"

"If you were the only ones we would concede. With the arrival of others from your same species, we insist you fulfill your agreement with us," the light being argued back.

The large man stomped over to the table, gunning mainly for James. "So you get to go off gallivanting around, leaving us here to do your dirty work!" His head turned to look down at Lena, her disinterest angered him enough to point at her. "You, if you think you're leaving after screwing us over like this..."

James didn't even look when he tightly grabbed his arm and forced it back down by his side. The man growled to cover the pain that left him in.

"It comes off next time," James said flatly.

"He has a point. You aren't volunteers, you're the real deal. You should stay in our place," the angry girl said.

"What kind of planet are we on that, that makes sense?" Lena asked, her eyebrow now hitting the ceiling.

Birk shook his head. "Jovan, Joanne please," he scolded them.

"I'm sure even the Esapils would object to holding real Slayers here to guard them from rare Game attacks. That would be illogical," T'nai said.

"Agreed," the energy being said.

"Illogical? I swear you throw that word around when it suits you," the girl, Joanne grunted.

"She's correct. This is our bed to lie in," Birk said toward her. His attention returned to Lena sitting ahead of him. "I do see where they're coming from. The Esapils are pure energy, something that is not compatible with the Cube's own holographic environment. On the other hand the risk of damage to the colony is minimal since it is also holographic..."

"If one lands on the programming centre, or at the edge of the dome, the damage a loss would bring would be catastrophic," the energy being interrupted.

"We've given you more than enough data to build a defence," Birk countered.

Lena scoffed a little too loudly, "defence, against a lost Game ripping a hole out of the dome. I assume they have it for a reason, and I doubt it's for the view outside."

"It's not as dire as they make out. What's a slight inconvenience compared to our lives?" Joanne complained.

"So what is kidnapping two of them going to achieve?" James asked.

Birk smiled up at him, "what else? Peaceful negotiations." The cold glance in his direction wiped it away, leaving him a tad shaken.

"I'd hardly call kidnapping them peaceful," Lena said.

"It will get their attention. In order for them to get back their kind, they have to let us go back to Earth," Birk said.

"You do know that getting to Earth is almost impossible. The Alpha Quadrant get less Game Cubes than the rest of the quadrants," Lena said.

"We're aware of that. But we're not getting anywhere staying on this planet for no reason," Birk said.

"Huh, no!" Joanne screeched, getting everyone's attention. They immediately noticed why, the tubes were empty. Jessie stood beside them irritably with her arms folded. Everyone rushed over.

"What the hell, how did they get out?" the large man, Jovan growled.

Jessie rolled her eyes, "I pressed the release button."

"You did what!" Jovan shouted. He lunged for her. James immediately got in his way. "Get out of my way, she let them go!"

"Make me," James said.

Jovan snarled, puffing his chest out to make him look even bigger. "I'm not afraid of a scrawny little thing like you."

"Yeah I can see that," James said in a patronising tone. "Put your little overcompensating tantrum away before I sprain something."

Lena sniggered quietly to herself in the background, so only he and Jessie really saw it. Jessie however wasn't amused in the slightest. "James it's fine, it's my problem, I'll fix it," she said, taking a step back. A little whisper and she vanished.

"What the... a witch?" Joanne stuttered.

"Fan out, look for her!" Jovan bellowed.

Birk quickly intervened before they could, "no need. We'll find more Esapils. Let's go." He beckoned them to follow him.

Lena shrugged as she followed them. James watched her with a frown. "Where are you going?"

"I think someone should keep an eye on these idiots," Lena replied.

Once she left Jessie reappeared in the same spot she disappeared from with a relieved smile on her face. "That was a close one huh? I half expected to appear on the other side of the planet like last time."

"You call me impulsive and reckless, why let them out?" James asked.

Jessie's smile dropped, "why? Those comic book morons were holding people hostage. Are you honestly telling me you weren't considering doing the same thing?"

"Maybe, I don't know. We don't know the whole story," James muttered.

"What?" Jessie said in disbelief, her eyes widened in shock. "The James I knew would've broken the damn glass, then told those clowns to piss off when they got mad. This isn't a situation where we pick sides."

"Isn't it? One side wants a bunch of idiots who offered to help them, to stay forever against their will. The other..." James said.

"Kidnaps anyone they find to use as leverage against their oppressors, only help people to make themselves look cool, and think being heroic is donning some stupid outfit and calling themselves Captain Berkhole," Jessie snapped.

James stood there silently for nearly a minute. "That's exactly what I was going to say," he eventually said flatly.

Jessie tutted and folded her arms. "There's more going on than we know, true. The Esapils wouldn't have kept these Slayer wannabes here for no reason, and I doubt it has anything to do with their personalities. We should find it out before we go, at least letting them go proves to them that not all Humans are selfish idiots, they'll talk to us."

"I'd hardly call wanting to get back to their normal lives, maybe go home to their families selfish. How many times have we left a planet to do just that?" James said.

Jessie flinched. "I guess but..." she said hesitantly. "No, they waltzed off into the Games to have fun, gain fame, whatever, knowing full well that they could never return. They chose to do this. You and Lena didn't have that same choice. Still I know both of you wouldn't abandon anyone no matter the cost."

"Wouldn't I? I've done worse," James said.

Jessie sighed, shaking her head. "You know, this..." she said, gesturing toward him. "You may have fooled everyone else, but don't try to pull this *I don't care* crap on me. You're never going to push me away. I don't appreciate you trying to either, especially since we're in the exact same boat."

James' head dipped slightly. "Jessie," he said with some regret in his voice.

Jessie interrupted by snapping, "don't!" her voice cracked. "I'm going out for some air, don't follow me." She marched out after Lena leaving him alone.

The further along the streets she walked alone with her thoughts the angrier Jessie felt. She didn't notice the two energy beings until they floated in front of her.

"You are not like the others," the deep booming voiced one said.

"Oh, it's you. I hoped to talk to you," Jessie tried to sound friendly, but her anger got in the way.

When the other spoke in a lighter voice she noticed they lit up slightly when they did. "The Earth Slayers only play at being heroes. Your friends are the true kind, but it's you who saved us."

Jessie felt a little guilty on Lena and James' behalf, even after their argument. "It's... we've been through a lot these last few weeks. This situation is a little difficult to judge without knowing everything. Why are you blocking them from leaving, is there something they still need to do?"

"It isn't as simple as that," the lighter voice said.

"The Games themselves are not the problem. The damage has already been done. We cannot risk the Earth Slayers leaving, we would most certainly infect others with it. I cannot condone it," the deep voiced one answered.

"Uh, I'm not sure I understand. You don't want them to stay to fight the Games, that's why it doesn't matter if you block them from going in. If it's something else, why don't you tell them that? They clearly don't know," Jessie questioned.

The two energy beings stayed silent for a moment, possibly pondering their answer. One hovered upward as if to leave. "She demonstrates a power they do not have. Perhaps it is safe to tell her."

"Possibly," the deep voice said. Jessie stared at them curiously, none of the wiser to what was going on. "Follow us to the programming centre. It is secure there." The pair flew off, leaving her to run after them.

They didn't have to go far before they reached what looked to her like a lift shaft, blue tinted glass and narrow. Only it seemed to be the only thing holding up the circular building high up in the sky. On the beings arrival an opening appeared before them, allowing one of them to go inside and follow it up. She looked inside before stepping in, seeing a little platform hovering off the ground.

"It is safe for Humans. Many of the Earth Slayers have visited here in the past," the deep voice one told her before going up as well. Jessie looked up anxiously, how high it was coupled with the see through lift gave her butterflies and made her a little sick. She closed her eyes and stepped inside. It only took a few seconds for the energy being to tell her it was over.

The pair lead her into a large control room. Consoles lines all of the walls, a large one sat in the centre. A few more of the beings were floating around, one in particular fluttered about agitatedly once it spotted her and flew over.

"Why did you bring her here? She could be one of them," it hissed suspiciously.

"She saved our lives back at the Slayers den, she uses magic," the softer voiced being said.

The suspicious one grunted, "did she now? I don't believe it." It hovered a little too close to Jessie, she armed a scowl and moved to one side. "What would a witch be doing with a bunch of Slayers?"

"They're my family, and that's all you're getting," she spat back. "Now, can you tell me what's going on?"

"Yeah right," the suspicious being said as it sped away to the opposite side of the room.

"When the Earth Slayers arrived we thought our troubles would be over. They'd defend us and we could focus on reinforcing our defences," the deep voiced being said. "Winning Game after Game had side effects we weren't aware of, that they didn't warn us about. I'll show you." It hovered over a station around the edge.

"Um, how do you use these without well... erm hands?" Jessie asked awkwardly.

A few more of the light beings surrounded them while the lead one brushed against the computer, which activated a video link showing the glass dome above a skyscraper.

"Okay, but that doesn't explain the need for buttons," Jessie commented, gesturing to the old fashioned to her keyboard there. "What am I looking at?"

The image zoomed into a brighter red patch in the sky. Another close up and she could see not only that it looked to be inside the dome, but there were blue specks in its epicentre.

"Our scanners cannot penetrate them, it is like they're not even there," the lead being explained.

Jessie stared at it with a growing knot in her stomach. "They're portals to the Games Matrix. I... I don't know how the Game Cubes could have done this. The only time I've seen this was caused by a weapon."

"Exactly," the other being she helped said. "This is sabotage, and it could have only come from inside the colony."

"Wait, are you suggesting...?" Jessie asked cautiously.

"The problems arose when the Earth Slayers offered to go into the Games to defend us. There really is only one explanation," the leader said.

Five minutes alone in the ridiculously colourful hideout had soured James' earlier mood even further. To avoid breaking a few of the stations he sat down to concentrate on sharpening a few of his weapons.

Lena and the Earth Slayers returned, all of them looking downcast. Even with his back on them James could tell, mainly from how much quieter their arrival was.

"What's the matter? Nobody around to play with?" he asked, disinterested.

"Pretty much," Lena replied, walking up to stand beside him. "Where's Jessie?"

James sighed, "fresh air."

Lena studied him carefully, her eyebrow slowly raising. "What did you do?" she asked bluntly.

James slowly glanced up at her, "why would you think it was my fault?"

"Really?" Lena snickered.

"Yeah," James sighed and shrugged. "So what's the problem?"

"On the edge of town I spotted a few mini portals, you know like the one Damien made," Lena replied, getting his full attention. "I think we've figured out why the Esapils were not so happy about these guys leaving."

Joanne rushed to a nearby station, quickly tapping it. "Helping them all these years let Softmicron into the colony. They must be using the equipment at the programming centre to open these portals."

"Jessie was right," James said as he stood.

Lena looked confused, "she was? What did she say?"

"She said that the Esapils must have another problem other than the Games themselves," James replied.

"She had the nerve to come back here after what she did? Hmph, when I get a hold of that little witch I'm gonna..." Jovan said. He didn't get the chance to finish, the edge of a blade pressed against his throat.

"James don't," Lena stuttered, she rushed to grab James' arm and pull him back. He though roughly pushed Jovan forward before she could. "Stop!"

"How pathetic, so called Chosen getting wound up over a little pixie girl," Jovan managed to say. "I'm going to rip her wings off," he whispered before attempting to push him away. All he got instead was his throat grabbed and flung over his attacker's shoulder. Jovan fell straight through the table, knocking all of the air out of him.

Lena cringed, a little relieved for the moment that her brother seemed to leave it as that. "Okay, can we get..."

James turned and returned to what was left of the table, leaning over to grab a hold of Jovan once more. Lena was in the middle of objecting again when Jovan swiftly kicked up to keep from being attacked again. A smug smile appeared as he got his face, but it didn't last since it only put James off for merely a second. He shrugged it off as nothing, the only thing it did was break his shaded glasses which he casually tossed to one side.

"Holy shi..." Jovan panicked instantly, scrambling back a bit.

"Jovan, I warned you about picking a fight with real Slayers, they're..." Birk scolded him.

Jovan tried to sit up against the wall, "he's evil, seen the eyes?"

Lena winced, this time she moved in front of James to block him from doing anything more. The sight of not only the bad eye but his good one blood red gave her the chills, which she tried not to show. "He's not worth killing, okay? Go over there and have a drink or something, anything," she said as calmly as she could.

James' right eyebrow raised. He walked off toward the bar much to her relief. Everyone in the near vicinity moved away quickly.

"Perhaps you should have warned us he was on the verge of turning. He'll kill everyone in this room if someone so much as looks at him," Joanne grumbled.

Lena looked around at everyone, now staring at her expectantly, some fearfully. "He's not."

The fear turned into disbelief. Birk shushed them. "Red eyes usually means they're vengeful, fatally so. As soon as he does, that's it for us. Surely you must have been warned."

"I used to think it was that black and white, but no. James has fought it off a few times. As long as Jessie and I stop him he won't go all black eyed murder spree. It's okay, we're pro's at convincing him by now," Lena said, trying her hand at a reassuring smile.

Jovan managed to get back to his feet, he brushed himself down. "One eye was darker than the other. You couldn't stop him before. Don't pretend you have control of him, he's a lost cause."

"Yeaah, the left's probably darker because it's always red," Lena said meekly.

"You just said..." Joanne sharply said.

"It's a Game injury, not a permanent evil warning sign," James grumbled from afar.

An alarm rang out, unnerving the Earth Slayers further. Joanne's attention returned to her console. "The Esapils are on the move, on a mass. They're heading for one of those portals."

"I knew it, there must be Softmicron on their side. Why else would they be going to the portal?" Jovan snarled.

"Logically they are more likely to be investigating or closing it," T'nai said.

"Either way, we need to be there just in case," Birk said.

Many of the energy beings buzzed around one of the red and blue portals almost the same size as them. Jessie and a few others waited on the path close by.

"If this is the same thing, whatever forced the portals open should be able to close them," Jessie explained.

"Hmm, if our efforts here fail then we'll have to find the culprit. Not an easy task," the lead Esapil said. Jessie worried at the thought, more so because she really did not want to go back to the assault on the eyes lair. "Are you concerned your friends will take their side and turn on you?"

"What?" Jessie said in surprise. "No, that never crossed my mind."

"But you and the male Chosen are no longer together, what will you do?" the leader asked.

Jessie smiled, resisting the urge to laugh. "We'll be fine by dinnertime, I'm sure."

The group of Esapils near the portal approached them. "We only managed to stall its growth," one reported.

"Yes, no thanks to you," the suspicious one grumbled.

"Me? I only just got here," Jessie shook her head.

"Nothing in the Humans' lair can create something as tangible as these things. It's all holograms. You've certainly got the power to do it," the suspicious one said.

Jessie looked at the one she assumed was them with a confused frown. She was about to object when the others closed in a bit.

"You may have appeared to only arrive a short while ago, but you've been here all along, using your sorcery against us," he continued.

"No, that's..." Jessie stuttered. Some of them got too close, when they brushed into her it felt like a static shock. "I only know one spell, and you know what, that was the first time I pulled it off." She batted a couple of way, not too literally knowing it would hurt. "Look you said it yourself, there's been a Softmicron posing as someone for as long as the Games have been played. Why give the game away by using magic in front of you in a new disguise?"

They all stopped, backing off a little at the sound of a brief phaser blast. Jessie didn't need to look to know who was responsible for it, but still looked around to see James and Lena approaching with the Earth Slayers following closely behind. As she expected he was pointing the gun at some of the Esapils.

"Tell me, what setting do I need to put out the lights?" he asked.

"That's not going to help us figure out who the spy is, unless you want to kill them all, and no," Lena said to him, still a little worried despite his healthy eye being blue again.

One of the Esapils floated forward, "you think we're the ones with a Softmicron in our midst? That makes no sense."

"But me being one does?" Jessie grumbled.

"You Humans insisted on staying here to help us. I wouldn't be surprised if you all were saboteurs," the softer voiced Esapil said.

Jovan grunted, "winning Games is what Slayers do."

"Exactly. You're the ones who have access to the only real building here, the programming centre," Joanne snapped.

"Enough talk!" Birk shouted at them. "Earth Slayers, prepare for battle."

Everyone else waited reluctantly for the Earth Slayers to pose while they announced their nicknames. When they were done the last one to do so looked to James as if it were his turn.

"This place is where I'm going to turn black eyed," he muttered in response.

Finally the Earth Slayers lunged for the Esapils, who in turn did the same. Lena glanced down at her only weapon, then up at the energy beings. "I miss my weapons coat. Stupid fighting game vaporising my toys," she muttered huffily, dodging a few Esapil onslaughts now and then.

She wasn't the only one. Without their nets, the Earth Slayers were having difficulty landing any blows onto the energy beings. The best the Esapils could do to them was static shock them if they weren't dodged.

James tried to fire at a couple, the one he should've hit the energy pulse flew straight through it. "Fine, need a higher setting," he said. The power setting was inched up as he stepped back a bit in case he was pounced. Doing so he bumped into someone. He swung around, ready to attack. Seeing it was Jessie he froze.

"Oh, having fun?" she asked.

"Not really," James replied. "You were right, about everything. I'm sorry."

Jessie shook her head. "So were you in a way. This could've been avoided if the Esapils told them what the problem really was."

"Yeah, talking about it would've helped. So, are you still mad at me?" James asked.

Jessie smiled, "what do you think?" James didn't get the chance to answer, she wrapped an arm around his neck to give him a kiss.

Lena noticed it in the corner of her eye, she rolled them. "Oh for god's sake, get a room." She ducked again. "Later."

Birk meanwhile threw up his hands, surrendering to an oncoming Esapil. "Wait. We must stop fighting."

"Why should I trust you?" the deep voice came from it.

"Because the Softmicron are clever. This is exactly what they want. If we keep fighting, we'll never find them," Birk replied.

"You're right," the leader said. Both ordered their people to stop and gather around. Most did so, if a bit reluctantly. Lena quickly joined them too. Jovan, Joanne and a couple Esapils kept to the back impatiently.

"Okay, that was abrupt," Lena commented. She frowned at James and Jessie as they walked over to her. "I hope we didn't interrupt anything," she said to them without meaning it.

"There's always later," Jessie smiled.

Lena shuddered, "yeaaaah no, save the smooching for when I'm not around."

"What happened anyway?" James asked.

"We have decided to discuss the situation, not hide from it and fight each other. It's the only way we'll get this solved," the lead Esapil replied.

James glanced briefly at Jessie by his side, "sounds a good plan."

One of the Esapils pushed through the group to reach the leader. "What are you doing fool, you'll kill us all!" the suspicious voice spat out of it.

"Brother, what happened to you?" the leader asked with concern.

James stared at it, one eye narrowed. "Is he your actual brother?"

"No, it is merely something we call one another," the leader replied.

"Oh," James said right before he aimed his gun at the suspicious Esapil. One shot knocked it to the ground, its light faded until nothing was left. When it did the cute tiny creature he knew well took its place.

Lena smirked and shook her head. "That was a bit of a leap."

"Not really. If I was wrong, no harm done," James shrugged.

"So he was the Softmicron saboteur. How could we have missed it?" the leader said.

"Like I said, they're clever," Birk said.

Jessie looked on like she was disgusted. "Really? Everytime he spoke he was bitching, pointing blame and being all paranoid."

"There is one problem. Didn't you say that the same weapon used to open the portals could close them?" one Esapil asked.

Jessie winced and looked toward James, expecting him to look a little sorry. She was surprised to see he still wasn't fazed. "There's only one place he could do this. There'll be traces of it in your computer's database. Should be no problem," he said.

Joanne looked on hopefully, "does this mean we can finally go home?"

"With the Softmicron outed and dead, the portals closed. You're free to do whatever you wish," the lead Esapil answered.

Jessie, James and Lena realised mostly at the same time what that would mean. They looked at one another painfully.

Lena asked though, hoping that they'd need more time to do it. "Does that mean you're going in the same Game as us?"

"Why yes, we told you how uncommon they are here," T'nai replied.

"Oh even better," Jessie groaned sarcastically.

The latest Game pulled up from the ground and disappeared into the sky, leaving a large marketplace in one piece, full of people going about their business. James, Lena and Jessie were among them.

Jessie opened her tricorder first to scan. The siblings looked around at the people who didn't seem to care about the bizarre platform game they were trapped in seconds before.

"Oh," Jessie said hopefully, getting their attention. "I'm picking up warp signatures. There's a number of ships on the surface not far from here."

"Really?" Lena laughed, mostly in disbelief. "We did it?"

"Depends on who owns the ship I guess," James sighed.

Jessie studied the tricorder further, tapping it occasionally. "There's four large ships in an open area. Several shuttle sized crafts. I assume it's a landing area."

"Okay, first we should find out where we are," Lena said.

James nodded, "yeah, ask around. Maybe one of us can check out if these ships owners will be okay with a few extra passengers. I guess..." Someone walked full speed into his back. The thud threw the absent minded man backwards onto the ground, James barely moved from the impact. He looked over his shoulder to see what happened.

"Oh excuse me, I'm sorry," the man stuttered fearfully. He scrambled to his feet, shaking violently. "Forgive me sir." Then he sprinted off like his life depended on it.

"Uh, that was an overreaction," Jessie said.

James was too busy frowning to notice Lena laughing quietly at him. "Maybe you've been here before big bro," she said.

"Good one," James said. "Who wants to arrange the taxi?" Lena mouthed *the what*.

"I'll take it. You two can be a bit..." Jessie said, punching her palm. "Happy, when you don't get your way."

"But if no one lets us on their ship, how are we gonna get out of here?" Lena protested innocently.

Jessie smiled at her, "I'll make sure to punch in your place."

James laughed as he reached for his own tricorder in his pocket. "No doubt here." The frown was back when he couldn't find anything in said pocket. "Huh, it's gone."

"What is?" Lena asked.

"My tricorder. I had it before, I could feel it when... oh," James said, his face flooded with realisation.

Jessie and Lena glanced at each other briefly. "When what?" Jessie asked.

James exhaled impatiently, "that guy who bumped into me." He rushed off in the same direction the man went.

"So, you're going the other way?" Jessie asked as if nothing happened.

Lena reluctantly nodded. Then she noticed Jessie taking a sneaky glance at the stalls nearby, a couple of them sold clothes. "You can't go shopping."

"I wasn't," Jessie quickly said to defend herself. Her shifty eyes told a different story. "No money."

"Mmmhmm. Keep in touch okay," Lena said as she wandered off.

James kept to a wall as he walked down a quiet alley. He looked around the corner, catching the alleged pickpocket brazenly stroll into what looked like a pub. James followed.

Inside was a stark contrast to the quiet of outside. Despite it being daytime the seedy looking pub was bustling.

At least it was until the glass automatic doors closed behind James. The silence that caused allowed him to hear dust landing. He walked forward towards the bar while looking around at the frozen people, curious at their reaction. Even the bar staff had frozen in fear at the sight of him. It gave him a chance to think, then he spotted a sign strangely in English folded onto a nearby table advertising a drink.

"I'll have that Dark Storm," he said.

"Ok," the barman squeaked. He turned to run off and make it out of sight. Minutes passed before he ran back and plopped a jar shaped glass filled with black fizzy liquid. He ran off again before James could offer payment.

James eyed the drink with distaste. "Thought it'd be coffee." One sip killed off any hope that it was. All he could taste was what he thought was rum. "Nope, not even coke." He held onto it so he could have a sneaky look over his shoulder. Then he spotted the man who bumped into him trying to be nonchalant and drink, but he was trembling so much he had spilt the whole thing.

"So are you done with that or do I have to take it back from your corpse?" he asked.

The man did an involuntarily loud gulp before answering. "Who me? Dunno what you're talking about."

"Kill it is," James sighed.

He edged only slightly. The man panicked so much at that he upturned his table. Everyone started to leave in a hurry after that. "Ok ok take it!" The man threw the tricorder at James and ran off. He caught it before it slammed into his face.

Jessie walked alongside the fence of a spaceship yard. Security guarded every gate she passed. She eventually reached an open one. A woman was in the middle of an argument with a guard.

"It's more than valid, I've got another eight years on that," she protested.

"No need to make a fuss Miss. You know the rules. We need to verify everything twice," the guard said before walking off. The gate shut behind him, sealing off the shipyard once more.

"So by the book he's a bookend huh?" Jessie said.

The woman reacted with an exaggerated hmm. "They all are."

"I take it you own one of these ships," Jessie said.

The woman frowned, instantly suspicious of her. "Well I'm sure not here to steal one, but are you?"

"No, I'm looking for passage off this planet. Three of us are anyway. Would you be interested?" Jessie asked meekly.

"Hmm, depends," the woman smiled.

"On?" Jessie flinched.

"Who the cargo is. Do you have any ID?" the woman asked.

Jessie's remaining hopes were instantly dashed. "You need ID?"

"My, how did you get here if you don't have that, stranger?" the woman laughed good naturedly. "Ah, let me guess. You arrived in that Game."

Jessie wasn't sure how to answer or if she should. "Maybe. How do you get this ID?"

The woman stepped closer and lowered her voice, a serious look on her face. "If I were you I wouldn't go chatting about that around here."

"No, why?" Jessie asked.

"You really are new here, aren't you? And not even on this planet, but the entire system," the woman said with a sympathetic tone. "Space travel is restricted. So many hoops to jump through if you're not one of them. We're talking family history, criminal past checks, DNA scans, what you had for breakfast. If they don't like your race they don't even read your rights, they haul you off to jail. So they say."

Jessie looked around, rendered speechless by the information.

"All of the ships here were confiscated from these people. Unless a renter like me comes along some will never leave the shipyard," the woman said.

"So what would happen if we boarded without ID, do they check inventory?" Jessie asked.

"You ain't getting through the door sweetheart. Sorry. I'd love to help you, I don't like these guys either but I can't risk prison. Or worse," the woman whispered.

Jessie shook her head, "no that's okay, I understand. Maybe you can tell me where to get an ID."

"No, believe me, if you came through one I'd leave via a Game. No shortage of them here," the woman stuttered.

"If this planet is in the Delta Quadrant like all the other planets we've been to, I doubt they've heard of us to hate us," Jessie said.

"Ok if you insist, your funeral," the woman said, gesturing to what looked like a watch tower close by. "Ask for a flight permit. All of your friends will need one too."

"Thanks," Jessie smiled. She began to walk back to the market, but the woman stopped her by gently clasping her arm.

"Don't. I'm serious. Unless I've pegged you wrong, they won't take kindly to Game travellers," she said.

Jessie turned back with a confused expression. "That's the thing, no one seemed fazed that a Game was even there. No one cared that we showed up."

"They wouldn't be. You were lucky you arrived in such a busy spot. Don't mention it to them or they'll hang you at dawn," the woman warned her.

Jessie felt her chest start to ache from anxiety, she had to ask. "Who's them?"

"I thought you'd get it by now, Game user and all. You're either one of them or aware of them," the woman said. "They're the ones who programmed the Games."

"Ohhh," Jessie mumbled, her face turned pale.

James tapped at the tricorder in his hand glitching, beeping frantically. Everything he did was rejected. Fifth time he noticed the scuff marks on the joining line at the side. He felt someone approach him. "Yeah, it's way too quiet in here to try that."

The new arrival stopped close by. "It's been a while since one of you arrived in one of those things," he heard a woman say.

"One of you?" James whispered, instantly suspicious. He swung around to face her. As she stood intentionally in bad light he could only see her shape. A humanoid woman, close to his height, a hand placed firmly on her hip. "Who are you?"

"You first," she said coldly. Then she took a step forward, her arms moving as well. He heard the familiar sound of a blade unsheathing. James would've been fully on guard if he wasn't already. "You know what, never mind. I'm curious to know what you're posing as, but I ain't got time to play around." A further step allowed him to see her a bit better. She appeared Human to him. A smooth face, similar pinkish skin, brown eyes.

"What do you mean posing as?" he asked.

The woman shook her head. "Hmm, always a charade with you things. One stab and you're all alike."

James flinched at the familiar description. He thought he understood. "Wait, are you talking about...?"

They both stalled at the sound of a low flying vehicle pulling up outside, followed by rushed footsteps approaching.

"Damn it," she whispered. "Did you...?"

"Human male scum, stand down and we'll show you mercy!" a man's voice shouted from outside.

The woman looked a little shocked at first, then embarrassed. "Oh, they're after you?"

James shrugged, "seems so."

"I'd duck then," she said, gesturing her head towards the bar. James nodded. They dove over to the other side just as phaser blasts flew at them.

"All I'm asking for is a basic *where are we*," Lena said impatiently.

The two people she was saying it to ran off in a panic. It only frustrated her more and she stomped off in another direction. Further down the street a trio of armed people in uniforms split up and scurried through different side streets. All of them were going in the same basic direction. Lena looked on, growing increasingly worried.

"Crap." Lena went to tap her commbadge as she sprinted after them. She didn't get very far. Once she turned into one of the streets she bumped into a familiar face, a one that smiled at her smugly. Next thing she knew she was surrounded by more of them.

Jessie sighed as she made her way back to the market, kicking a couple of small stones on the way. Any hope she had of getting back to Voyager, or even the planet they lost it, had turned into a sense of foreboding. She hoped she misunderstood the woman's words. Then she heard rapid footsteps getting closer. She didn't know they were looking for her until three phaser rifle like weapons were pointed at her from all sides.

Back at the bar James and the woman were pinned behind the bar. Phaser fire didn't seem to be letting up. He didn't hear the commbadge chirp or Lena's voice trying to warn him.

"Yeah, they don't care for us here!" the woman shouted.

"Us?" James did too.

The answer was drowned out by glasses left behind on the bar smashing over their heads. Glass rained down over them. The woman shook her head and extended her hand out flat. "Hi, I'm Sandi! Nice to meet you!"

James looked at her with his eyes wide in disbelief, "um, really?" he said.

The fire stopped as quickly as it started. Following it sounded like an air horn. The pair heard the TV screen above them, cracked and sparking in places, start up on its own. The earlier voice then echoed throughout the bar, "Slayer, we have your female. Surrender or she dies!"

Sandi cringed and pointed at the TV, "you should look."

James hesitated a second before twisting around to see the screen. There on it stood Jessie, surrounded by three soldiers pointing their weapons at her. She looked mad; her face red and fists clenching. James instantly thought about how she'd react if she heard what they called her. She mumbled something, and to him it did look like she said the word female.

Sandi was more than confused when it brought a smile to his face. "Uh, wrong woman?"

"No, not at all," James said right as Jessie clobbered the soldier standing on her left side with her elbow. Sandi heard the commotion and looked up to watch. She was just in time to witness the one knee to the crotch, then a smack with one of their own rifles to the third soldier's face finished the job.

"Yeah we should probably..." Sandi said, bringing out a handgun looking weapon. "Before." James gave her a quick nod, he took out his own. They quickly stood, leaning on the bar as they fired back outside.

It was soon quiet again. Sandi edged around to the entrance via the walls and snuck a peek outside. "Gone, for now. Same old Softs. All gungho when they're in armed packs."

"Wouldn't most people be?" James said.

"Yeah but something you should know, though I'd be surprised if you haven't seen it already," Sandi said. "We scare the pants off them."

"Slayers or Hu..." James wondered. Sandi smiled and nodded before he could finish. "I see, well that explains almost everything." He retrieved his broken tricorder from his pocket. Sandi's eyes lit up at the sight of it.

"Oh that's interesting," she said.

James tapped at it with a grimace, "it's been weird since I got it back. Then seconds later." He glanced briefly at the shattered remains of the automatic glass door.

"Got it back? They bugged you. Did it to me once," Sandi said sympathetically.

"Oh great," James groaned. His eye fell onto the scuff mark on the side, he thought to pry it open. It'd probably break it but it wasn't working anyway. As soon as he did he spotted the alien looking chip forced in near the top. He pulled it out and tossed it straight to the floor.

"Don't break it. Then they'll come back," Sandi suggested.

"Right," James said. They headed carefully for the exit, making sure to check it was clear before they fled the building. "So do you usually introduce yourself during fire fights?"

Sandi smiled sweetly, "some of my better friends I've met during fire fights."

Lena scowled so intensely at the woman who had blocked her, she had to step back to cool off.

"It was you. You sold us out," Lena hissed at them all.

Jovan laughed deeply. He flexed his large muscles, punched his own hand and kept a firm grasp on it. "Why would we do that? You were a great help getting us off that pit of a planet."

Lena looked over her shoulder to eye him up and down, and it was obvious she was since he was twice her size in height. Three times in weight. Still her gaze made him feel like he was four foot tall. "Try it and you'll be choking on it," she said icily.

"You're outnumbered and outgunned here, I wouldn't be so cocky if I were you," Jovan sneered.

Lena's glare disappeared, she looked worried. "Yeah. You got a point." Her fist met his face, he then met the pavement. The remaining three flinched. "How about now?" she asked innocently.

"You have no idea where you are," Birk grumbled. He withered at the glare returning. "You're not getting off this planet. Everyone here knows what you are."

"So, the Esapils were right. The entire Earth Slayers squad were Softmicron. Why pretend to be Alpha Quadrant people, and Slayers nonetheless, why win Games for them?" Lena demanded.

"The better question is why do you ugly beasts waste time asking questions you don't need the answers to," T'nai said. "You'll either spend the rest of your days in prison or die by..."

Lena slammed her palm into her face, knocking her flat out cold. "I'm not the one insisting on all the chatting. Who's next?"

Birk and Joanne shared a glance that said the same thing. Run and find backup, lots of it.

They had kept mostly quiet navigating between alleys, only whispering once they were safe and alone in any. They found a one near to a street where all but one shop had their shutters down. No one else was around so they could raise their voices a little.

"Is this whole planet full of Softmicron?" James asked.

Sandi hummed about it whilst peeking around the edge of the alley, "majority of them, yeah. The ratio increases with every Game, hence the mix up. Sorry."

"No problem, I get it. How long have you been here?" James asked.

Sandi thought about it, "two, maybe three weeks. Everytime we tried to get into a Cube, they'd block us."

"We?" James said.

Sandi's head dipped, her mood punched in the face. "If we couldn't leave via a Game, a ship seemed like the only and safest option. It wasn't."

"This is the first planet we've found with ships capable of warp," James said, more than a little annoyed at the irony.

"I'm sorry," Sandi said sincerely. "You'll be lucky to step into one, let alone take it for a spin. I'd cut your losses and run if you see an opening into a cube."

"Didn't you say they block anyone going in?" James said.

"Yeah but the odds are a little better than a ship," Sandi replied. "Look how quickly they found you."

"We did land in a market to be fair," James said.

Sandi frowned, turning back to look him in the eye. "The Square Market? Strange. Sure, they can feel we're around like a sixth sense, but it's rare they can pinpoint who it is. With so many people around, you should've gotten away with it for a little longer than you did."

"Things never go easy for us, probably why," James said. "Leaving via the Games isn't an option. We need a ship if we're ever going to stand a chance at finding ours. It didn't matter where we entered the Matrix, we never saw any sign of them. We might stand a better chance if we go in via a ship like they did. It's not like we could walk around it without something noticing us."

"Wait," Sandi stammered, her face turning pale. "You actually lost your ships in the Games Matrix itself? I thought you meant a Game landed on them. This is... how terrible."

"I did mention the portal weapon, didn't I?" James wondered to himself.

Sandi looked on nervously, "I suppose. Even if you could recreate their entry, it would be in a different part of subspace. You'll still have to search it, very dangerous."

"We'd be able to cover far more ground though. The best we've done by foot is probably only a mile," James said. "You should come with us. If there's more of us, better odds."

"That's true but I can't. I have something I must do first," Sandi said.

"What, maybe we can help?" James asked.

Sandi considered it briefly, but it made her feel very guilty. Her head shook. "No. It's too dangerous to risk another Slayer. I'll be fine. Good luck, truly." She ran off before he could argue. On the way to wherever she was going she spotted Jessie and Lena following the former's tricorder readings. Only Lena noticed her make an abrupt turn and go down a different path.

It didn't take them long to catch up to James. "You too huh?" Lena said, pointing backwards.

"Softmicron colony, yeah," he nodded. "They'll all know who we are."

Jessie smiled, "I told you having a reputation wasn't a good thing."

"Hey, I get James sure but I'm not that bad," Lena pouted. "It'll be like how we can sense demons or what cup number mum is on."

The pair stared at her smirking slightly, Jessie nodding slowly. "Sure you're not," she said.

"Did you pass a woman a minute or so before, on your way here?" James asked.

"One in a hurry, yep. She's probably off to recruit her mates, so we should move," Lena replied.

"No, she's another Slayer. Human," James said.

Jessie's jaw dropped, "really, are you sure? There seems to be a lot of *Human Slayers* running around the Delta Quadrant."

James noticed the odd way she said Human Slayers and grew confused. Lena nodded. "Yeah, but she's got the *didn't pickup any Softmicron lifesigns on the way here* going for her at least."

"True," Jessie said, only then noticing James' expression. "Maybe we should explain that."

"Later. If she's who she says she is they'll find her easily. However if I'm right about the sense or scent thing, we'll be adding to ours if we go after her," Lena said.

"She knows a bit about the Games Matrix and about this planet. I think we'll need her," James said.

Jessie glanced between them, "sounds like it's worth risking finding out if she's the real deal. Splitting up didn't help us so we should all stick together from now on."

"True. Those idiots know we're here already anyway. Why not?" Lena shrugged. "If we're, and by we're I mean Jessie as she's the only one they won't sniff out..."

"Oh god how I miss actual showers," Jessie groaned to herself, making James smirk.

Lena was put off for a moment by it though. "Um, if Jessie is going to get us a ship, we'll still need to get to it in one piece. One extra on our side will help."

"Yeah about getting a ship," Jessie said awkwardly. "That's going to be a little tricky."

**TO BE CONTINUED**