1

DANNY | Hub City Intergalactic Airport, Hub City

Dr. Danny Greene stepped out of the airlock to find her assistant, Kiki, scowling at her and tapping her foot. “You missed your flight on purpose, didn’t you?” Kiki said.

“Well, I regret it already.” Danny had taken the next available flight. A third-class cruiser, the ship was slow, crowded, and one of the passengers a colicky two-month-old. She shifted her duffel bag to her other shoulder, picked up her guitar, and set a brisk pace toward the hopper station.

Kiki skipped a step to catch up.

“You look like buta,” Danny said. “What are you doing here?”

“Your publicist sent me.”

Danny had planned to drop off the evidence with Hub City Police, check into the hotel, take a hot shower, and go to sleep till her flight back to Shulan. This little rendezvous was not on the agenda. “Why?” Danny asked.

“Duh, the Craw show.”

Commented [VEG1]: Aaaaaaand … here we go!

Commented [VEG2]: Character added to style guide.

Commented [VEG3]: Character added to style guide.

Commented [VEG4]: I stopped short at “she,” since both characters are female. The context of the scowl clarified, but in this case, whump me over the head, please. :-)

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Commented [VEG5]: I’m using the AP Stylebook as a guide here. Your original construction is correct, but I disfavor colons usually. Added to style guide.

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Commented [VEG6]: I’m going to guess this is a minor swear: “You look like hell.” If otherwise, please clarify.

Commented [VEG7]: Added to style guide. Correct.

Commented [VEG8]: My practice would be to add a paragraph here. If you use this construction where you have prose before a quote in the same paragraph, only one character should speak per paragraph, and you should create a new paragraph when switching characters. This construction is correct within your style. Added to style guide.

"That was yesterday."

"She rescheduled!" Kiki shouted over the low foghorn blast announcing a freighter about to leave dock.

"What? No." The station vibrated beneath her feet and Danny stopped walking. Kiki almost bumped into her. She handed Danny a fat folder. "What's all this?"

"Fan mail. Hate mail. Memo about the Victim's Relief Gala. Oh, and," she added in a sing-song voice, "something from the Corporate Department of Intergalactic Investigations."

Danny snorted. "Buta. Don't those people ever give up?" She opened the manila envelope out of curiosity and continued walking down the metal-plated causeway. "You tell 'em, no?"

"Of course."

The envelope held two 8-by-10-inch color photos and four sketches. Danny stopped in place again and flipped through them.

Kiki peered over her shoulder and made a gagging sound.

"So don't look." One photo was from the Norris murder on Beckworth Colony. She'd never seen the other one before, but it was the same MO. The corpse lay on a patch of vibrant, colorful scrub typical of the planet, lines painted around it in blood? No, too bright. Paint. Two of the

Commented [VEG9]: With the comma, the sentence reads that Kiki was announcing the freighter, not the foghorn.

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Deleted: ." She said that last part in a sing-song voice.

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Commented [VEG10]: From the AP Stylebook. Added to style guide.

Commented [VEG11R10]: I realize that the unit of measure isn't right. Use the equivalent, of course.

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Commented [VEG13]: Points of ellipsis: See the style guide for a full explanation of how I'm doing it in this manuscript.

Commented [VEG14]: While the points of ellipsis construction you used has been added to the style guide, in this sentence it isn't really necessary. I think a comma works better instead.

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sketches matched the crime scene photos with uncanny accuracy. A sticky note on the last sketch read, "Precog?" with a giant question mark.

Danny slid it back into the folder and put the whole thing in her purse, next to the plastic bag with the bloody t-shirt covered in Levesque's DNA and kept walking. "Contact Beckworth PD and offer a consult."

"I did. They said they can't afford you."

Danny harrumphed. "Offer a discount."

"You can't afford a discount, Dr. Greene."

Their shoes clacked hollowly on the metal-plated causeway. "You never answered my question. What are you doing here? You should be on Earth."

"I'm here to make sure you get to the Craw interview."

"On whose credits?"

"Yours."

"Kiki, I can't afford transport for both of us, either." They passed a vendor selling kadmissam. Danny could tell by the smell they'd substituted the tua with flour. Her stomach growled anyway. She had the real deal in her bag and planned to make it last. *Change of plans.*

Commented [VEG15]: Directly quoting the writing should be in quotes.

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Commented [VEG16]: "it" could refer to just the photograph, so I made this change to clarify. The construction did work as written, though.

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Commented [VEG17]: The plastic bag contains the shirt, so there should be no comma between the bag and the shirt.

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Commented [VEG18]: We can tell what she harrumphed at.

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Commented [VEG20]: We have discussed italics. I won't shout Elkins here based on that discussion. Usage as internal thought added to style guide.

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Hub City PD. Check in to the hotel. Hot shower. Room service. And then sleep till the flight back to Shulan.

"Your agent said if you didn't do the interview, she'd drop you."

"So let her drop me."

"And your publisher said if you don't do it, you're violating your contract and you have to pay back the retainer."

Danny stopped again and gaped. "I don't have the retainer."

Kiki crossed her arms over her chest. "So do the interview."

"When's that supposed to happen?"

"Now. You were supposed to be there at 05:00."

"What time is it?"

"Twenty after."

Danny started walking again. "No, Kiki. No. I gotta get to HCPD. Then I'm going to my hotel. I need sleep."

When they got to the hopper station, Danny shifted her guitar to her other hand and her duffel bag to her other shoulder, and stood in line, yawning. Another vessel left the station with a

Deleted: *HCPD*

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Commented [VEG21]: Use a comma (I prefer the Oxford comma) with three items, but a conjunction with two. Added to style guide.

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shudder.

Commented [VEG22]: What shuddered? The ship? The floor? Danny?

"Craw rescheduling is not something that happens to normal people," Kiki said.

"I don't want to be on interstellar media."

"You don't say no to Cecilly Craw."

They moved forward in the queue. "Why?" Danny yawned again.

"God, sometimes I forget you aren't actually human."

Danny clicked her tongue, a very Lyrendan sound, and furrowed her brow. "Daka'ru, I'm human." The people in front of them got in their hopper. They were next.

"Sayin' no to Craw's like sayin' no to the Queen o' Shulan, Dr. Greene. If you were human, you'd know that."

"She's a journalist. She's not royalty." *And, I've said, no, to the Queen.* A hopper pulled up. Danny opened the door, put her guitar in the front, threw her duffel bag on the seat, and got in. Kiki ran around the vehicle, pushed Danny's bag to the floor by their feet, and closed the door with a bang.

Commented [VEG23]: You didn't use single quotes when Kiki used the example in the last paragraph, so don't use them here. Better to not use them at all in this sort of construction, since they're unnecessarily complex.

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"Delta five. Hub City Police Department," Danny said to the driver.

"No. Alpha seven, CNM," Kiki said to him.

"Which one is it, ladies?"

"HCPD," Danny said.

"The network," Kiki said simultaneously.

Kiki turned in her seat. "You can drop off the evidence after. I like gettin' paid, Dr. Greene. Your book needs the publicity."

"I'll take on more cases."

"You gonna work for the CDI? Cause they're the only ones askin' right now."

"You know my policy."

"So do the show."

"Meter's running ladies," the mechanical voice said. *Great, an autopilot with attitude.*

Deleted: *they got*

Danny sighed and yawned again. "Buta. Fine. Alpha Seven, CNM," she said, and the hopper whirred into motion.

Kiki sighed and sat back in the seat.

Danny watched the city go by as they sped in and out between the massive towers of the galaxy's biggest spaceport. Earth's sun glinted off the curve of the neoplast domed skywalks connecting them. She peered down at the dense expanse of greenery as they passed over the park

with its oxygen-generating plant-life. Quiet this early in the morning, the park would soon be a buzz of activity. The locals called it the Hub-Hub for a reason. The park was the hub of The Hub. Danny wondered if Dolce Basso still sat at their yenya table every lunch time. Maybe he'd be there today. *Change of plans. Cecilly Craw. HCPD. Yenya with Dolce Basso. Then a hot shower, room service, and sleep... or not... with Dolce Basso till the flight back to Shulan. Yeah. Much better plan.*

But the hopper whirred to a stop outside of Alpha tower and Danny felt her stomach lurch. *Buta. Cecilly Craw*. Farqi freighter of red flags, and Danny was getting on board anyway.

Commented [VEG24]: This could probably be folded into one or two sentences, but there are options on how. "Quiet this early morning, the park, called the Hub-Hub, would soon be a buzz of activity." OR "Quiet this early morning, the park, called the Hub-Hub by residents, was the hub of the Hub." I prefer the first construction.

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Commented [VEG25]: Missing an indent.

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Commented [VEG26]: I'm unclear on what a Farqui freighter of red flags is. A swear? A ship with flags on it? Are the red flags metaphorical, like red flags on a date? Or are they literal, flapping in the wind? Perhaps this is explained later, but at the moment, this construction confuses me.

Commented [VEG27R26]: Later: Now I get it. Wow, that was weird. You can leave this but I wouldn't have caught it if I didn't notice this comment passing by later in the day.

DANNY | Castledon News Media, Hub City

The speaker agreement had certain contingencies, nothing personal, nothing about her background except her credentials, and no mention of her esper abilities whatsoever. Still, Cecilly Craw was notorious for pissing people off. Pitting Danny against Bill Ward, a notorious esper hater, was evidence of that fact, so Danny had already dropped a pebble in her shoe. It was something she'd learned from a serial killer she'd helped put away, who'd made the study of pain his life's work. *He probably knows what he's talking about.*

Craw smiled that fake smile of hers. "Dr. Ward will transmit from Beckworth Colony, so be prepared, if there's a glitch or delay, we'll switch over to you, okay?"

A serving-bot flew over with a mug of water, and a mechanical voice told her to keep the logo facing out. Another voice said, "And we're live in three, two--"

Danny stifled a yawn, rested one elbow on the arm of the chair, and focused on keeping her posture open and relaxed, like that media coach had said. Craw introduced Bill Ward and his backlist. *Esper Colony,* his first ridiculous suggestion for the "esper problem." *Guiding Evolution: Selective Genetics and Esper Powers*, his second stupid idea. *Espers' Role in*

Commented [VEG28]: The formatting may be getting messed up coming out of Scrivener. There should be an indent here but when I tried to add it by redoing the carriage return, I got a page break and the paragraph picked up center alignment instead. I'm not going to fix these anymore but I will probably point them out.

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Commented [VEG29]: I assume he'll get introduced later, or this will be explained?

Commented [VEG30R29]: Now having read the entire scene, Bill Ward's identity is clear. However, it would be helpful if you rewrote this to make his place in the scene more clear at the outset. The edits are a suggested way to do that.

Commented [VEG31]: I assume this is metaphorical, but it's unclear who you're referring to, since you have two women in this scene so far.

Commented [VEG32R31]: Now having read the scene I see it's physical, so that needs to be made clear.

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Commented [VEG33]: The pronoun here is unclear: Is the serial killer unnamed, or is it Bill Ward? If it's Ward, we can go with "Ward had made a study …"

Commented [VEG34R33]: Now having read the scene, I see it was the serial killer. The suggested change clarifies that, and gives the opportunity for us to hear her speak through thought, always a good thing.

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Commented [VEG35]: If you're using italics for the book titles, "epser problem" can be in quotes, rather than a statement of air quotes. Because of the proximity of other italics, "esper problem" shouldn't be italicized for clarity, since the quotes already provide emphasis.

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Humanity's Future, poorly-researched trash. And his most recent piece of crap, *The Deviant Esper: The Decline of Humanity.*

Next, she introduced Danny, which had her squirming in her seat. *How did people sit through this buta without feeling like they're masturbating in front of the entire galaxy?*

"Dr. Greene is an expert in esper powers, with a PhD in esper studies, another in intergalactic cultures, and a third PhD in multi-species forensic psychology--"

"I'm still working on that last one," she said.

"She uses her expertise to consult with law enforcement agencies all over the galaxy, and has visited an impressive--" She glanced from her notes to Danny, "Seven different planets?"

It was eight, but whatever. Danny stifled another yawn.

"Dr. Greene is also the author of *Esper Myths: The Truth About Espers*, the surprise hit of the season." When Craw finished listing her credentials, she turned to Danny and said, "That's quite an impressive CV. May I ask how old you are, Dr. Greene?"

She's violating the agreement already? Danny sipped her water and put the mug on the small table by her side, logo out as she'd been instructed.

"Ms. Craw, don't you know it's not polite to ask a lady her age?" she said with as charming a

Commented [VEG36]: This is my pathological hatred of the word "was." This construction gets rid of it, continues to disparage his work, and gives me the opportunity to put the dash into the style guide.

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Commented [VEG37]: Correct construction!

Commented [VEG38]: A character in this situation thinks in the present tense.

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smile as she could muster while her toe dug into a pebble.

Craw faked a laugh and asked Bill to explain the premise of his new book.

Danny had read it. In chapter three, Bill suggested breeding programs. In chapter seven, he'd suggested shipping all espers off to their own colony. In chapter eleven, he proposed extermination as his solution for the high percentage of espers showing an excess of "deviant behaviors."

One person's deviance is another person's fun, Bill, Danny thought.

Craw asked him about DST babies. His hologram froze on the answer and vanished, so Danny answered for him. "Sixty-four percent of infants born addicted never survive the detox. Of those who do, the majority are on the low end of the FDS spectrum."

"FDS, being..."

"Fetal Diastrastadone Syndrome--"

Ward's hologram reappeared. "Dust babies are a growing concern with a wide array of issues. Physiological, psychological, neurological. Heart attacks are common, ticks, seizures, gastrointestinal dis--" He froze again.

"It can range from not so bad to truly awful." Danny stifled another yawn.

Commented [VEG39]: Again, are we metaphorical?

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Commented [VEG40]: Excellent, giving a sense of her fatigue and boredom with this exercise.

"But espers don't share all these problems?" Craw asked.

"No. It's different for espers. The mutation increases neuropathways, alters senses. We haven't even begun to uncover the breadth of para-psychological abilities that manifest--"

"And causes much higher rates of deviance and psychopathology. Sociopaths are far more common in the esper population."

"That's not true. 1% of all humans exhibit sociopathic behavior."

"And 2% of all espers."

"That study didn't have a high enough sample for any kind of statistical significance, Dr. Ward," Danny said.

"Are espers violent, Dr. Greene?" Craw asked.

"Often," Ward said.

"Rarely," Danny said at the same time.

Craw turned toward the hologram of Ward again. "Professor, in your most recent book, you claim espers are the future of humanity. Is our evolution heading down a violent path?"

Ward shrugged and nodded.

Danny shook her head.

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Commented [VEG41]: This is a single, non-hyphenated word. Source: Webster's New World College Dictionary

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Commented [VEG42]: Excellent use of dialogue to highlight and bring forward interpersonal and philosophical conflict in this scene.

"You disagree, Dr. Greene?"

"Humans have always been violent, Ms. Craw, and esper abilities aren't caused by natural selection. It's DNA re-sequencing caused by a processed Lyrendan weed and the most addictive drug we've ever seen." Her voice raised a pitch. Danny pressed on the pebble and stifled another yawn. She really, really needed some sleep.

Commented [VEG43]: Okay, so I'm sensing this is physical. That means, two mentions ago at the beginning of this section, we need to clarify the physical pebble.

"Can you tell us some of the esper powers you've seen in your work?"

Oh, for the love of life. "They're not powers, Ms. Craw. It's not magic."

Bill interrupted. "Telepaths, telekinetics, eidetic memories are fairly common. Precognitive abilities--"

"We've never encountered a valid precog," Danny interrupted.

"Haven't we?"

Haven't we? So, Bill Ward had sent that file? Danny needed to have a talk with him off-camera.

"There's such a variety of unusual powers, we--"

"They aren't powers. It's language like that which perpetuates the myth that espers are something other than human."

"*Esper Powers and Pathologies* will be the title of my next book!"

"You know damn well the vast majority of espers are good people living relatively normal lives," Danny said.

"The vast majority hide their powers from the rest of us."

"Because of prejudice like yours, Bill, and they aren't *powers*."

"*Gifts* then," Craw said. "Let's call them *gifts*. Is there any way to tell if someone has esper gifts, Dr. Ward?"

"They sure as hell aren't gifts!" Danny shouted.

"Unfortunately, not yet," Ward ignored her outburst. "Your next-door neighbor, your colleague, even your own brother could be an esper without you even knowing."

"Disturbing thought," Craw replied.

Ward nodded. "Which is why we need to track them, monitor them, maybe even tag them."

"Yeah, why not tattoo our faces like Lyrendans do!"

Oh, farqinda. Danny stopped talking and closed her eyes for a second. The pebble in her shoe was obviously not working.

Craw leered at her like a qwabe who'd just caught a four-winged fish. "You admit you're an

Commented [VEG44]: Comma splice. Style guide.

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Commented [VEG45]: The "oh shit" moment. Excellent.

esper, Dr. Greene?"

Danny pressed her toe down hard. *Breathe. In through the nose. And out.* "It's not a crime," she said.

"Care to share your gifts with us?"

"Esper abilities are not gifts, Ms. Craw, they're a *curse*."

"You're an eidetiker, am I correct?" Craw asked.

Danny nodded. *In for neimarro, in for seinarro, I suppose.*

"So, you remember everything you see and hear?"

"No. It doesn't work like that. It requires a lot of focus and--"

"Which has allowed you unheard-of levels of academic success. Three PhDs at your age. I doubt anyone in our audience can see a flip side to that."

"Two. I'm ABD on that last one." *Where am I going with this?*

"Two. But you have other gifts used in your consultant work with law enforcement. Am I right?"

"They are not *gifts*!"

"Would you care to share with our audience what you can do--"

Commented [VEG46]: I'm assuming these are monetary units, as "in for a penny, in for a pound."

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Commented [VEG48]: There does not need to be points of ellipsis here. A full stop will work without indicating a trail-off.

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Commented [VEG49]: I think this works better as a thought. I removed the paragraph since Green was speaking in the last utterance.

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Commented [VEG50]: As we've discussed, I dislike the use of italics for emphasis, but have added this to the style guide since it is the style you're using, and I will not correct it unless it's otherwise incorrect somehow.

Oh nononononono. Craw had gone too far. The entire galaxy did not get to know about that.

She dug her toe down hard and heard her therapist's voice in her head, saying, *breathe, Paku, stay grounded.* She took another deep breath. "No," she said again, her voice level.

Cecilly Craw leaned forward in her seat. "But you have several gifts, am I right, Dr. Greene?"

Danny unclipped her microphone and stood. "We're done here," she said.

By the expression on Craw's face, she knew she'd regret that.

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Commented [VEG51]: I LOVE this scene. She does her best and manages to get herself into a situation, through her own not-careful word choice, that causes her to lose her shit. It introduces to the reader that Greene is an esper herself, a necessary world build and character development, in the most embarrassing way possible. Excellent!

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COOPER | Travis Residence, Hub City

It was Cooper's first day back at work and he'd tossed and turned half the night, finally falling into fitful dreams around oh-three-hundred, then slept through the alarm. Had to cut his run short because of it. So, when the doorbell rang, he was still in his sweats. Still sweaty. He ran a hand through his dark hair and answered it. Pontiker Pont and Mia Jani grinned up at him. They said they'd walk him to work. It was Hub City, where only tourists walked alone. And Aylen couldn't do it anymore. "You're early," he said.

Pont bowed low, spreading his tawny wings out to the side, an honored greeting in his culture. "Ready to get back to work?" he asked.

Cooper bowed back and spread his arms. *God, am I ever.*

When they met, Cooper knew immediately he and Pont would be good friends. He came from Lyrend, and they were different in every way, except the ways that mattered. Mia, Pont's beautiful wife, was a cyborg from Danubia Prime. Most cyborgs seemed lopsided because of metal plating on their implant taking up half their face, but Mia made the ocular seem like jewelry.

Commented [VEG52]: He'd tossed and turned the night before his first day back? Or he'd gone to his first day of work, and then had poor sleep that night?

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Commented [VEG53]: Putting a full stop here provides emphasis on Aylen's inability.

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Commented [VEG54]: While this construction is consistent with the way you've started quotes mid-paragraph before, this paragraph is sufficiently long that I think it might benefit from being on its own, simply for clarity. Author's choice.

Commented [VEG55]: Thoughts in first person.

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Commented [VEG56]: This feels past tense and passive, thus the changes.

"We were hoping for some Travis hospitality," she said with a smile.

Cooper nodded, opened the door wider, and waved them inside.

Cooper's dad was at the kitchen island mixing pancake batter. He greeted them both with a warm smile. "Make yourselves at home. I'll whip up some more." He cracked two more eggs in the bowl with one hand and sent the CNM hologram blasting the news over the counter into the corner and turned down the volume.

Mia helped herself to coffee and put the kettle on for Pont's tea.

"Qaid'ru," Pont bowed and pulled a stool out for his wife. He hopped up next to her and draped his mangy wings over the back of the chair. The dogs wagged their tails at them and nuzzled up against Mia's legs.

"Gimme a minute, I'll get ready," Cooper said and left to shower and change.

When he came back, everyone had heaping plates of his dad's pancakes in front of them. His Mom sat at the table with his sister Sophie, who Sophie sang a Tom Silk song as if no one else was there. Cooper pulled the headphones off her head, and she stopped singing and smacked him on the arm.

"We have guests, Soph," he said.

Commented [VEG57]: Now they're mangy? That seems odd for wings, unless they don't have feathers, which I know from previous reading that they do. Usually feathers are shiny.

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Commented [VEG58]: If you're going to do a section break here, use something like * * *. However, since we're in Cooper's POV, this construction works fine without a break. (Or that might have been formatting nonsense coming out of Scrivener again.)

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"Pont and Mia aren't guests," she said, but left the headphones on the table.

His dad sat down between Sophie and his mom. "Mia tells us you're seeing someone?" he said.

"What gave her that idea?" Cooper glared at Mia and went to get coffee.

She cringed. "Sorry, Cooper, I didn't know it was a secret... I'm sorry."

"Cooper, there are valid reasons you're not supposed to date anyone your first year out of rehab," his mom said.

"It was yenya, Mom. I'm not marrying her," he said and noticed Pont's grimace as he bit into his pancakes.

Cooper opened the spice drawer. If Pont insisted on walking him to Tower Five on his first day back, the least he could do was feed him a breakfast that he liked. He got the curry powder, cumin, and turmeric, and sprinkled them generously on Pont's syrup. "Listen, she showed up one day a couple months ago..." He added a sprinkle of cayenne for good measure. "And she beat me." And a pinch of salt. "Try it now."

"Mm, qaid'ru, renka, much better. "

"Oh, that's gross," his sister said. Her left arm twitched, and she held it still with her other

Commented [VEG59]: While not strictly necessary, a paragraph here seems to help clarify the action.

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hand.

"Don't try it till you cut it," Pont said.

"Don't knock it till you try it," Cooper corrected.

"That makes no sense."

Cooper shrugged.

"Wait. She beat you? At yenya?" Sophie gaped at him. "No. You let her win." She tried to eat, but her hands were giving her trouble today. Sophie was adopted. Born with FDS, she had mobility problems, speech problems, bullying problems.

"Not really, Soph, no," Cooper said, putting the spices away.

"Good looking woman?" his dad said with a wink as he cut his sister's pancakes for her.

Cooper met his dad's eye and nodded.

"And you didn't get her name? Thought I raised you better than that."

Cooper snorted. "She showed up one day, slaughtered me four times, left forty credits richer. Then she showed up the next day."

"And the day after that, and the day after that," Mia said with a smile.

"And the day after that, and the day after that." Pont's wings quivered in amusement.

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"You both suck," Cooper said, helping himself to pancakes.

"No. You suck. You lost four times!" Sophie said.

"Hm. I lost way more than four times, Soph."

"Loser," his sister teased.

"I was distracted."

"You were thinking with your dick!"

Cooper choked on his pancake, Mia almost spit out her coffee, and his dad fought back laughter.

Commented [VEG60]: Actual LOL here. I was about to comment that we need a little comic relief, and this works well after the last two heavy scenes.

"Sophie!" his mom said.

"What? It's true," Sophie said and opened her mouth like a baby bird waiting for more pancakes.

Pont shrugged and said, "She's not wrong, renka."

He hated to admit it, but Sophie and Pont had a valid point.

His Dad winked at him in solidarity as he shoveled another bite in his sister's mouth. "You get an ID? You could have Mia trace her," he suggested.

"Yeah, Mia can hunt her down, and you could be her stalker," Sophie made a face.

Pont put on a newscaster's voice, "Breaking news, Special Agent Cooper Travis arrested for using company resources to stalk woman--" Cooper reached across the counter to smack him, but he ducked out of the way laughing and picked up a pancake with his fingers.

"It was funnier when he did it," Cooper said.

Mimicking the news was something his friend Aylen used to do, made even more hilarious by the fact that he'd been married to the journalist Brody Brock. Pont was trying, at least.

The cat jumped on the counter, and Cooper immediately picked her up and plopped her on the floor. "Guys, drop it, okay? She was passing through." Growing up on a spaceport like The Hub, Cooper was used to transient friendships.

"Yeah, but she kicked your ass to Neptune," Sophie said. "Jeez, Cooper, I want to meet her."

"Maybe she's ugly," Pont shrugged, and the motion made his feathers rustle. "Is good, thank you," he added with his mouth full.

Cooper met his friend's eye and shook his head. "She's prettier than Mia."

"No one's prettier than Mia," Pont said.

"Good answer, honey," Mia said and kissed him.

She was, though. She had dark hair that she always wore pulled up and loosely fastened with

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two pointed sticks, a few curls escaping down her long neck. She had flawless pale skin and the most striking green eyes he'd ever seen. She'd approached him that first day, with the sun shining over the crest of the planet below and lighting her from behind through the sheer fabric of her dress. Her perfect posture and efficiency of motion pinged his radar and he found found her exquisitely erotic. When sat down across from him, he was sure if he spoke he'd make an ass of himself, so he didn't say a word.

She had him cornered in minutes with his queen against the wall. *I see it in three*, she'd said. Her voice had a throaty burr to it and a slight accent he couldn't place. Sexy. Distracting. She beat him in ten moves.

Again? They both said together, and she giggled.

He couldn't stop thinking about her.

They'd played yenya every day for three weeks. Then nothing. But he'd heard her give out her number once. And so, after a couple of days, he pinged her with the opening move to a new game. The messages had continued at seventeen-hour intervals ever since, until a couple days ago, when they'd stopped again.

"Cooper's in loooove," Sophie teased.

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"Soph, drop it," Cooper said.

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Those games of yenya had stopped him from using more than once over the past few months. The seventeen-hour delay put her somewhere near the Gautalus system. He assumed she was in transit again. He hoped she was on her way back to The Hub.

Cooper met his mom's gaze. "Those games have been my lifeline, Mom."

His mom nodded, understanding.

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"Hey, guys, watch," Mia said and waved a hand, pulling the news hologram closer again and zooming in. A banner twirled around the logo announcing, "Up next... Live with Cecilly Craw, esper experts, Professor William Ward and Dr. Danny Greene." A commercial blared, and Mia turned it down.

"Bitch," Mia mumbled.

"Daka," Pont puffed his feathers.

"Language," Mom said.

"Sorry, Leah, but that woman--" Mia pursed her lips.

"What woman?" Sophie asked.

"Dr. Greene. She's an expert on esper behavior. We asked her to consult on the Sheridan

case," Mia said.

"She said no?" Cooper's dad asked.

"Oh, she said no, alright. She said no six times," Mia said.

"Could she have helped?" his mom asked.

Cooper clenched his jaw. "Maybe." *Maybe Aylen would still be alive.*

"Turn it up, q'ishi," Pont said when the show returned.

Cecilly Craw sat in front of an animated backdrop of Hub City. She introduced her guests, "Dr. William Ward, broadcasting from Beckworth colony, and live in the studio, Dr. Danny Greene." The camera focused on Greene, and Cooper grunted like he'd been punched in the gut.

"You okay, son? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Dad, that's her." He watched as his yenya partner brushed a dark curl from those striking eyes.

"Her who?" Sophie asked.

"Ta daka's your mystery woman?" Pont puffed in anger.

Cooper nodded and moved to stand next to his friends.

Dr. Greene held a mug in both hands and sipped as Craw introduced her. She wasn't in the

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Gautalus system. She was only three towers away right now. Cooper wanted to go put his hands around her throat and throttle her. Then he wanted to kiss her and find out if what he felt was real. Not necessarily in that order.

The interview didn't last long before Greene lost her temper and walked out.

"Damn, she's got balls!" Sophie said.

"Sophie, language."

"Did that answer your questions because it didn't answer mine?" Mia said.

"Media wants sensation, not education, q'ishi."

But Cooper barely heard them. She'd refused them six times. *Six*. She was as much to blame for Aylen's death as he was. His heart beat like a drum. His vision blurred on the edges. He knew he was in fight-or-flight and reacting now was a bad idea. He knew what he was feeling wasn't rational. But she'd been his lifeline. *And Aylen is never coming back.* He opened his comm-ring.

Mia put her hand on his sleeve. "Cooper, don't," she said.

He hit record. "I know who you are, bitch."

"Cooper!" his mom said.

He ignored her. "Yenya. Lunchtime. Don't be late." His fingers hovered in the air.

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Everyone spoke at the same time.

"Don't do it, renka," Pont said.

"Son, Pontiker's right," his dad said.

"You'll ruin it, Coop, you always do," Sophie warned.

His mom, whose advice he always sought, said, "If your friendship's as important to your recovery as you say..."

I should wait till I cool off. But Aylen was my brother. She could have saved him. She could have saved them both.

He hit send.

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