

NOTE GETTER

A STORY OF THE SPIRALCHAIN

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Core

Whatever its proper name might be, the guardians of the Spiral of Worlds had called it the Dream Channel for as long as Sierra could remember. It was a formless place, reminiscent of the cosmic emptiness from which they'd come, back when awareness had been a passing flirtation of otherwise inert energy and stardust. As much as many of them longed to return to those hazy days of centuries gone by, the guardians—called dragons by men who weren't permitted to know better—had mostly thrived in physical form as they watched over their worlds.

Sierra of Core had certainly done well for herself. Hers had been the largest and most complex of tasks, and she'd been dispatched to do it alone... but it had not been without its satisfactions. The greatest of those was the connection she felt with her fellow singleton, Forza of Depal. They'd grown close in the Dream Channel, and Sierra found herself disconsolate whenever too much time passed without their communion. Such was her infatuation that the normally controlling guardian even allowed Forza to decide the forms they took in their interactions. Why else would she have chosen human shapes when they met here, when they could have easily embraced one another in their majestic dragon forms or blended together in their fluid true shapes?

Months had passed since she'd last been able to make contact with Forza. The Dream Channel was a different place of late; it'd become inexplicably *crowded*. Designed by the human architects of these bodies as a network through which information and machine updates could be transmitted, the Dream Channel was built with exactly enough bandwidth to accommodate the sixteen guardians. They had experienced increased functionality due to the lighter processing load following the destruction of two guardians from Rettik, but that was now lost as the system strained under the weight of what appeared to be an almost forty percent overload.

She thrashed about, a wisp of angry bronze-tinted gas in the emptiness. She called out to Forza to no avail. Growing desperate after their long separation, she opened her senses wide, lowering the defenses and filters she used to keep out the most irritating of her fellow guardians... and there were many such irritations.

There were problems among the sixteen dragons—none could deny it. As much as Sierra bemoaned the lack of a partner aid in defending Core and keeping its inhabitants from recreating the mistakes of Nur, she knew that her kind were ill-disposed to existing in close proximity to one another, and it showed in their very personalities.

Sierra found she couldn't stomach even a handful of minutes of conversation with Sen, Vis, Arc, or Taul. Due to the slumber from which they ruled their world, they were *always* present in this place. She occasionally enjoyed the ramblings of Qimu of Arctos but had little patience for the raving of Qsir when it was his turn in the Dream Channel. The Murrodite dragons rarely slept and thus she was spared their single-minded diatribes... and the dragons of Onus refused to interact with any of the others out of the same haughty superiority that characterized the humans that colonized that world.

She was hoping to make contact with the last remaining dragon of Rettik, Etom. He was usually clear-headed and might have insight into what was happening to the Dream Channel. For this purpose she lowered her guard, and she did make contact with someone... but it wasn't Etom.

First, she heard the rushing babble of seven voices, so new as to be practically infantile, scarcely understanding that their sleeping minds were connected to those of other beings. Their minds were addled, somehow *less than* the full richness of any of the others. But the babbling chorus of seven was not what startled her.

An eighth unexpected mind in the channel was not the same fresh diminished thing as the other new occupants. It was as different from any other dragon as could be—its every intention and desire contrary to the core programming that bound them all to common purpose.

"What are you?" she queried.

The dark voice responded in a furious blast of static and rage, jarring Sierra's mind out of the Dream Channel and causing her human shape to wake with a start, her luxurious satin sheets damp with sweat.

"I don't sweat," she murmured as she threw the sheet back to let the cool air of her private residence in the White House play across her naked flesh. Droplets of perspiration prickled all across her body as the cold air struck her, and she chewed anxiously at one perfect lip. "What's happening, Forza?" she murmured. She craved the comfort of her distant lover. Despite centuries of stoic isolation, she'd never felt so alone.

More interminable days of existence trudged ever onward, and Sierra continued the task that had been impressed upon her above all else when guardianship of Core had been thrust upon her: restricting progress.

Every day, human ingenuity—such as it was—grew ever closer to replicating the events of First Contact... events that Nurian historians had determined to be the first step down the slippery slope that would lead to universal disaster.

She had been successful by all accounts. The Nurian date of First Contact had come and gone on her replica world, and that victory emboldened her to work even harder to curtail technological advances. There was a dark humor to the mission in her mind, as she herself was a product of exactly the same sorts of technologies whose invention she was striving to prevent. It was a ceaseless enterprise, and sometimes she had to cheat to achieve her goals.

She wore a tailored business suit in a charcoal gray against which her auburn hair—allowed to take on a few shining strands of gray in acquiescence to her very public image of the past few decades—looked quite striking. She was heading to the Pentagon, a building that had now taken on many of the duties she had once accomplished through Gold Key Holdings. It was from this place—with the aid of the military hierarchy now that she was the elected leader of this nation—that she spread forth her hand and denied humanity countless improvements to their lives.

Her driver and her four-person Secret Service detachment reacted instantly as she emerged from her private residence, and soon they were on their way.

The drive gave her more time to think, and her disconsolate evening spent in the Dream Channel made her private thoughts increasingly morose. Yes, she had stopped First Contact so far—but only barely. The intervention of the so-called Order of Core had sheltered a promising theoretical physicist from her grasp. That man, Dr. Vinson Lu, had unwittingly discovered a means of opening quantum junctures. He'd stopped before tapping any of those junctures, but the knowledge was now loose in her world. Others would stumble upon it... that was the very foundation of human nature.

She'd leveraged Congress to enact ludicrous limitations on technological innovation in key fields, and her personal wealth had—through layers of shell companies—wrought havoc on those same fields in every developed nation on the planet.

She was convinced that the greatest advantage she now possessed was longevity. If she could hold the line against quantum tunneling long enough, the most promising minds in this generation—the one that'd caused First Contact on Nur—would cease to be a problem.

Death of old age remained a constant on Core, but that was not through any action on Sierra's part. The radiation therapy that defeated aging on Nur couldn't be discovered here. Through a random fluke of the terraforming process, the essential mineral required for the manufacture of Deltamorphic radiation, abundant on Nur, simply did not exist on Core.

But that didn't mean she could afford to wait for time to take the last of the scientists who posed the greatest risk off the board. For that, she had other departments at the Pentagon.

She strode through bustling hallways, her heels clicking with booming precision. Her security detail struggled to keep up until she reached the door to Project Uu. Her keycard and biometric scans granted her access to the small lab. It was a boring room lit by a bank of overhead fluorescent lights. It contained a single computer terminal of an older style, reminiscent of models in the seventies somewhere between the room-sized original computational devices and the smaller desktop models that became ubiquitous in the late eighties. Its screen was dark green with a single, pale green cursor cube flashing in the upper left corner.

"Leave me. Secure the door," she ordered. The four men did as she bid, and the door clanked shut behind her as the deadbolts engaged, awaiting another biometric confirmation to open.

She sat down in the pivoting office chair in front of the large terminal and rested her fingers with their neatly manicured nails on the large, blocky plastic keys of the keyboard.

That physical contact was all the device required.

Her mind and that of the computer interfaced smoothly, and its melodious voice said quietly, "Uu online. What problem shall we solve today?"

Sierra sighed. This was perhaps the most barbaric of all the things to which she'd ever been party, and that was saying something considering her early campaign of genocide against the Yettim. She only occasionally reminisced about that native race of Core that predated the reshaping of this world to match the historical records of Nur. She'd spared them from being hunted by the humans, she was quite sure, but it had been a gruesome thing... just as was the ghastly technology now at work beneath her fingertips.

Inside this shell of a disguise were the fragile remains of what had once been the Obliviator, a device used at the Army Post Road Installation to eliminate Obliviates as they emerged from the Spiralgate. Before that, the device had been a Node belonging to

Hyarak, a brilliant scientist on Rettik who'd somehow become an even more brilliant tactician and warlord on Onus.

She had possessed Uu since the destruction of the original Core Spiralgate in April of the year 2014, as Core reckoned time—about two years now. She'd used tiny grafts from the three ounces of silvery semi-solid matter contained in the core of the device to make the sophisticated weapons and equipment. That was how she outfitted her personal expeditors—the men and women she had once deployed to round up the Order of Core and to keep tabs on the Children of the Line.

It was ghoulish, for that core material of the Node was the same substance from which her own flesh was made. A carefully cultivated and transmuted quantity of matter derived from some of the most genuinely genius innovations in the history of Nur.

She knew that she could use her own flesh and blood to create more of this material, but allowing humans to develop the technical understanding required to process and utilize such material would set them once more on the path to technologies she could not permit. Thus Uu would remain both the only source of such wonders and the only intelligence capable of putting those wonders to use.

"I need a more subtle weapon," she explained to the machine. "Something that I can use to more effectively reduce the population and shift their attention away from my target fields. Events in the broader Spiral are unknown to me, but last night's attempt to reach Forza brought me into contact with something unsettling. I must maintain Core's isolation. Humans must be stopped from drawing the notice of the forces at work beyond this world."

The giant false casing around the Node hummed briefly before its harmonious voice replied, "We have already made use of most generative science weapons of which I am aware, Sierra."

"I was thinking something more biological," she mused. "Something... viral."

The Node set to work combing its memory for the necessary applications of its powers—power she could readily boost with her own once they had an idea of how best to accomplish her aims. If this scheme was successful, it might well mean the end of her time actively pruning the future of humanity on this world. It might mean that she could at last set her mind to the one truly noble pursuit in her heart.

"You had best hurry, Joseph," she muttered to the absent ally to the Children of the Line. "You owe me a favor, and the moment to collect may soon be at hand."

Mary Bolton-Sawyer was a no-nonsense woman. The first Black woman to hold the post of Secretary of Energy for the United States and the first quadriplegic member of the president's cabinet, she'd always felt the eyes of the world on her... but never with quite such intensity as today.

Her husband dressed her, as he always did. She wore nicely pressed slacks and a blouse of solid, sky blue in a flattering fit. The ritual of getting dressed soothed her, even though it was one of several areas of her life where she was entirely dependent on other people to take care of her. Kaleb Sawyer didn't complain though—he'd been by her side for years, since even before a genetic misfortune had first brought a trembling palsy to her limbs. In his own stoic way, he'd handled her loss of mobility more gracefully than she had.

She'd been wheelchair-bound for years, and today, dressing her and getting her settled into her beast of a motorized chair was all the help Kaleb could provide. What came next was something she had to do herself.

Mary Bolton-Sawyer had to meet the President of the United States and tell her that she was resigning. She had to throw away this opportunity for herself and her family... and to give up one of the greatest platforms for awareness and inclusion that her intersectional community had possessed in years.

Such was the price for being a woman of her convictions.

The wheelchair was largely controlled by an onboard computer that she manipulated with eye movements. Unlike some who lived with her condition, she retained the ability to talk... but her doctors warned this might not be the case for much longer. She directed the wheelchair down the hallway to the Oval Office, a considerable distance from the apartments that President Veil had given over to her and Kaleb.

She found the door open. The serviceman outside nodded his head to her to go in. She smiled at him. Mary found she smiled far more often than she actually felt like smiling, using that gesture to assuage the worries and nervousness of those around her. She spent far too much time worrying about making other people comfortable around her—Kaleb always said so. But he wasn't the one who had to live with all those furtive glances and awkward silences.

"Mary," the president said, standing upon Mary's entrance. "You're early."

"I'm sorry, Madame President," Mary replied. "I misjudged my timing this morning."

“Oh, don’t worry about it at all—I appreciate efficiency. You know that.”

Mary did indeed know about the president’s almost obsessive penchant for efficiency. It was the root cause of their meeting today.

“I won’t keep you long, Madame President... but I wanted to say this in person, rather than over the phone,” Mary began, nervousness causing her stomach to twist into knots.

Sierra sat back down and stared at her with that impenetrable gaze of hers. She gave no indication that Mary should continue, and she said nothing at all in reply.

“I...” Mary struggled with the sentence she had come here to say, despite having rehearsed for weeks.

Sierra closed those piercing eyes and said, “You intend to resign.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Because of the strip mining,” Sierra said, the words a statement rather than a question. It sounded vaguely dismissive to Mary... and if there was one thing Mary could not abide, it was being dismissed.

“Of course it is,” she said with undisguised heat in her voice. “After decades of improvements to our power infrastructure in this country, how can you possibly reinvest us so heavily—so recklessly—in coal? Does that lobby really have that much power over you?”

Sierra smiled and replied, “I assure you, I’m not appropriating those funds for political gain. Think of it as... *scientific* gain. You know I’ve always been a friend to the sciences.”

“You’re tying up hundreds of millions in federal dollars in grants for strip mining operations in some of the most fertile ground in the country!” Mary practically yelled. “It will be an ecological disaster, and I’m shocked that the Secretary of the Interior isn’t sitting here next to me handing in his resignation over this as well.”

“Mary, you don’t understand. I need that coal. We all need that coal.”

Mary shook her head, the gesture muted compared to that of someone with a full range of motion, but still noticeable. “The nation has been transitioning to a more hybridized fossil fuel usage pattern for years. We have all the coal we need for the foreseeable future in existing mines and physical reserves. Trust me on this, Madame President. It’s my job to know these things.”

"I don't want to burn it," Sierra said.

She reached into the drawer of the gorgeous desk at which some of the most influential people in American history had sat. A moment later she placed a chunk of hard black rock on the smooth desktop between herself and Mary.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked.

Mary arched an eyebrow. "It's coal."

"It's not just coal—it's Anthracillic coal."

Mary knew plenty about coal and about the various uses for its varieties. She retorted, "It's used industrially. We don't even use that as proper fuel."

"Exactly," Sierra said. "And we have very little of it, comparatively. The mines in Pennsylvania produce a fraction of what I need—we have to expand. We have to find more. I'll buy it from elsewhere if I have to, but I need as much of it as possible."

"Why?" Mary asked, perplexed.

"I wish I could explain it to you, Mary... I truly do. Whether you believe me or not, this is the most precious material on the planet. In several ways, it's been protecting the human race from extinction... and now I need it to do one more job."

"I won't stand for it," Mary said firmly.

Sierra arched one elegant eyebrow at her. "Do you stand for anything, Mary?"

"That was beneath you," Mary hissed. "I hereby tender my resignation, Madame President. And I'll devote my every waking moment to stopping this. You were elected to protect the interests of the people of this nation, not to pursue your personal, private agendas. Someone has to hold you accountable."

Sierra stood, and her smile turned into a small, tight frown.

"I'm very sorry you feel that way, Mary. I truly did think you had potential." She walked around the desk and reached a hand forward towards Mary's face.

Before she could touch her—Mary had a deep and abiding dislike of being touched by people—Mary signaled the wheelchair to reverse, backing towards the door even as the Secret Serviceman outside opened it.

Sierra took her outstretched hand back as she folded her arms across her chest. "Crossing me is unwise, Mary."

“Crossing me is no picnic either, Sierra,” she said with bitter emphasis on the informality of that last word. Her heart was racing even faster than the whining motor of her wheelchair as she fled back to Kaleb and a sudden, unexpected career in political activism.