

Chapter One

Jon sat across from his best friend of six hundred years, devastated that he had to kill him. The man was unconscious, bloodied, and chained to a chair—a terrible contrast to the serene ocean below. Jon looked past the balcony railing and down to the jagged rocks. This wasn't how he wanted it to end. He took a deep breath and waited for Sargas to wake up.

Sargas eventually came to with a jolt and wrenched at his chains. His eyes flicked from side to side, then settled on Jon. He smirked. “So you finally figured it out. How long have you known?”

“Almost eighty years,” Jon said, placing his hands on the table between them. “How long have you known about me?”

“Only a decade or so.” Sargas turned and spat blood onto the stony floor. “Shutting them down was a mistake, you know.”

Jon frowned and waited. Sargas couldn't know with any certainty that it was him who had shut down the gateways between worlds and caused the depression.

“Oh, stop that,” Sargas said, waving the idea away. “It was you. Who else could have

done it?"

"It wasn't a mistake," Jon said. "The war was killing millions. And besides, it's done. There's no going back."

"I don't care about the dead." Sargas's chains clinked against the chair. "You can't reach the planet of Jangali anymore. Not in time to find the organism, at least."

Jon bit the side of his mouth. How did he know about the entity on Jangali?

Sargas relaxed into his seat and laughed. "Six centuries of life and you still can't hide what you're feeling."

This organism on Jangali would change everything, and Jon couldn't let it fall into Sargas's hands. He focused. This would be his only chance to get the information he needed, but he had to know something else first. He had waited for so many years.

"Tell me," Jon said, leaning forward, "did you actually convince Ava to go through with it or was it her idea?"

Sargas cocked his head. "Does it matter?"

"Was it your fault or not?"

"Actually, it's always been *your* fault," Sargas said, pointing a bloody finger. "You made me do this. You could've just given me the extra years of life when I asked for them."

"You convinced her to kill herself so that you could have a *chance* at living forever. How can you be so selfish?"

Sargas let out a bellowing laugh. "You really don't have any idea, do you?"

Jon stood abruptly and the air seemed to bend around him. "Don't patronize me. I know exactly what you've done."

"Okay, sure, I nudged Ava over the edge, but she was ready to jump, wasn't she? Whose

fault was that?"

Jon fingered the wedding band he couldn't bear to take off as she flashed across his mind:

Holding hands in moonlit water.

A warm spring day and a white dress.

Her laugh as she dragged him onto the dance floor.

"Why?" Jon asked, voice quaking. "How could you do that to her?"

Sargas suddenly lost his good humor. "How. Could. You?"

Jon stared at Sargas, then his gaze fell. He pulled out a thin syringe filled with a clear liquid and placed it on the table.

Sargas stirred in his seat. "You wouldn't," he said, eyeing Jon. "You're too noble for that. Too good—"

Jon quickly picked up the syringe and jammed it into Sargas's arm. The effect was almost immediate. Sargas's eyes went wide with surprise before his whole body deflated, like he were suddenly very drunk.

"Do you know the exact location of the entity on Jangali?" Jon asked.

Sargas writhed, trying to keep his body and mind alert. He clamped his mouth shut.

"You can't fight it," Jon said. "You might not tell me everything, but I'll get enough. You know I will."

Sargas sagged further and then appeared to fall asleep. Jon had never used the drug before but had read that this could sometimes happen. The passage he'd read recommended to get the subject standing. Jon walked around the table, unchained Sargas, and guided him to a standing position. He patted the man's face.

"Do you know the exact location of the organism on Jangali?"

“No...”

Jon sighed in relief. “Do you already have people on Jangali?”

“Yes,” Sargas said, swaying to the side.

“Where are the other bodies?”

Sargas closed his eyes, and Jon thought he had fallen asleep again, but then his eyes suddenly snapped opened with surprising lucidity. Jon was so shocked that he took a step back.

Sargas’s eyes flicked to the balcony. Jon followed his gaze, then looked back at him.

“No!” Jon yelled.

But it was too late.

Sargas lunged with an enormous effort, reaching the balcony railing and then throwing himself over it without any hesitation. Jon closed his eyes and was silent until he heard the body hit the rocks far below. He collapsed into a chair and kept his head bowed for a long while.

He turned to Treyges, who was waiting by the door, as unruffled in his black suit as he had ever been. “Contact the team and tell them to get ready. Raise the security level to red and prepare the ship to depart. Cut all communications with the core and dismiss everyone in the house. We’re leaving.”

Treyges bowed. “Where to, sir?”

Jon looked up at a particular patch of sky.

“Jangali.”