

THE ENTEAN SAGA
EPISODE 2: BRIGHTNESS CALLING

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DEDICATION

For Madame Pele

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CHAPTER 1: A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

Present Time. Aboard the spaceship Stardust, in orbit around Longwei, the warrior sister planet of Entean.

Mission: Investigate the sudden and inexplicable silence to calls from Her sister planets, as well as the thousand-year-old mysterious disappearance of two Ring colonizer vessels and the reconnaissance ship sent in pursuit...which also disappeared.

Spider burst into the galley, eyes gleaming in his thin, angular face. His abrupt entrance shattered the serenity of the room, empty save for Eloch, Wren, and Little Sister the sniffer.

Startled, Little Sister lifted her head and growled.

Eloch put a hand on the sniffer's sleek black brow.

"It's just Spider," Wren said to Little Sister, continuing to offer the beast tidbits of food. "Hiya, Spider." She raised a questioning eyebrow at his sudden appearance. He had become less and less taciturn, more enthusiastic, ever since he chose to accompany them on their quest, rather than remain on Spur.

"Aiko and Genji are back," Spider panted. "And they've got something. Sick Bay. Come."

Abruptly, he was gone.

Eloch cocked his head at Wren, who hastily put down her sandwich.

"We'd better go after him."

They both dashed off, Little Sister's claws scrabbling on the deck close behind.

Earlier. A flyby over Longwei.

Aiko banked the shuttle and dipped low over the volcano one final time. The craft shimmied from the heat and the clouds of poisonous gasses pouring from the vent. Dodging plumes was nothing she couldn't handle. As the captain of the *Stardust*, she flew through wormholes for a living.

"Got everything you need?" she asked, still focused on her instrument panel as she coaxed the shuttle into compliance.

"Yeah, I'm good," replied Genji, her research scientist and unofficial med tech. He murmured absently, already absorbed in the data he'd accumulated.

"Good, because this is the third time we've done a flyby of this planet. Why Eloch is so cautious, I don't know. I would've been on the ground by now." She shook the fringe of bangs from her eyes.

Genji glanced up at her. "Does it bother you? His being leader? *Ho!*" he exclaimed and gripped the bulkhead's safety handle so he wouldn't fall flat on his face. The smoke plume had shifted and buffeted the shuttle, nearly flipping it over.

Aiko honed in on the instrument panel and her intimate knowledge of her ship's strengths, quirks, and foibles.

"That didn't feel right," she said when she had regained control. "Almost as if we hit something."

"Or something hit us."

They were silent for a minute.

"Perhaps Eloch is right to be a bit more cautious than usual." She took one last look at the lava churning and spiking beneath them. "Can you

take another reading for life forms? I could swear we made contact with something back there.” She banked the shuttle and prepared for another pass, squinting through the smoke.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, Aiko,” Genji said as he scanned the bleak, volcanic landscape so different from the lush coastlines. Longwei was a water planet, dotted with countless islands such as this one, some smaller, some much larger. “Only a couple of those large reptilians we saw earlier.” He glanced out the window. “Yeah, see them? On the slope of the crater down there. They seem to be heading over to that—wait, Aiko!” He nudged her, “Look there, seven o’clock. Is that—?”

“Yeah, Genj. Sure looks like it. Hold on.” She banked the shuttle again, putting it between the prone figure on the volcano’s cinder slope and the reptiles. To conserve energy, she flipped off the cloaking device and flipped on the shields. With two fast approaching animals as large as her shuttle she wanted her shields secure. “Here’s what we do,” she said as she flew. “We’re going over there. I’ll hover while you get the body, you’ll bring it back into the shuttle, and we leave.”

“What if it’s dead?”

Her grimace mirrored Genji’s own. “I don’t like the idea of your hoisting a dead body into this shuttle any more than you do. Doesn’t matter if it’s alive or dead. I don’t want to dream about those things eating it.” She paused, scanning for a place to land on the sharply angled slope. “Can’t touch down, so you’re going to have to jump. Snap on a line. I’m not going to let them eat you, either. Bring a second line for the body. If necessary, I’ll winch you both up. If those lizards see you, run downhill. I’ll be close by.”

“Got it.” He was already shrugging into a harness which he then affixed to one of the lifelines spooled next to the shuttle door. By the time Aiko set the craft to hover two feet above the ground, he had another line attached to the winch, with its harness bunched in his fist.

“Ready?” Aiko asked and shot a glance at him. He looked pale.

With a nod, he punched the door panel and it slid open. Quickly, he glanced up the slope, saw the reptilians closing in fast, and a plume of smoke swirling not far behind. “Wind’s shifted again!” he shouted, glancing around for the body.

It was nearly beneath him. Aiko was good.

“I’m out the door!” he yelled and launched himself to the ground. He landed wrong, stumbled onto his side, and slid down the slope. It took him a moment to recover, until the roar of a lizard galvanized him.

He half-crawled in the loose footing to reach the still form. He knelt down, barely registered the body’s gender before he strapped her into the harness and hoisted her over his shoulder. The ash was deep and shifted underfoot. His burden unbalanced him, and he skidded as he reached for the shuttle.

Aiko had been tracking him and had repositioned the shuttle downslope. All he needed to do was jump back in. Heart in his throat, Genji grasped the shuttle skin to steady himself when he skidded again, nearly underneath it, but he clung one-armed to the opening as he scrambled to get his footing.

“Got her!” He grunted and heaved his burden through the opening.

“Lizard!” Aiko shouted. “Hang on!” She prayed Genji had heard. As it was, she barely had enough time to take the shuttle out of hover and move out of range.

Or so she thought.

She swore. “Goddamn thing’s got wings!” She tracked and dodged away from the creature’s flight pattern.

The shuttle lurched.

Genji stumbled and cried out, as he swung free from the door. With one hand, he clutched the winch line attached to him. With the other, he clung to the shuttle’s door and frantically kicked back through it, connecting with the jaw of the flying creature.

It hissed and snaked its neck.

“Get in, dammit!” Aiko shouted and tipped the shuttle away from the door. She heard the unconscious body slide and bump against the bulkhead, followed by Genji’s swearing as he tumbled back inside. She didn’t breathe again until the shuttle door slid shut.

“I’ve lost track of that lizard,” she muttered, intensifying the shield’s strength. “Goddamned things fly. We’re cloaking again.” She raised her voice so Genji could hear while she flipped the switch and dove into the volcano’s plume, hoping to lose the lizard.

The smoke plume enveloped the small craft. “Can’t see,” she muttered and punched more power into the engines.

The shuttle surged up and out, back into sunlight.

Her skilled fingers a blur, Aiko set her course for the *Stardust*. “Hang on, Genj!” She punched the engines again, and they accelerated out of the atmosphere.

She hazarded a glance at her crewmate. “You okay?” His curly hair was damp with sweat, his face red with exertion, and his usually mild expression was anything but as he mechanically nodded. “Your flight suit,” she said and returned her attention to flying. Behind her, she knew, Genji would be examining the minute tears covering his flight suit.

Genji smoothed a hand over his tattered suit and glanced down at the girl lying beside him in a tangled heap. He gingerly turned her over and straightened out her limbs. Her chest rose and fell. *Still alive, then.*

Genji put a hand over his heart and took a deep breath. “Gods and goddesses, Aiko. What just happened?” He exhaled slowly.

Aiko winked at him. “You did good, Genj. You rescued the damsel.”

He studied the damsel and felt something tug at his heart. She was pale, unconscious, and helpless. *But still so lovely.* Her soot-colored lashes hid eyes of an unknown color beneath slanting brows that arched toward

her temples. High cheekbones graced a symmetrical face that ended with a slightly rounded chin. Her full mouth parted in unconsciousness. *Lovely*, he thought again.

And naked.

Genji swallowed. “I think I’ll find something to cover her.” He felt a little wobbly as he stood and rummaged in the storage cabinet until he found their emergency blankets.

He spent the remaining few minutes of the shuttle flight running his scanner up and down his patient. But he wasn’t looking at the readout. He was looking at her face, her exotic features, and the lengths of thick, spiraling hair flowing freely to just below her waist.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Aiko asked. “Taking her to Sick Bay?”

He started, nearly dropping the scanner. “We’re back on board?”

Aiko grinned. “That we are.” She unbuckled her safety harness and punched open the shuttle door panel. “Gonna check the outside. Why don’t you take the damsel to Sick Bay? I’ll tell Spider to round up the others, and we’ll meet you there. Wait.” She handed him a translator. “You may need this in case she comes to before we get there.”

Genji nodded and slipped the translator into the pocket of his flight suit. The suit was so shredded he had trouble finding the right opening. Ruined. He looked back at the girl and lifted the blanket. All that smooth, nut-brown skin, completely undamaged. Why wasn’t she in the same condition as his suit?

He jumped out of the shuttle, holding her limp form against him. This time he carried her gently in his arms, not slung over his shoulder. *So light. So tall*. He estimated she was at least his height—taller, maybe. He wasn’t a tall man, not like Eloch, but he certainly wasn’t short, either.

“Looks like we did hit something,” Aiko called after him.

He turned, hiking up his damsel to get a better grip on her slippery blanket. “Damage?”

“A big dent in the skin a little hammer pounding can fix. The seal is secure, though. One of those lizard things most likely.” She made a face, “Revoltin’. I don’t envy Eloch and Wren their mission. Get going. I’ll be right behind you. Fixin’ this first.”

~~Genji nodded and headed to Sick Bay.~~

Leaving the still muttering Aiko to repair the dent, Genji nodded and headed to Sick Bay.

CHAPTER 2: DISTANT RUMBLES

The Previous Day. On the planet Longwei.

“Hurry, Haku,” Pika said as he glanced back at his older brother. “It’s only a little farther. Not much longer.” He wiped the sweat off his face and refocused on picking a trail across the rough surface of a long-since cooled lava flow.

The black rock had soaked up the heat of the day, making it nearly unbearable to walk across despite his exceedingly tough bare feet. Pika still felt heat from the late afternoon sun on his back and shoulders. His shadow undulated across the rocky ground as he threaded his way between the bulges of old vents and collapsed lava tubes. Chunks of rock and ancient cinders crunched under his feet. Out of habit, he kicked a rock to see how far it would fly.

Haku grunted, unconcerned about the distance. What worried him was how long it was taking to get to Pika’s destination.

And the territory. They were deep within King Rafa’s hunting grounds. Granted, they were surrounded by barren lava fields with nothing to hunt but wild goats, skinny things that fed on the sparse vegetation. He preferred wild pig to goat. Very succulent and juicy in comparison. They probably wouldn’t be discovered, he decided.

Even so, they were still trespassing, and they were Nuri. Nuri meant royalty. Royalty found in another’s territory meant trouble.

“We’re flying back,” he announced. “This is not the time to get caught in Rafa’s lands, Pika. You know that.”

“Fine, fine.” Pika waved a hand at him. “Only a little farther.” He felt Haku glaring at him, but he kept on, instinctively sure of exactly where to place each step.

“What’s gotten into you anyway, Pika?” Haku called from behind. “You’re supposed to be the careful one.”

Pika knew Haku couldn’t see his face, but he glowered at his brother anyway. “I *am* careful, but this is important.” He stopped and ducked behind a hump of black and brown lava, into a gully in the lava created by the imprint of a long-ago tree, its indentation the only indication the now-barren landscape had once been a thriving forest.

His reddish-brown skin and dark tattoos allowed him to blend with the landscape. As did Haku’s, who had joined him. “What now, brother?”

“There!” Pika said, pointing to a broad green valley where the lava flow ended. The contrast of color against the stark lava rubble made it even lusher to Pika’s eyes. “It’s right there.”

“Where?”

“That’s the point. It’s invisible. Magic. Don’t you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“The crater that’s supposed to be in front of us. That valley is much further away than it looks.”

Haku grunted. “Crater? How am I supposed to know about a crater on someone else’s hunting grounds? And how do you know about it?” He fell silent and looked at Pika with narrowed eyes. Then his eyes darkened, and he punched Pika’s arm “You idiot! You’ve been sniffing around here before, haven’t you? *Haven’t you?* And more than once, if you remember some nonexistent crater. Or have you been out in the heat too long?” He punched him again, “I can’t believe you’ve been here before! What if you’d been caught?”

Pika caught Haku’s forearm before he could strike him again. “Cut it out, Haku!”