

**The first book in an epic space opera by Matt Wright—sequel series to *The Sun Maker Saga*!**

*Breaking Colossus: Stars Reach Book One*

The intergalactic war rages on.

Freedom seems within our grasp...

..but our savior has gone missing.

When Roth joined the Ascendancy military as an intelligence officer, he thought he was doing the right thing. But when his father, the legendary **Grey Soleis**, is reported MIA, Roth is torn between military duty and family.

Unlike Roth, Grey is a man of mythic proportions. Some want him to stay lost. Others worship him. They both have something in common: **someone wants them dead.**

For Alora Soleis, her missing husband is the least of her worries when an insurrection traps her on her homeworld.

Will she summon enough fighting strength?

Or become that which she **hates?**

Both she and Roth must transcend their limitations to save their family from breaking apart forever.



# BREAKING COLOSSUS

*STARS REACH BOOK ONE*

MATT WRIGHT



**Breaking Colossus**  
**Stars Reach Book One**  
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# CONTENTS

Praise for Breaking Colossus	vii
Epigraph	ix
Communicues #30113 & #43012	i
1. I Promise	5
2. There Will Be a Banquet Tonight	14
About the Author	27



# PRAISE FOR BREAKING COLOSSUS

*“Matt Wright’s storytelling conveys the real scope and sense of wonder of great space opera. Breaking Colossus takes you on a journey as big as your imagination.”*

—**KEVIN J. ANDERSON, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *THE DARK BETWEEN THE STARS***

*"A fast-paced, galaxy-spanning space opera adventure filled with intrigue and political maneuvering. A solid outing from Mr. Wright!"*

—**CHRISTOPHER RUOCCHIO, AUTHOR OF *THE SUN EATER*  
SERIES**





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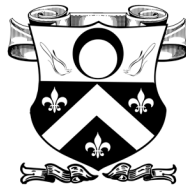
*You'll never be fainthearted or a fool,  
Télémakhos, if you have your father's spirit;  
he finished what he cared to say,  
and what he took in hand he brought to pass.  
The sea routes will yield their distances  
to his true son, Penélopè's true son,—  
I doubt another's luck would hold so far.  
The son is rare who measures with his father,  
and one in a thousand is a better man,  
but you will have the sap and wit  
and prudence—for you get that from Odysseus—  
to give you a fair chance of winning through.*

—HOMER, *THE ODYSSEY*  
TRANSLATED BY ROBERT FITZGERALD



# COMMUNIQUE

## #30113 & #43012



### *Communique #30113*

*Sender: Queen Alora Soleis*

*Recipient: Captain Grey Soleis*

*Recording...*

**G**rey, I cannot ignore this anniversary of our separation any longer. This communique may never reach you, not just because of the nearly infinite space between us, but because I fear the Ascendancy is keeping you from me.

In the months after you left, I pondered what I would say to you if you were still gone five, ten, or even twenty years later. All those years have passed, and for all I know, you are still millions of lights away fighting in the war that has claimed more lives than any other war in the history of our species.

The truth is...I'm not prepared for this. Nevertheless, here it is.

I should start by saying I have no news of you or your whereabouts. What I do receive comes from our liaisons in the military, mere desk-sitters, who assure me you are still fighting the good fight. Still alive—and that's all. They have no idea why you never respond to me, but I

know all too well their words are well-crafted lies with inlays of gold and silver.

I have supported the Ascendancy for twenty years. Funding the war effort to overthrow the Dominion is always on my mind. By so doing, I believe I've helped you in your efforts to return to me. My sky seems to fade away from me into darkness. I wish to pull it back with all the strength I have.

You should know Roth is well. Our son has joined the military and has been serving faithfully aboard the *Titanus*—but you already knew that didn't you?

You promised me you would watch over me like a star. You promised to be my sky. I still hold on to that promise, Grey. Every day. The universe is vast...and though the space and powers that separate us seem greater—and it seems we are but specks of matter on spheres of dust, rising forever—I believe my words will find you, eventually.

I suppose what I want to say most of all is...to ask or plead for you to come home and be a father to Roth. That is all I ask, Grey. You may forget me. You may forget what we had together.

Don't forget your son.

Be well, my love. Until we meet again.

***End Communique.***

***Communique not sent.***

***Archived.***

---

***Communique #43012***

***Sender: Captain Grey Soleis***

***Recipient: Queen Alora Soleis***

***Recording...***

Don't have much time. Something's going to happen soon. Something bad...

I haven't heard from you, but I hope all is well. It's been twenty years to the day, but I think of you always. I love you. I miss you. Give

my love to Roth. I promise I'll return. I'm doing everything I can to return to you both.

Don't give up on me, Alora. I continue to be your sky.

*End Communique.*

*Communique not sent.*

*Archived.*



# I PROMISE

**T**rin fled through Ascendancy space in the form of an aster ship, bleeding smoke and light into the void.

She thought she'd evaded her pursuer, but couldn't be sure. Her core had been damaged in a catastrophe she could not remember. She'd need an emergency diagnostic and restoration cycle to see how much damage she'd sustained. For now, a small aster was inconspicuous enough to avoid Ascendancy scrutiny.

All she could remember was a very human face coupled with a human promise:

*Find my son.*

*I will. I promise.*

Trin had traveled a long way with only those two fragmented memories driving her. Now, she could feel the end creeping up on her. She would be lost to the depths like a sinking lifeboat if she didn't find land. Thankfully, she'd happened upon the *Titanus*, one of the Ascendancy's great bladeships. Its purpose was to stay far away from the fighting, retrieve, and convey intelligence in the ongoing war against the Dominion Constellar.

There'd been a time when the Dominion had saved the Civilizations from the Vine and Tyranny. Over the past three centuries, Trin had seen

it devolve into the very thing it had sworn to destroy. The Ascendancy was now the new wave of resistance fighters opposing oppression. She wouldn't feel safe until she had landed in the bladeship's docking bay.

A line of asters was returning from their scouting missions. Using her waning energy, Trin used her ARO technology to cloak herself so that not even the *Titanus*' casterprism could discover her. Even so, she prepared herself to flee if needed. Humans still hadn't forgotten their fear of Arrows—the Tyranny Conflict was still too recent.

Trin hadn't seen another of her kind in three hundred years, only angry humans bent on destroying her. If the humans aboard the *Titanus* found her out, they might cast a Gorgon trap on her without hesitation. Of course, there were the few who hadn't wanted her dead, but she couldn't remember any of them. If there were more Arrows out there, they hid too well.

The line of asters descended toward the bladeship, their registries getting pinged for positioning data that explained where they'd been. If Trin was lucky, it would ignore her, and she could slip past its dropped shield array. Besides, her registries were empty. Trin couldn't know where'd she'd been for the past several hours. Even the memories of the past several months needed repairs.

Still, her systems continuously recalled the face and the promise to her awareness. She couldn't let go of the light they gave her.

*Find my son...*

Keeping back about ten clicks from the nearest aster, Trin approached the *Titanus* slowly, keeping herself alert for trouble. There were no other bladeships within five lights of their position, and she would not get that far if something went wrong.

ARO cloaking, at one time, was impossible to detect. But humans had found ways around it. Would this bladeship be as thorough?

Each aster landed in their assigned bays, and nothing indicated they'd discovered her. But she'd not placed herself in actual danger yet. Rushing forward, Trin sped through the open shield array before it closed itself off to traffic. She was now in the bladeship's artificial atmosphere and felt her frame resonate with the humans' frenetic chaos beyond; hundreds of humans rushed this way and that in dizzying confusion. Keeping herself cloaked, Trin transformed.



The cells of her human-created body were trillions of nanoscopic chains made up of decahedron-shaped nodes. They responded to her will, built themselves into any shape, taking on any color in the known spectrums, and shifted around and allowing her to change into almost any form she wished. They also expanded and contracted in plasticity. To the untrained eye, it appeared like breaking the law of conservation of mass. The technology inside her was so advanced that the humans feared the Arrows and attempted to destroy them all. They almost succeeded.

But now, they begrudgingly obeyed her, altering her into the form of a woman of average height and weight, pale skin and hickory hair pulled back into a thin tail. It was her chosen identity, and she landed on the lip of the docking bay, steadied herself, and dashed behind some crates that were fastened to the bay floor. She released her cloak and glanced around to determine if she'd drawn attention.

When she was ready, a pilot's suit and helmet emerged from her skin and covered her. She then emerged from the shadows and strode into the fray with purpose, eventually falling behind a line of other pilots. Overhead, a voice sounded on the comm, counting down to the next scouting mission while hundreds of voices called out and the asters' engines roared. There was also the pounding of auto-hammers and the crackling of electricity. It all distorted her focus, threatening to throw her off her goal. If she didn't restore herself soon, she would blackout, and that would be the end.

She would not allow herself to die that way.

Keeping her eyes straight ahead, Trin followed the line of pilots through a bright archway that led into one of several arteries that ran through the massive ship. Although it was shaped like a downward-pointed knife, the *Titanus'* innards resembled a human's circulation and nervous systems. Bladeships and Arrows had been cut from the same mold, as it were, and she knew exactly where she was.

Just then, a memory sparked in her mind—she saw dark eyes gazing into hers with burning intent. It was the human face—the person to whom she'd made her promise.

*Find my son.*

*I—*

Even as she strode up the artery, the face distorted. Viscous fluid leaked from the corners of her eyes, then—unbidden and involuntary. She blinked them away, absorbing them back into her skin, then closed her eyes to force the inward pain to abate. It refused her.

When she opened her eyes again, Trin noticed a small storeroom ahead of her on her right. She could feel her systems shutting down one by one as she focused all power on mobility and consciousness. She hurried inside and closed the door behind her, hoping that no one had thought her suspicious. Inside, she found herself in a small, five-by-five-meters room with rows of metal shelves filled with storage containers of all sizes. These shelves stifled most of the room except for a direct path to the opposite corner.

Squares of light in the ceiling lit the area, and Trin thanked the stars that she had entered alone. She stood for a moment, erect and still, as he powered down non-essential systems while searching for a place to hide. Beyond a wall panel at the far corner, she sensed a gap large enough to fit in like a crawl space.

She forced her body to walk the path. Her vision clouded over with warnings and dizzying static. Her left leg gave out, and she took a knee. Blinking, she glanced downward, deciding to cut off the power to her other legs altogether and redirect it to her arms. The rest of the way, she knelt on the floor and pushed herself across the smooth floor.

Trin reached the wall, gripped the panel, and pushed it back and to the side. Its motor resisted her, and sparks flew. Inside, she found a small space that had forgotten its original purpose. Trin dragged herself and her dead legs inside with her remaining strength, then closed the protesting panel behind her.

Finally, she was shielded by the darkness. Trin caused her helmet to fade into her skin in the last moments of consciousness. Then she hugged her legs to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. With seconds remaining, she commanded her systems into a restoration cycle. If luck yet attended her, it would repair some of the damage she'd taken.

But her listless restoration system responded with groans and indolent protests. They couldn't fail. Trin had worked too hard to keep them alive—had come too far to die now. Still, she compelled them, feeding it all the power she had left.

Then, it was like falling into a gravity well as her system began their cycles. She couldn't know how long she'd remain on "inside time." As long as was necessary to regain at least a portion of what she'd lost.

When she was sure she wouldn't deactivate permanently, Trin allowed all her consciousness to fade. The deeper darkness of her unconscious took her away as her systems reduced themselves to their most basic operations—a data transfer rate of only a few terabits per second. Her head dropped to her knees, and she dropped the illusion of Trin and changed into a gray-skinned, genderless omnidroid with empty eyes.

Within those dark, dizzying revolutions, Trin waited for the light.

---

The million eternities of her innermost universe appeared to be insufficient. When the restoration process had completed, Trin brought herself from the brink of oblivion until she felt well enough to continue.

She thought she knew now what the promise and the face meant to her, though she still didn't recall every detail. There was a self-appointed mission—*Find my son*—since she had such a soft spot for humans. It registered that she would risk her life for one of them, make a promise that she wasn't sure she could ever keep.

It sounded very much like her.

Visual and auditory systems rose beyond the black and breached. Above her, voices resonated beyond the wall panel. She listened to the gibberish of their speech until her lexicon rebooted. They spoke Riethan—the official language of the Civilizations. Her system time reported only a few standard hours since she'd arrived at the *Titanus* and begun her restoration process.

"...think we missed something?" the masculine voice said.

"It makes no sense," a feminine voice replied, sounding annoyed. "Why would a pilot enter a lower deck utility closet and then...disappear? Something's wrong here."

A brief silence between them.

"You don't believe me."

“I believe you,” the other voice said, “but we’ve done everything possible. You heard what the chief said.”

“There are crawlspaces throughout this entire level. Don’t you think—”

“Right, but they haven’t been used in decades. You couldn’t access one without first diverting power to their motors.”

A loud sigh. “I suppose...”

Their voices faded as they moved farther away, then cut off altogether when the door opened and shut. Trin scanned the room beyond the panel and found no others present. She needed to keep moving.

*So they suspect me. I need to be more careful.*

Pushing herself onto her knees, Trin gripped the sides of the panel and heaved it back against the resistant gears. She climbed out and replaced the panel as she found it. Little had changed in the hours she’d been cycling. Glancing down, Trin transformed from a naked, genderless omnidroid back into herself again—this time, she wore a black intelligence officer’s uniform. She shortened her hair to military standards and materialized a small black cap on the crown of her head.

With another thought, the insignia of an Ensign materialized on the breast of her jacket. To complete the ensemble, a Disc tablet appeared in her hand. A lowly Ensign running errands wouldn’t draw too much attention if she remained out from underfoot. Her first goal was to find a terminal, find a way past the safeguards, and build a connection to the plexus. Once she accomplished that, she would have the Ascendancy in her control.

With a determined stride, Trin left that storeroom and merged into the traffic of the ship’s artery. Few looked her way, and those who did gave her little more than a cursory glance. Her confident stance and focused gaze hopefully gave an impatient impression—and stars have mercy on whoever interrupted her.

She didn’t have to go far before seeing a small cuboid with a screen and console. Although it was a minor terminal, it was enough to establish a connection. With swift purpose, she ducked inside and sat in the swiveling chair. There was little privacy there, and she would need to rush. Placing her hands on the console, she injected a portion of herself into the system.

The Ascendancy used several protective firewalls that prevented access to their archives and encrypted ansible. The near-instantaneous relaying of information across vast distances was incredibly valuable to humans. Who could blame their wariness? But breaking through such safeguards would not be easy. Doing so while avoiding the alarm would be...something else entirely.

Trin could do it under normal circumstances. But now...

A dark prism booted to life before her—invisible to all except her—and recorded her features. In seconds, it would confirm she was not a member of the bladeship crew. Less than a minute later, soldiers would swarm and arrest her.

Arrows thrived on efficiency, and Trin used it to her advantage, learning the algorithms. She flew past the terminal's local defenses and then forced herself into the plexus connection, scanning and understanding it. It was complex, well-protected, but very efficient.

Eight seconds had passed. The plexus mainframe asked for credentials, but Trin fought past the gatekeeping automation. Once she'd established a connection, she would need to make certain no one could trace her. It required a True-Random algorithm of her own making that covered her tracks.

In the span of two seconds, Trin had traversed billions of lines of code that could have stretched a quarter of a million lights away to Cadmus and returned halfway. She absorbed all of it, realizing it possessed few weaknesses—and she felt respect rather than dismay. It would take the best minds in the Dominion one hundred years to break such a defense. And yet weaknesses existed, and Trin had found them all.

Thirteen seconds.

Milliseconds before the terminus shut off from an outside source, Trin had already achieved what she'd come for. Her wireless connection to the plexus was strong, although it would need some refining.

Trin estimated she had less than forty-five seconds before a platoon of soldiers descended upon her. There was no time. She stood and turned down a smaller intersecting corridor and followed a line of pilots making the trek back to the docking bay.

*Triumph!*

The *Titanus*' plexus throbbed around her like a heartbeat. Commu- niques carrying information, code, and orders, among many other trea- sures posed as vital blood cells. Trin could track the location of the soldiers dispatched to her position, and they were too close for comfort. She'd left just in time.

The humans could decipher the True-Random algorithm with enough time and patience, but she would be long gone before they got close enough to understand it. But she had more immediate concerns. As she strode along the corridor, she made subtle changes to her appear- ance—oceanic irises, higher cheekbones, flatter lips, thin eyebrows, and red-tinged hair. She kept her rank of Ensign to remain anonymous. Next, she had to think of a place to hide.

About a dozen heavy footsteps thudded through the corridor behind her. She cast a glance over her shoulder—soldiers with falcon rifles, or *falcatas*, were searching among the crowd for her. She remained calm and kept to her course.

A soldier gripped her by the shoulder and spun her around with brutish strength. She cried out and glared back at the man in the black uniform. He gave her a quick look-over, and when he didn't find what he wanted, he and the others moved on. She watched them thunder past, searching everyone they came across with rough hands and no explanation. Their toiling amused Trin so much that she couldn't help smiling.

She then ducked into an empty office and locked the door behind her. From there, she could alter the prism footage and make it look like she wasn't there—an easier feat than cloaking.

Now Trin could attempt to piece together her memories in peace.

Twelve hours. That's how much she'd lost.

The only two pieces left were a face and a promise...

*I will. I promise...*

Before her was a man with a strong, square jaw choked with stubble; a heavy lower lip encasing white, perfect teeth; a crooked nose and a creased bridge between two black-as-void eyes; and a strong, fortress forehead.

Ah! And bright red hair!—matted with sweat and dirt, yet cut short to military standards. It was a portrait of a man who had seen and expe-

rienced too much. With this, Trin pulled up the *Titanus*' roster and cycled through it, comparing every crew member's face to that memory.

It didn't take long. Trin stopped at one young man staring straight back at her.

*Roth Soleis - Petty Officer 3rd Class.*

With a ninety-two percent match, Trin knew this one was at the very least related to the man from her memory; his red hair was shorter and fainter, and his face was oval with light gray eyes, high-arched brows, and a pallid complexion.

She already liked him.

After gathering what information she could of this Roth, Trin sat down on the floor of the office and prepared for a restoration cycle—one that wouldn't take as long but would give her the strength she needed to find Roth and discover whether he was the son she'd promised to seek.

*I may have failed in the past, but this is a promise I refuse to break.*

# THERE WILL BE A BANQUET TONIGHT

Roth Soleis hung in space near the aft of the Bladeship *Titanus*. The pitch black of the void enveloped him, but his helmet's screen allowed him to admire the nebula Agamemnon that cascaded across his vision like a river several dozen lights away.

Although they were close enough to admire it, they were far enough away to avoid getting shredded in the conflagration. With the help of the bladeship's massive galaxy-scanning casterprism protruding from the starboard hull, Roth could appreciate it as one admires a masterwork in a museum.

Outside, he felt at the center of infinity, hearing only the sound of his own breathing. He turned his head and gazed upon stars up close, supermassive black holes with accretion disks that shredded suns and planets alike, quasars of incessant nictitating like lighthouses in the night.

Eventually, Roth shut off the screen, and all the light vanished from his view. Only the void remained. He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath in the catharsis of his solitude.

At the beginning of his tour, weightlessness had often troubled him. Now, he enjoyed it upon occasion. It cleansed and fortified him for the stressful, work-filled days ahead. The bladeship's physicians recom-



mended it to soldiers and officers alike who had seen death in battle...or those who had struck subordinates in a fit of rage.

*Rage?*

Roth couldn't help a broken grimace—it had been less an uncontrolled fit and more of a self-fulfilled prophecy. The officer he'd struck had pushed him to the edge and may have deserved it. Roth admitted his strength was lacking and hadn't even broken the man's nose. Still... now, when other soldiers looked at him, they saw his father, Grey. A military man. A violent man. Why wouldn't Roth follow in his father's footsteps?

Isn't that what he'd wanted by joining the military?

Putting him outside the bladeship in a dry, musty suit was the only way his superiors could think of to cool him down. Roth could, perhaps, deal with such childish punishments, but he couldn't understand what came next. *Mandatory leave*. He was going home again.

*Stars...*

He heaved another sigh, trying to dismiss thoughts of anxiety. All he wanted was to stare at a starless patch of space and cease thinking, let his sight lose its focus, and relax his light-speed mind. That, at least, was his hope. But instead of darkness, Roth saw the image of his father, Grey Soleis, floating just in front of him. His shadow covered everything, and he seemed to gaze at Roth with his fathomless eyes as if waiting for him.

It was as clear to him as a memory—and Roth knew his memories too well. However, he'd never known the Grey who'd fought in a war behind the Ascendancy's veil. His father was too important, too good at the war effort. The upper echelons had not yet declassified most of his missions—not even to his son, an intelligence officer.

The story of Grey has long become mythologized.

From birth, he'd been genetically modified to fight in this war. One might say he'd been designed from before his birth to defeat the Dominion. Grey's parents, the regents Acacius and Peitra Soleis, had seen fit to grow him in a laboratory vat. They'd wanted to avoid any defects that accompanied natural births. They raised him as a weapon, prolonging his life for the day when he was needed to fight. But when that opportunity came, he shocked everyone when he united in love with Alora of

House Liberics. It meant forsaking the war and tending to planetary rule.

Acacius and Peitra couldn't sway him—no matter how hard they tried. With the revolution underway, the Ascendancy sent ambassadors and generals to bring him back, and not a one succeeded until Admiral Mads Torson arrived in the Bladeship *Cyclops*. Roth didn't know what the admiral told him—and neither did his mother, Alora, for she was in the last days of her pregnancy—but three days after Roth's birth, Grey left Telam to fight in the universe-spanning war. It swallowed him up.

Roth could still remember most details of his birth and the three days that followed. He remembered the look in his father's eyes and wasn't sure if it represented consternation or emotion. In the creases of his frown lay the secret to his leaving Telam to join the Ascendancy. Twenty years later, Grey couldn't have been farther away from his family and home.

Roth gritted his teeth. His outside time hadn't been restful—it had only bubbled up feelings of agitation at himself and his childish wishing that his father would return and bridge the gap between them. Grey had become a living war hero, predestined to end the war. And perhaps he would eventually become the savior of them all. One day, the stargazers would name a nebula after him. Fitting that the death of a star would be named after the greatest war hero in history...

Just then, a deep voice infiltrated the silence of Roth's suit, thundering in his helmet and interrupting his thoughts.

“Officer Soleis. It's time.”

The voice belonged to Petty Officer Arvind Tau, a recruit who'd entered the military around Roth's time. The upper echelons had promoted him early, and he worked in the docking bays now under the payload commander. The text of the man's service record flashed before the eye of Roth's mind; Arvind Hasen Tau—born twenty standard years ago on Cadmus—almost to the day—he had to remember to wish him a happy birthday—a holo of his paramour, Pridwyn Cora, replayed and Roth remembered why he didn't like her: high voice, vain personality, uninteresting social life. She was the daughter of a wealthy arms merchant on—

*Stars!*

Roth shook his head, forcing himself to stop remembering everything. He knew what it was like to drown in the details.

“All right,” he said with a sigh, “pull me back.”

His suit’s umbilical cord reappeared, and the *Titanus* rematerialized before him. Slowly, the line drew him back toward the maw of an open dock protected by the bladeship’s shield array. It didn’t bother him that the military cut his outside time short. Each soldier or officer was trained to expect it in case of a sudden attack that put their lives in jeopardy. In his case, he had to attend to his mandatory leave to Telam. To his home.

Going home again stressed him troubled him more than his work did. It meant he had to deal with Mother.

The cord drew him toward the maw of an open dock protected by the bladeship’s shield array, which opened and permitted him back inside. Arvind stood on the lip to receive him, wearing a smart deep-ocean blue suit and black shoes that reflected all light. He helped Roth back onto the deck where the grav-cells took over and pulled him downward. Stumbling, Roth struggled to accustom himself to the gravity. Arvind steadied him with a firm grip on his arm until he could stand on his own.

“Thank you,” Roth said, taking off his helmet.

Arvind gave him a nod, and they walked together in silence back into the bay toward the rear corridor of dressing rooms and lockers.

“So, how was your trip to Cadmus?” Roth said, filling the unnerving silence.

Arvind shot him an odd glance. “How—” Then, his face illuminated in remembrance and understanding. “Oh. I forgot. You remember everything.”

“Eidetic memory,” Roth said, tapping the side of his head. “Not everything. Just most things. It’s my greatest asset.” He patted Arvind on the shoulder. “Happy birthday, by the way.”

It seemed like an appropriate thing to do. Arvind wasn’t a close friend, but neither was he an enemy. Still, the man seemed put off by the gesture.

“That’s uncanny, you know that?” Arvind said with a grunt. “I haven’t seen you in, what? Two standard years?”

“One and a half—barely. Did you enjoy the weather?”

Arvind sighed. "It was cold," he said, "but winter's finally ended."

Roth nodded. "Ah, you're right. It would be."

He realized early on that his memory could make others feel...*stupid*. He knew the current weather on almost every planet within the Ascendancy, but he asked anyway to tone down his ability. It often had... mixed results.

"And Pridwyn? How is she?"

Arvind's demeanor fell. "We're not together anymore."

Roth's brow lifted in surprise. "That's unfortunate," he said. "I spoke with her a few times, do you remember? She was a..."

"A bitch?" Arvind said with a scoff.

Roth frowned. "Is...there anyone else?"

Arvind came to a halt. "You know—to be frank with you, Soleis, it's none of your business."

Roth stopped a few feet ahead of him, turned slightly, and stared at the officer. What had he said wrong?

Arvind wiped his hand across his face. "You...just take care of yourself, Roth." Then he turned and strode away.

Roth watched him go, feeling his forehead and cheeks reddening. He'd touched a nerve in Arvind somewhere, but he imagined it had less to do with this eidetic memory and more to do with the social mores he'd crossed. Perhaps he and Arvind weren't close enough to share such sensitive information, but he could never be sure.

None of it was his business, apparently.

When he finished dressing and turning in his suit, Roth slammed his locker shut and left through a cylindrical vein of sterile-white walls that led toward the fore of the blade. He found a lift and took it up to the level of his quarters, trying to silence his clamorous mind or focus on the faces of those who entered the lift with him and disembarked at other levels. They and their conversations became blurs in his periphery. Hopefully, his mind would forget those blurs, too.

When he arrived at his floor, he kept his eyes on the floor until he reached his quarters. Palming the scanner on the wall, it hissed open, and he strode inside the shadows. His presence activated the lights in the ceiling, brightening the small, cuboid room with a bed, privy, shower, and a closet to hang his clothes. Unlike several others he knew, Roth

enjoyed the enclosed, windowless space. It made him feel protected. What he liked most was that few others entered that space.

Roth undressed and stood for a moment in his underclothes. With eyes closed, he stood on the balls of his feet, stretching his leg muscles, and relived his outside time in his mind. He could recall every detail as if he were reliving it—the cleansing weightlessness made him wish the military hadn't forced him to take personal leave.

Made him wish he'd done nothing to deserve such punishment.

He lined his six pairs of shoes up in a row by the door, folded his suit, and placed it neatly in the hamper to be cleaned automatically. He then stripped and took a hot shower, careful to time himself with a mental clock that counted down second by second. The rigidity filled an emptiness inside him, making him feel busy and important. A mirror over the sink reflected his thin, stiff body that struggled to keep any weight he put on.

Afterward, he shaved off any unsightly hairs on his austere face and changed into his best uniform; a clean void-blue cloth, a black mantle draped over his left shoulder, and a blue officer's cap. It was all very ceremonial—but then, to him, this punishment was nothing but a ceremony. He scrutinized himself with painstaking effort, making sure all creases were ironed and that no flecks of skin dotted the fabric.

Once he was satisfied with his appearance, Roth glanced up at the caged clock on his wall and counted half a standard hour before the transport left. Taking up his military-issued Disc tablet from his bed, he left his quarters, and the door locked itself behind him with a swish. To occupy his mind on the way down to the lower-deck transport asters, he focused on Disc.

He spent most of his time either in his room or in a situation room with his peers. Because he had little else to do in his free time, he often worked in his off-duty time and found it kept his mind from wandering and permanently storing useless information. It also offered him a distraction from thinking about leaving the *Titanus*.

To him, he arrived at the transports too early—ten minutes—although it was better than lateness. The attendants in scuffed and wrinkled uniforms waved him onboard when he flashed them his identification on his Disc. Inside, he hesitated when he caught sight of the other

officers on board, sitting in nearby seats at the rear of the aster, across the center aisle. He knew too much about these individuals—and they knew it. In the seconds it took him to find his seat, his brain had forced him to recall their names as he clenched his teeth:

Chrysa Rubas, Karo Tripola, Annos Buriadis, Tasia Vall, and Haris Manak.

They each bore the same rank as his—petty officer third class—and all were on shore leave to Telam, just as he was. They'd been smiling and laughing together, but as he entered, it all ceased. How could they forget the officer with the perfect memory?

*It's not perfect, he thought, only near-perfect...*

But only Roth could hear his own explanations. He looked away and chose a seat at the front of the cabin, but before he sat down, he wiped his chair with his gloved hand, brushing away a few dust motes. Once seated, he folded his arms across his chest, crossed a leg, closed his eyes, and focused on his outside-time memories.

The pilot launched the aster transport a few minutes late, and Roth couldn't help but let it dampen his mood. Invariably, the clock in his mind ticked, never letting him forget. It weighed on him that no one else knew or cared to know.

He must have dozed off for a few minutes. When he opened his eyes, the aster trembled as it passed through Telam's upper atmosphere. Telam's gravity filled his body and pulled him down toward its surface. The gravity was two percent higher planetside than on the bladeship, and he could feel the seemingly minute change in his sensitive joints and muscles. Roth glanced out a window at an azure sky with glary-white clouds. The main sequence star's rays reflected in the windows, casting shrills of moving light across the cabin.

It was morning here, but his internal clock told him it was evening. Time aboard the bladeships was synced with the local time of Ptolis Baerius, the capital of the planet Cadmus and the government seat of the Ascendancy. Military life had programmed his body to fall asleep soon, but his mother would have been awake for hours now, preparing for his arrival.

He remembered the last time he'd spoken with Alora two months and seven days ago, when he first told her about taking his military leave.

Before that, it had been two years, one month, and two days. They spoke little, and he certainly hadn't told her why he was taking leave.

And she never asked.

Instead, Alora had smiled her reserved smile and said she'd be ready to receive him. Beyond that, it was the first time Roth had seen genuine happiness in her eyes in the four years he'd been gone. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her so eager to receive him.

The day he'd left Telam, they'd argued—as was their wont—and it hadn't been civil or private. He'd embarrassed himself and his mother in front of her council. Even after he'd sent a public communique to apologize for his behavior, his memories would often make him relive those moments repeatedly as if he were trapped in someone else's body, unable to stop himself from saying the terrible words he'd said. They were like flashes of lightning or bolts of pain through his nerves. Apologies never healed wounds in the Soleis family, no matter how well-intentioned.

The air in the aster transport changed as the cabin acclimatized, sucking in the breeze from the outside. Slowly, the cabin depressurized as they drew closer and closer to the surface. When they dipped below the clouds, they revealed massive tors and megastructures of Ptolis Galtaire, the capital of the Telam system. Great towers of glass-shaped cubes, pyramids, and spheres rose at the center of gardens and parks of bright verdigris and rainbows of flora. Galtaire exemplified the apex of human ingenuity and control over nature.

There were very few of the have-nots in the country of Galannes or on the planet Telam. The reason, Roth knew, was because of Telam's becoming a vital hub of industrial manufacturing. The Dominion had relied on house Soleis for three centuries, pouring money into their coffers to create ur-ships and then bladeships. This prosperity, however, did not erase the underhanded nepotism, or the slavery disguised as liberty. The moral poverty and the abundance of violence and rapine—hence, the Ascendancy and its universal war.

In the end, this planet owed its prosperity to the keen contracts and investments that Telam's manufacturing entities had made with other systems. Many seemed to forget that it was a coalition of industry and

trade moguls who first formed the Ascendancy. The politicians took over its face once the war machine was capitalized.

The buildings below grew larger and larger until they approached an Ascendancy Gate near the center of the ptolis, a sprawling facility with a circular landing pad at its center. Once they landed, Roth sat up straight, double-checked his suit, and waited for the attendant to direct him off the aster.

Although he could not see his mother, he could feel his presence, and a bitter swell of anticipation rose in his gut, which he strove to suppress. Attendants gave him the go-ahead, and it appeared Roth was the only one to disembark at this Gate. He left the others without words or glances.

The dread in his stomach proved prophetic. As he disembarked and stepped out onto the tarmac, he saw a small crowd of court attendants and nobles standing near the military offices across the landing pad. He knew them each by name and title, and they wore impeccable suits and dresses, all in subdued black of House Soleis. Some held crystal glasses and drank from them, shaded by hovering parasols that hummed inches above their heads. They clapped mildly when they saw him, but were otherwise silent. Only the perfunctory obligation to his mother could drag them out of the acropolis and into the sun.

There was Vaso and Efthalia Maien, along with their son- and daughter-in-law, Mads and Prosa Maien. Then, Gavril and Yanna Maheras, and Yanis and Bria Harten. Four years had added pounds to their frames and gray hairs to their heads. Mother's attendants, Karine and Shayha, stood behind her, and they'd grown into fine young women. Behind them stood mighty Platon Argyris, the head of security.

Alora stood apart from the others, glaring like a beacon at the head of their party. Roth suspected the lords and ladies kept their distance from her out of deference—but she wore a pearl-white silk jacquard against their (and his) depressing apparel. It wasn't an extravagant dress, but she was the sunlight that radiated in all directions while the others simply absorbed her. Ever since Roth had stopped growing, his mother had always been taller with perfect bone structure and blemish-free skin, which had everything to do with her prenatal gene-mods.

She seemed hardly a day over thirty, and her chestnut hair was



pulled up in a large, intricate braid. Around her slender neck hung a green, emerald jewel his father had gifted her before Roth was born. She beamed at him, and he gave her a smile in return. Meanwhile, his anticipation gripped him tighter, but he didn't miss a step on his way toward her.

He stopped a few paces away and gave her a formal bow.

"Mother."

"My son," she said, looking him over with her fathomless green eyes. Her soft voice had perfect pitch like a song. "It's good to see you again."

Platon stepped forward, careful to remain behind Alora at all times. He was tall and broad, holding his hands behind his back. Deep laugh lines and wrinkles etched into his hard, oval face. He was more imposing in his jet-black uniform and mantle than most generals under Alora's command. Scars and wounds he'd taken in battles fought in Alora's service marked his dark skin. She'd brought no one else in her retinue. He was enough.

"My prince," he said with a curt bow.

Even though he technically wasn't a prince while in the military, Roth decided not to correct him. He respected Platon even if he often disagreed with him.

"It's been a long four years, hasn't it?" Alora said with gleaming eyes. She turned halfway toward the others. "There will be a banquet tonight in honor of my son, and all are invited."

The lords and ladies of the court raised their glasses to him, then made their way in awkward shuffles back to the groundcars that had driven them there. All Roth could think was, *four years, two months, and sixteen days...if we're being precise.*

His mother seemed to understand his thoughts. "What do you remember about the day you left?"

Roth lifted his gaze skyward and sighed. "Everything."

"Of course you do," she said with a faraway look. "And so young, too."

He'd been sixteen at the time, but the Ascendancy had needed more willing hands. It was hard to pass up the opportunity with the promise of safety in an intelligence bladeship orbiting only a few thousand kilometers from his birthplace.

Besides, his father had joined. Why couldn't he?

"Mother, why don't we move off the tarmac?" Roth said.

She looked at him sharply. "Am I not permitted to speak with my son?"

Roth's gaze hardened. "Shouldn't we head back to the acropolis?"

Some of the joy in her eyes left her, and her voice went flat. "Yes. Perhaps we should."

Hooking her arm in his, she turned and followed Platon's lead toward the Gate exit. Roth gritted his teeth, realizing he'd fallen back into the subtle parry-and-riposte communication tactics for which he and his mother were well known.

They left the Gate in silence.



To Be Continued

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Wright is the author of the Sun Maker Saga, a self-published space opera fantasy series, as well as a freelance writer and editor. He co-edited *The Southern Quill* (2017), a literary journal at Dixie State University, as well as the sci-fi/fantasy anthology, *Unmasked: Tales of Risk and Revelation* (2021). He also edited and reissued a new edition of *From the Earth to the Moon and Round the Moon* by Jules Verne (2021). He's also the author of a few short stories set in the Sun Maker universe: *Warriors* (2021), *The Last Star* (2021), and *The Astraneaum* (2022).

Matt has been writing fantasy and science fiction for over fifteen years and has written full-length novels since he was in high school. He loves writing in the epic genres with echoes of mythological and historical contexts. He currently resides in St. George, Utah, with his wife, Elizabeth, and his best bud in the whole world, Joey (4).

