

The Last Half-Human

The sky was red as Janika got closer and closer to the steps of the Cophili Palace. Her friend, Marjo, trailed behind. "Hurry!" she called over her shoulder.

The building loomed ahead, a great mound amid the sulfuric blue and yellow mists of the planet. Normally, it was a picture of glory and power, a constant reminder of the might of the Ohn (OWN), and of his mercy on the human slaves. But with the sky falling around them, casting shadows of smoke on the usually vibrant indigo terrain, the mound seemed to stand against a backdrop of its own impending doom, teetering on the edge of eternal obscurity.

Every human feared the mound, and the earth it was shaped of. Four hundred years ago, humans had landed on planet Sulfa and sought to take it over as their new home. They had threatened the total destruction of the Onjjou (ON-you) people, but they had underestimated the deep and intricate connection the toad-like creatures had with their planet. The human foreigners began to fall ill and die as the sulfur-mists of the planet saturated their bodies. They begged for mercy against the gas, to stop the fighting so they could flee to their ships, but the Onjjou were not going to give up their upper hand.

The humans had been captured, all their ships destroyed. A few were spared; most were not. Many public executions took place beneath the shadow of the mound, where the condemned were forced to kneel until the lethal concentration of sulphur-mist in the structure's walls killed them. The remnants of the human race were gifted with a tattooed band, a blue 'slave mark' around the wrist, infused with enough of the resistance natural to the Onjjou to keep the humans alive. Every child since was branded at birth. The choice was clear: slavery or die.

The weight of their captivity was heavy. The Onjjou were a fierce people, their battle-hungry nature reflected in the white, blue, and purple stripes lining their green bodies like war paint. They were no less than harsh in their dealings with each other and frightening in their dealings with their slaves. Punishment for failure was brutal; insubordination was far worse, sometimes leading to the deaths of whole colony-families as payment.

Humans had tried to rally and rebel before, but it always ended in violence, death, and renewed submission. After all, the Onjjou controlled the survivability of their children. There was only one fabled hope for the human race: set into the wall behind the throne of the Ohn was said to be a link to the very rivers of blue sulphur at the planet's core. That deep river was the source of all life on the planet and enabled the slave marks to provide protection for the humans. If the core was to become contaminated with a foreign body,

something unnatural to the planet, the planet would self-destruct from the inside out. The humans' protective tattoos would stop working as well, but enough of the humans would live long enough to flee the planet in airships piloted by captured and dying Onjjou.

They only had to wait for their right moment to strike, and this was it.

Janika fingered the tattoo on her wrist. It was warm, working in overdrive to protect her from the high levels of sulphur in the air from the missile blasts. Behind her, Marjo's breath was coming out in huffs. He was the weaker of the two, but they had both trained for this day. They knew what it would cost them. Especially Janika.

A projectile zoomed overhead, crashing into the purple ground just ten feet behind them. Janika stumbled at the ground's shaking, but Marjo grabbed her arm. "C'mon!" he said.

The missile had been Jnarkian, from the impoverished Eastern faction now at war with the Ohn and his Mmke nobles. The civil war had been building to this point of crisis for twelve years; despite their short tempers, the Onjjou took a long time to resolve disputes. The humans had bode their time until the right level of chaotic devastation gave them their window.

There were no guards in the city anymore; the Ohn had long ago fled to a safe haven with his court. Some stragglers lingered, and though most of the fighting had moved on, the city would not survive. Mario's breath was coming out in heaves, now, but he was a step ahead of Janika, pulling them both along with his determined momentum.

She suddenly coughed, almost falling forward with the surprising force. Each gag seemed to reach deeper inside of her, pulling the breath from the very tips of her toes. She gasped for air as another fit took charge and forced herself to lean forward, divorcing her legs from the what was ravaging her upper body and using the forward momentum to keep her knees bending and reaching. Black smoke came out of her mouth to join the ash of the sky. Something wet coated her lips, but she did not check if it was spittle, bile, or blood. *Sulphur poisoning.*

She had seen this many times. It was especially common among the miners, men and women who came home to die after months spent beneath the surfaces of the pits. The slave mark afforded only so much protection; the concentration beneath the surface took a toll of its own. Black smoke was one of the first signs that sulphur was taking deep root in the sufferer's lungs. She would die of this. They both would, though Marjo had not yet shown signs of the inescapable disease.

She regained control of her steps when the cough passed. To her left was the trade platform where she and Marjo had been purchased by the same slaver. Ahead was Cophili Palace.

The palace steps were usually home to a dozen abandoned slaves, sick and begging, or already decaying. Now, it was just another place where rotting bodies and skeletons were scattered. Janika did her best to ignore the smell. They darted inside, under the crumbling archway, and toward Cophili Hall, the throne room.

They stopped short in their tracks. No slave of their acquaintance had set foot in this throne room. It was glorious. Despite the crumbling walls, sparkling, elaborate lights lined the floors and ceiling. Rows of chairs sat facing the throne, intricately decorated to reflect of the glory of the one throne, the seat of the Ohn.

Janika almost fell to her knees before the seat. It seemed to be draped in blue light, wearing a canopy of mist. With her eyes on the throne, she could no longer tell if the other lights in the room were actually emitting a light of their own or whether they just reflected back the light of that one chair.

And yet, there was something frightening about seeing the centre of all the world's power situated amid vacancy and void. Her gaze shifted upwards and fell to a blue light pulsating in the wall, a small orb of dancing fire. She looked at Marjo. This was it.

They did not speak, yet somehow, they both knew to reach for the other's hand before covering the final distance between themselves and the orb. They slipped behind the throne but a strong tremble threw them both off balance. Another missile had exploded, this one much, much closer to the Palace. It wouldn't be long before this building was destroyed—and every chance at hope for their people along with it.

Marjo looked up at the blue light in the wall. He clasped his hands together in a cup so that Janika could step onto them. "Quickly," he said.

She lifted herself up onto his shoulders. She was exactly eye-level with the orb. She could feel a cough building in her lungs and she swallowed hard to force it to stay down. She raised her hand. She *was* the foreign body that would end it all.

She looked down at Marjo. He looked up at her.

She slammed her hand into the orb with all her might.

For an instant, the world fell silent in a pregnant pause between life and death. Janika felt almost weightless, yet somehow still rooted to the wall and to her companion below.

Then, everything inside her screamed.

She fell, hardly conscious of the fact that Marjo had fallen, too. She slammed into the ground and rolled to one side. She was in agony. Her wrist glowed blue, on *fire*, a burning sensation that spread to cover her whole body, ripping her apart from the outside in.

She cried out in pain and Marjo cried beside her. She forced her eyes open and saw that he, too, was glowing blue. Outside, between the sounds of explosions and trembling buildings, more cries could be heard. *No*, thought Janika, *no!* This was not deliverance. *Not...not resistance, but—*

Death.

Her final cry echoed off the stone wall behind her as she and her people were liberated from oppression once and for all.

The airship lifted higher above the its owner's collapsing mansion. Helia gripped the sleeping bundle in her arms as her human husband, Xis, navigated the craft further away from the residence they had stolen it from. Xis was a skilled pilot, one of the only slaves who could operate an Onjjou ship.

He had spent the first twelve years of his life maintaining his master's airships. By a stroke of sheer luck, he had been only a few years younger than the master's eldest son, and the boy had taken a liking to him. Xis had learned from him far more than he'd had a right to, until his master found out and sentenced him to death.

Xis had fled to a colony of rebel and runaway slaves and set himself to learning all he could about the workings of airships. He did quite well for himself as a youth in the underground. But when the rumblings of discontent among the slaves grew into a demand for plans and action, Xis had feared the life he had built for himself would be in jeopardy. Eventually, the do or die decision became inescapable, and Xis was once again on his own.

Without occupation, he posed as a slaver's merchandiser and began hawking anything he could get his hands on through the slave markets. A chance encounter had brought Helia into his life. She was a curious Onjjou who one day, when asked by her father to send one of the slaves to the market, had dressed herself from head to toe in slave garb, covering her face, and went herself.

"Beautiful, elegant, exquisite copper plates—your master will be the talk of the town with these on his table!" She had purchased six, and four years later, they had never looked back—not even when their decision to marry had meant exile from both of their communities. Eventually, they found a small assemblage of misfits to live among, some ex-criminals, others dying, and a sympathizer or two.

Their community had been disbanded by the wars. Xis and Helia's only mission for the past several months had been to secure an airship in which they could flee the planet with

their infant son. Now, they were finally taking off in a ship they had procured from one of the richest slavers this half of the West Mountains.

The ship approached the outer atmosphere of the planet, and Helia looked out as projectiles zoomed across the city below that had once been her own. She had long since abandoned the feeling of being one of them—until she had seen her son, a perfect blend of the two of them. His large, frog-like eyes and stretched-out grin between two human cheeks made him look mischievous. She gently played with the tiny fingers on his webbed hand as he slept. She kissed his wrist, smooth and green and free from the branding that marked every other human baby on her planet with human blood, and of the bondage it commanded.

Xis grunted beside her, hands on the pilot bar of the ship. Helia stared straight into the black unknown surrounding them, then glanced down at the instruments, checking for any signs of detected planets. Nothing.

Xis grunted again, taking one hand off the bar and rubbing his wrist.

"What is it?" she asked.

She looked over she saw that his face was tightly contorted, his lips pressed into a thin line. He began to scream, then banged his wrist against the bar repeatedly. He dropped to the floor and rolled onto one side. A deafening cry escaped from his lips and he curled tightly into a ball, shaking violently.

Helia screamed, and the child squirmed in her arms before began howling wildly. She dropped to the floor beside her husband, almost unaware of her infant's cries as her husband wailed in pain. "What is happening?" she cried. "I'm here! I'm here!"

Xis's wrist was bright blue and tears poured from his eyes. The blue glow spread from his arm and nearly covered his whole body as he rocked back and forth in terror. Eventually, his cries turned to moans and his shaking began to slow. He rolled onto his back, whimpering, and his grip relaxed.

She did not understand. She cried over him as his eyes lolled about aimlessly. His movements stopped, then his moaning ceased. His eyes stared at nothing.

"Xis...Xis..." she sobbed. "I'm here." She gripped her child tightly as his wails seemed to calm, now that his father was no longer screaming. She stroked the hair pasted to her husband's lifeless forehead as her tears flowed.

Blip.

Something sparked on one of the instruments, but she did not hear it in her grief. *Blip.*
Pause. *Blip.* Pause. *Blip.*

She looked over at the instrument panel. *Blip*. Shakily, she rose to her feet and knelt over the instrument making the noise. A large dot was pulsating off to the left of their current position. *Blip* went the radar arm every time it passed the spot.

Planet: Argann

Status: Suitable//Inhabited

Distance: 3,728 ww//approximately 8 months, 5 days, 42 minutes, 20 seconds

19...

18...

17...

She stared for a long time at the empty seat where her husband had sat, and then at the glowing dot.

Blip.

She sat. She pointed them on the course to their new home.