

Almost immediately, Aliza felt the thrum of the main engines firing, followed by the force pushing her back into the seat. Aliza was fast approaching the point of no return. There was no way to really tell what would happen when she fired the Ex-Matt into Khonsu. Would it restore the wormhole and take her to the intended destination? Would it take her to a different location that was a few feet away, or a billion light years away? She was going to fire an experimental missile that GEXI knew little about, right into a phenomenon that they knew even less about. It was even possible that the chain reaction that the Ex-Matt promoted would not end with stabilizing the wormhole, but could exponentially expand and continue to engulf, well, pretty much everything.

Despite all of this, Aliza felt an inexplicable calm. It was then that it occurred to her that it was because she needed to find out what had happened to Adam. The ramifications and consequences of her actions now were a distant second to wanting to know the truth about her boy. Oni suddenly chimed in, “Colonel Navarro, readings indicate an increase of both negative energy and gravitational pull. Khonsu is forming.”

Aliza’s eyes snapped up. It was so faint at first, she thought it was her imagination. As it grew, the reality of it became apparent. As Khonsu opened from the center outward, the sea of stars that were visible moments before disappeared as if swallowed by an expanding disk of night. The countless flecks of light were replaced by a gigantic hole of nothing, as if space were just ripped open. Aliza smiled to herself when she realized that was exactly what had just happened. This time the computer’s voice startled her.

“Colonel Navarro,” Oni began, “protocol states that I must warn you of the pivotal point. Should you choose to proceed, *Lago* will accelerate to irreversible momentum. After which, Colonel, there will be no turning back. Please advise.”

Her voice rang hollow in her ears when she spoke, and she was surprised at the sound of it. “Oni, proceed past pivotal point. Arm the Ex-Matt.”

She felt the exact moment when *Lago* was no longer propelling her forward. The pull of Khonsu was not the subtle momentum of *Lago*'s gentle thrust. This was almost primal, the wormhole's greed to consume all that was in its pull. As *Lago*'s rattling became stronger, the lights within her console and the stars beyond became shaky, erratic lines, the only steady object being the hole in space that grew larger as she approached.

There was no turning back; she could fire *Lago*'s reverse thrusters until her fuel ran out and she would still be consumed by Khonsu. When her readings reported that she was just under five hundred thousand meters away, she saw the Ex-Matt appearing as a bright orange star racing toward Khonsu. With its own propulsion combined with Khonsu's pull, it was gone in a blink. From Khonsu's center came a burst of light, expanding outward and almost completely filling its radius. It was a wonder that an explosion of that size was completely silent, yet all she heard was the rattling of her own ship.

She was almost upon the entrance, and the already violent shaking of *Lago* only increased. The trembling ship would normally be terrifying on its own, but in this case there was still a wall of fire from the Ex-Matt's detonation. And Aliza was being pulled directly toward it. It swirled in a violent, yet somehow beautiful, dance of orange and blue. The gravitational pull of Khonsu prevented the explosion from escaping, and it appeared flat, as if being held back by a giant sheet of glass. Aliza could only watch in fascination as *Lago* sped toward the swirling chaos. Closer still, and her entire view was now filled with the dancing whirl that should have extinguished by now. Instinct almost compelled her to throw her hands in front of her face, until a small part of her mind told her that the futile gesture would likely not save her. She was traveling well beyond

the speed of sound, into an explosion of negative energy, all within a force of nature designed to rip a hole in space and time. Instead, she forced her arms down and met the whirlwind head on with eyes open wide. In her mind's eye, she could see the tip of *Lago*'s nose breaching the wall of flame that was easily the size of a large sports stadium. Inexplicably, she reached her hand out, compelled to touch the flame. Her hand was but a shadow in front of the fire. She spread her fingers and watched the light flow between them. As she waved her hand, the light flowed with it, in tune with her movements. She had no concept of how fast she was traveling, and did not think to ask Oni. She was too mesmerized by the fire, and she cocked her head in confusion when she thought she saw the rippling of the flames slowing and eventually stopping altogether.

Her hand was still raised in front of her, and the light still shone through her fingers as she sat in the seat, though the swirling mass of fire was replaced by normal sunlight, its intensity a fraction of what it had been moments before. And, it was still. Her body tingled at its memory of the ship that had felt as if it was shaking itself apart, and her ears rang with the sudden silence. Aliza closed her eyes as her mind adjusted to the instant shift from sensory overload to absolute placidity. Next, she unstrapped herself and made her way to the airlock. All power within *Lago* was clearly out. Not one light was on, and there was no response to Aliza's repeated hails to Oni. She knew that the airlock would have to be opened manually. With both hands, she gripped the release lever. She grunted with an effort that caused fog to appear on her visor. After a moment, she felt it give and she pried the door open.