



Chapter 13 ~ Secret World

"Oh my goodness, look at all the traffic," Eleni complains.

"I said a lot of people would show up."

"Do we have to stand in line in this heat?" She asks while comfortably reclining in the cool, climate-controlled passenger compartment with Motta and Sara. Eleni sips from her silver thermal flask filled with icy-cold, pure Rocky Mountain spring water.

"Nah," I reply.

"Hey, Robert, you missed the turn to the spaceport," Eleni informs. "Turn around."

"I know where I'm going."

"Aren't we going to say goodbye to Daddy?" Eleni whines.

"Yes, and that is why we're not using the main security gate or parking in a crowded public lot. The dock is a one-mile walk from the lot or wait for a shuttle."

"But Daddy gave me a pass," Eleni says.

"I will not wave goodbye to my father from five miles away. I'm not using the main gate." I increase speed and point us towards the basin. "I'm going to say goodbye to my beloved father in person." I slow to sixty, cut up, and under the East Lake Viaduct Bridge, where an ancient stone arch crosses the, "Wadi."

"Wadi wut?" asks Motta

"It's dry river wash/stone lined storm sewer draining Sybaris Station."

"Utta?" Motta questions.

"Winter melt and Spring rain flow. The river drains into the salt pan." I give her the forward fish wave. "We're headed back up stream through the stations access hole."

"Robert, don't be vulgar," Eleni chastises.

I follow the stone-lined river bed back to the station's eastern security fence to where a tiny trickle of green water flows from a cavernous tunnel. We plunge into pitch black.

"Robert, this better not be another one of your games," Eleni cautions. I don't want to play scorpions. I want to say goodbye to Daddy."

"It is not a game, Eleni," reassures my favorite co-pilot, navigator, ship steward, business partner, friend, bartender, and occasional lover, Flight Lieutenant Haley Mills. She expands and illuminates the subterranean Topographical geological display globe. "One mile to confluence, switching target grid to green." Haley rigs for silent running and activates the brilliant LED headlights.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," I say.

"You're welcome, Sir," Haley responds. Social and military etiquette are written into her program.

"Haley, are you in the Quadrant Space Navy?" Eleni asks.

"No, I am a flight lieutenant in Robot's space navy," Haley explains.

"Are we in your navy, Robert?" Eleni enquires.

"Yes, all of you are," I share a smile with my sisters

"Do I have a rank?" Eleni asks.

"You're a space cadet."

"What's your rank, Robert?" Eleni asks.

"Technically speaking, Titan King."

"Robert," Eleni groans.

"Flight captain, and when you're on duty, please address me as Captain, Sir, or Robert, if you must."

"Robot," Motta mutters.

"Haley, do you know how to pilot Daddy's T-pod?" asks Sara.

"Yes," Haley replies.

"She's an excellent pilot," my compliments to her maker.

"Thank you, Robot."

"Haley, can you teach me?" asks Sara.

"I can teach you the program. It is not difficult. The onboard AI, Rayn, pilots the craft. The controls are so simple that even a Robot can do it."

Eleni chuckles, "Haley, high five, you're the onboard intelligence."

"The resident AI, Rayn, resides in Robot's T-pod and tells it what to do. Rayn taught me how to pilot and chart Metric Time."

"Can she teach me?" asks Eleni.

"No, Ryan's program exists in Complex Number Space. I will have to teach you."

"Thank you, Haley. I've always wanted to learn how to pilot a pod."

"Uber mees atoo?" asks Motta.

"I will, Uber you," Haley cheerfully replies.

"Tank' ou," Motta says.

Confluence dead ahead, Sir." Haley reports.

The tunnel widens, and we enter the mammoth mixing chamber. It's covered in sand, silt, and mud. The ancient stone walls are streaked and stained.

"Robert, what is this place?" asks Sara.

"This is the final junction in the station's storm drain network." We silently glide past gaping dark tunnels. The main channel branches, I take the large tunnel on the left and continue up the line.

"Sir, we have a problem," Haley enlarges the subterranean topo and points it out.

My secret access tunnel is half-filled with the sand and gravel washed down the mountain in this year's flood. "There is insufficient clearance for the T-pod. We will have to walk," I inform my passengers.

"Forget it, we're not walking through your muddy tunnel," Eleni insists.

I reference my time transformer. "Five miles back, we'll never make it in time. Mission abort," I turn the T-pod around and reluctantly head back the way we came.

In less than ten minutes, we hover to a stop at one of the main gate's security entrances and wait our turn in line for

clearance. "I'm sorry, girls. I guess we'll have to say goodbye from the viewing stands." I am deeply disappointed. I wanted to see my dear Father's face one last time.

The T-pod ahead of me is cleared, and I pull up to the security gate. I wait patiently for the green light and the automatic gate to open. Nothing happens. The signal light flashes red, and a pair of Sybaris Station Security Specialists approach my window, which I promptly roll down. "Good morning, officers. What seems to be the problem?" I naturally assumed the DON - Department of Navy -- decal stenciled on the side of the T-pod would allow quick and easy access.

The corporal raises his blast goggles and leans in for a good look inside. He studies my sisters sitting in the cool shade.

"Ouu-ka," Motta greets the stranger, and relaxes her attack posture.

"She likes him," Sara translates, calming some of my deeper concerns.

"Good morning, ladies," the corporal smiles and extends a casual salute.

He turns his attention to me and lowers his blast goggles, "License and registration," he frowns.

"Umm," I hesitate. "I think I left them in my other wallet," I check my hip pocket. I pat down all my pockets and

thoughtfully touch two fingers to my lips. "No, Sir, I come up empty," I shrug. "I must have left them at home. I think I'm not sure."

"Identification," the SS corporal takes a step back. His partner moves to five o'clock and shoulders his plasma-pup, an extremely painful but non-lethal weapon, in most instances. A plasma-pup's electrostatic discharge shorts out the nervous system, rendering the victim helpless for several minutes. Only in rare cases does it fry a brain like bacon.

"I'm Robert Wog." I raise my blast goggles for a full facial examination.

"Are you carrying any weapons?" The guard takes another step back.

"Sir, you're overacting. We're just here to say goodbye to our father, the Fleet Captain."

"I said, are you carrying any weapons?" the guard barks, takes another step back, and shoulders his weapon.

"No weapons, not many, maybe one in the glove compartment, and there might be a shotgun in storage," I raise my hands. "I surrender, don't shoot. It was my fault. Please don't hurt my sisters."

"Robert, don't be such a dork. Give the corporal this." Eleni waves her admission pass through my open window. "Hi,

Paladin, Daddy gave me this to show you. Do you want to search me for weapons?" She smiles.

Sybaris Station Security Specialist, Corporal Paladin steps forward, graciously accepts the note, and reads the instructions. Nodding in agreement, he folds and gently returns the delicate gold note. "Thank you, Miss Eleni. The Captain is expecting you," the lieutenant leans in and salutes the girls. "Ladies, have a good day," he smiles.

"Paladin," Eleni leans out her window. "Do you want to go swimming with us this afternoon?"

Paladin pauses.

"We'd love to have you meet us," Eleni encourages.

"U'ta-water-gud," Motta merrily mimics swimming.

"If you can't swim, I can teach you," Sara eagerly offers her professional services. "I'm a certified instructor."

"Dorian!" Paladin summons the second security specialist. "I'm escorting the Captain's barge to Fifty-Five."

"Spettro standing by," the specialist confidently replies. He and his heavily armed squad have things under control.

Paladin returns his grim attention to me. "No charges, you're free to go. Follow me, Hotshot," he smiles, and he mounts a T-bike standing nearby.

"Thank you, Officer." I'm surprised. I thought I'd be arrested. Then shot. Or shot and then arrested.

"Thank you, Paladin," Eleni waves through my window. Get off me, derp.

The signal light turns green, and the security gate swings open.

"Roll up your window, Robert," Eleni commands. "You're letting all the cool air out."

"How do you know Paladin?" I ask.

"He's one of Magnus's best friends. Girls, isn't he handsome?"

"Youp," Motta pops.

Sara nods affirmatively.

"Ruggedly handsome with pleasing body proportions," Haley weighs in from the co-pilot's seat. Appreciation of nature and male beauty is written into her aesthetic program.

"I think it's hard to compare to Syberianian-Atlantian hybrid to a human," I protest.

"Follow him, Robert. You're handsome. I was asking the girls, shut up and go."

"I'm going already, for Goddess's sake. Hold your panties on."

How irritating. Ima knows Ima handsome.