

False Dawn

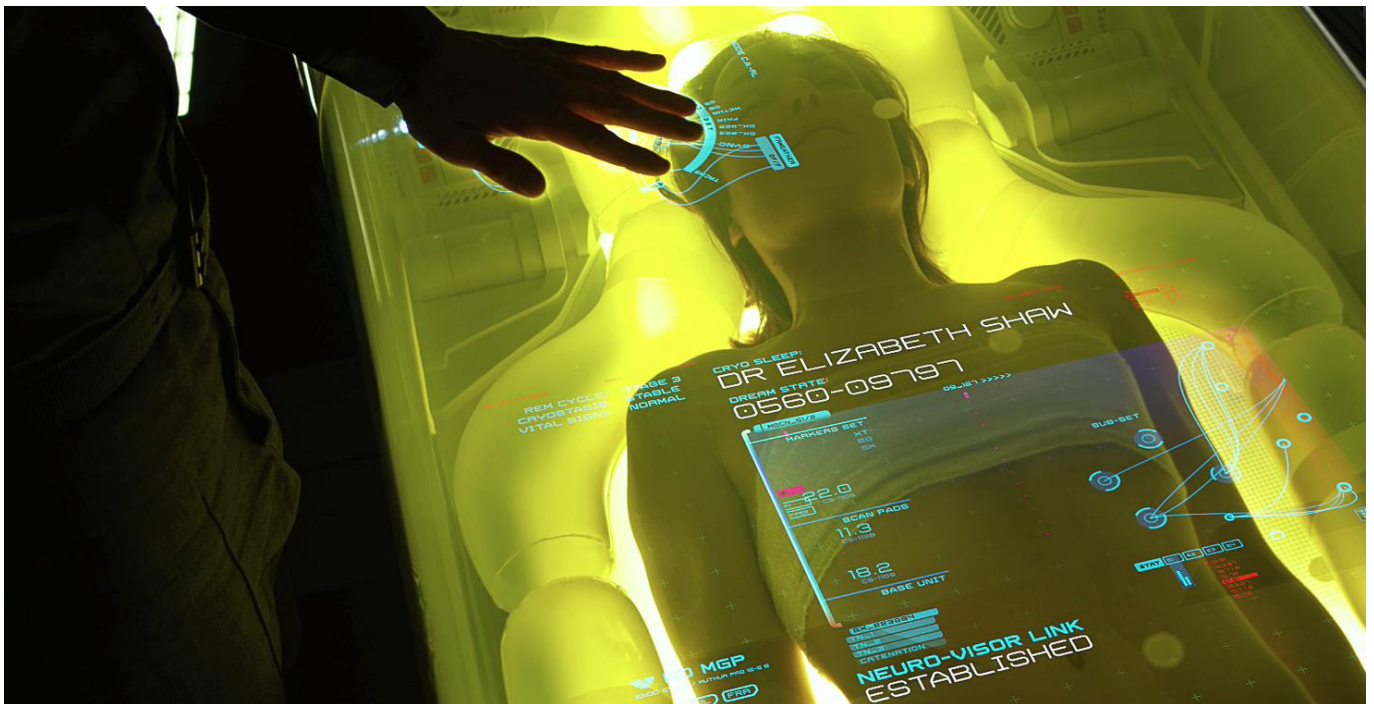
Part 1

The shadowed stasis chamber shook briefly as somewhere, something massive made its displeasure known.

The circular chamber was heavily armored in gray steel, with a massive central shaft core rising into a domed ceiling. The core supported a number of flickering amber-colored informatics displays. A catwalk encircled the room overhead at the base of the dome, forming an upper observatory, reached by a spiral ramp from the floor of the chamber. A pair of opposing armored doors faced each other across the catwalk. One door was sealed tightly shut. The other was warped and hung off its hinges, blackened and bent. A mass of twisted, charcoal-black shapes lay entwined at the threshold. Some of them still flickered with tiny orange flames. The air stank of chemicals, copper and burnt things.

From beyond the ruined door, the occasional crack of gunfire and distant shouts underscored the tension hanging in the air.

Around the base of the central data core, twelve massive coffin-shaped pods were anchored to the floor. Each bore a clear panel along the top surface, a diffuse yellow light emanating from within. Outlined in the light of each pod's interior was a humanoid shape, unmoving in deep repose.



Near one of the pods, an open hatchway in the floor spilled light upward, a set of descending rungs along the side of the access way below. Partially draped over the lip of the hatch opening was a woman's form garbed in a white jumpsuit and sleek goggles. Based on the smears of blood on the floor and hands, she had apparently dragged herself out of the access way to rest on the floor, feet still dangling. Wet crimson flowers of blood spoiled the pristine white of her back. She was as still as the encapsulated figures in the pods.

Another tremor shuddered its way through the walls. Several of the core terminals sparked, and a

small fire bloomed into life from within a panel. A number of the monitors fell dark.

One lit up. It flickered, and for a brief moment, a woman's visage was visible. White business suit. Dark hair. Eyes that could temper steel, but face composed and impassive. Mouth open to speak, but silent behind a burst of static that sliced through the chamber.

Then the woman vanished with a flutter of tangled code, and another face appeared. Boyish, thin, head shaved close, sweat dripping down his face. "Purge in progress, but I'm burning up a lot of ICE making it happen. Alpha team down. Gonna need Bravo team on deck down there, or else it's tits up. Three, two -"

Then the monitor cut out, and went dark.

Several long moments passed. Then gunfire, distant, but closer.

A hum of machinery. Like a colony of technological oysters, the pods opened in near unison with a wet hiss. The clear panels swung open as the pods elevated vertically, yellow mist seeping out to the floor in chill wisps.

Slowly, the forms within each pod stirred, clumsily willing limbs to move as the veils of slumber lifted from their minds.

Hotei struggled to find something in the gray nothing all around him. The blankness permeated through him and into everything...but he fought through it and looked for something; for anything. Eventually in the distance he caught the barest glimpse of something substantial. He reached out and grasped it, pulling it to him and embracing it with his entire being. It was small but not insignificant; it was his name...

Hotei forced his eyes open and they fluttered closed several times as he pushed back the fatigue and grogginess. His name stood strong in his mind now but as hard as he tried, he could bring no other recollections to mind. Then as he examined the room laid out before him, he was dismayed that there was still nothing that stirred any memories in him.

Hotei probably should have been worried or anxious that he possessed none of his past but for some reason it felt normal and familiar. Hotei let a wave of calm wash over his body - his memories were a mystery for later, he chose to focus on the now. He took a deep breath, leaned forward, and attempted a very shaky step out of the pod.

Before he knew it, he had ended up on his knees and it hurt like hell but it was good enough for a first step. Hotei gave himself a proud smile and let out a deep, curt laugh before trying to push himself up to his feet.

Hotei was not tall, a few inches shy of six feet, but a confidence in his stance and knowing tilt of his head made him seem bigger than he was. He seemed to have a smug smirk permanently stuck on his face but his light green eyes were too cunning and did not seem to share that same humor. Hotei pushed his hair, a pure mess of dark brown curls, out of his face before turning around the room and trying to get his bearings. Mostly, he looked to be a very normal and average man, not out of place in any setting, and easily forgettable - if not for the present situation.

Hotei quickly realized that he was just the first to step out of that coffin and he took notice of the others beginning to stir in their own pods. Each of them, including himself, were barely dressed. Everyone had some wrap-style white briefs, and those who were feminine also had some wrap-style sports support as well.

"Come now," Hotei called out to the rest with a grin, "Time to wake up."

As Hotei reached the fallen woman near his pod, he bent down, removed and replaced her goggles on his own head before proceeding to search the rest of the body for anything useful. Clipped to the jumpsuit, he found an ID badge. From her belt, Hotei relieved the corpse of a small electronic box that could be a tool of some sort. He whistled softly while he worked and waited for whoever was in those other coffins to awaken. Maybe one of them would know something? Hotei hoped so.

Then, from one nearby pod, a middle-aged man stirred from the cold yellow mists, his long, brown, wavy hair streaked with grey despite only appearing in his 40s. Curufea was uncomfortable; things weren't right. Almost subconsciously his hands moved to his hair. He sat up, yawning widely, stretching his limbs because he felt cramped, confined and had slept in an awkward position. Deftly his fingers plaited his hair. Or it goes everywhere, he thought. How did he know that? He reached for a hair tie that wasn't there, fingers tapping absently.

Curufea climbed out of the pod, cold floor underneath bare feet, one pale, gangly limb at a time. He stood tall, not quite two meters in height, and seemed completely perplexed. He looked at the surrounding technology, and the shadows, controlling his panic. For some reason Curufea felt he should have something on his face, and felt almost naked without it. Like a married man without his rings.

He spotted the young man nearby. Why do I think he's young, or that I'm older? The curly-haired fellow was apparently looting a corpse, and Curufea wondered at his lack of squeamishness. It should bother him more, he felt, but it didn't. Not since I called myself Curufea. That seems important, and the only thing written on the blank tablet of his mind.

In another nearby pod, a woman stirred. For a few moments more, the world was nothing to her. She was nothing. All was silence in the mists that shadowed her mind. Then, through the fog, a cacophony rang into existence, a tumbling of sounds that muttered together in an incomprehensible mess. Slowly, those sounds separated, forming their own shapes, cutting through the nothingness. Light pressed against her eyes, first white, then splitting into an array of colours that flickered and blinked. Lines, blurry at first, came into focus, arching over her, swaying above her. The noises translated into voices, words spoken, understood as the young woman called Aria, one of the last to remain prostrate, lay upon her bed.

The chamber trembled again as something rocked the room from a distance away, a rumble echoing through creaking metal supports. Cables swayed overhead.

The sudden clamour awakened Aria's mind from the last vestiges of slumber and the girl jerked upward. With a flurry of arms and legs, she tumbled from the pod and landed upon the chilly floor. Around her, the room swam, unwilling to remain still and the noises pooled together into that discord which rang in her ear, accompanied by the jarring, sequential claps that would pause, only to repeat in various intervals. The young woman turned one way and was met with a figure towering over her. Curufea, tall and stark, gazed downwards. A shriek pierced the air as Aria scrambled away, only to be flanked by another figure. Immediately, she shrank back and managed to clamber toward a wall, back pressed against it, eyes wide as they darted about, Aria's mind attempting to make sense of her surroundings, but in vain.

In the midst of the blooming chaos, another pod had opened halfway, jammed, and froze mid-activation.

"WARNING! WARNING! Maintenance required. Errors have been logged, and require immediate-"

"Oh goddamit." Two pale hands forced their way out of the lip of the pod, finding the top and bottom of the two halves, and pushed relentlessly. Pale arms flexed with sleek muscle, as the pod cracked open, spouting more error messages. A blonde woman stepped out. She was short, with the slender build of someone who treated fitness as a religion, a scowl on her face.

She took a look around, reached for sunglasses that weren't there, and sighed in disgust. "Great. Coleman, you get the number of..."

She blinked.

"Who's Coleman?" She looked at the nearest man. "You're not Coleman. Hang on."

Her lip curled as she surveyed the chamber. "Oh great. A 492." She started feeling her head for surgical marks, searching her body for implant scars, doing a quick pat-down and muttering under her breath. "Kingsley. That's important. Kingsley. My name? Yes. Okay, hang on to that..."

Finally shaking her head clear of confusion, Kingsley pointed upward, first at the shut door, then at the one that's been blown open. "Right. We need to move. Hey buddy-" She looked at Hotei. "Bring that stuff you picked up, and let's see if any of it opens up the door that hasn't been exploded." She took off at a jog up the ramp around the pod room, heading toward the closed egress.

OOC: Kingsley can see that on the other side of the circular catwalk, by the blasted hatch, there is a mess of burned bodies. Some of them still have things clutched in their hands that could be firearms of a sort. Beyond the hatch the room beyond is blasted and battered, as if a firefight took place. Other bodies lie on the ground. You are not sure what could have simply burned these individuals into such a mess, but it must have been intense and quick. The hatch near you, which is closed, has a security lock with a palm display. The door is marked "Cryo-Telemetry Station". Feel free to use this info in your next post.

A number of other waking figures stood to get their bearings.

Curufea extended a hand toward Aria, who had retreated to the wall. "I'm fairly certain I'm rarely meaning to be scary, I assure you, miss. I believe the woman referring to herself as Kingsley has the right of it. We should move on. Will you oblige me?"

Large, verdant eyes lifted to focus upon the proffered hand, then further they trailed to study the face of the man who had approached. While others muttered to themselves or fiddled around with findings, he was the only one who seemed to indicate any interest in anyone else beyond himself. Her gaze flicked between hand and face before she finally allowed her own hand to slip into his and he helped her to her feet.

Not far off, Hotei clipped the badge to his boxers and slipped the tool into his waistband. He should have probably looked a bit ridiculous standing there with just the goggles on besides his shorts, but the man moved with such a casual grace that it made him seem more deadly than funny. Hotei glided up the staircase, only a few steps behind Kingsley and knelt once he reached the upper catwalk.

"I have a map here," he tapped the goggles to indicate exactly what he meant to Kingsley. "But you're going to have to give me a minute to figure it out. Let me see if I can figure out what is on the other side of that door before we go rushing in," he suggested. "Not sure if this damn thing is broken or just not making any sense..." he muttered, but mostly to himself. He tossed the badge over to the woman almost as an afterthought as he continued.

Once again Hotei's mind drifted to his lost memories. He had noticed the scars on his knuckles and chest; some sort of tattoo was on his shoulder but he could only just barely see the edge of the image. None of it carried any meaning for him or sparked any sudden flash of insight. So yet again the young man pragmatically forced his attention back to the present.

Hotei's eyes fluttered and twitched, faster and faster and he began to comprehend the mechanisms of the device. The whos, whats, and whys could all wait for later. He was looking for one thing as the data began to scroll across his vision: a way out. Up, or down, or into a ship...whatever was the closest and gave them a real chance to escape - but he was working with very limited information and any path would probably be a gamble.

"One moment if you please." Curufea vaguely waved in Hotei's direction. He wandered over to the body of the technician, as if practiced in the art of a coroner. He was curious, who she was being as important as to how she died. No idea why he's here, who these folk are, or who he is - but a death holds significance. It is the ultimate act.

With a calm professionalism and a light touch of hands to various spots on the body, Curufea examined her. "Peak physical condition, age, around 40, female". He examined the holes in her front and back, "Shot at close range, two bullets, exiting out the back".

The girl he'd assisted...Aria...glanced about, uncertain, still frightened. The encroaching cacophony beyond the room set her on edge and with every shot, she almost jumped. When Curufea crossed over to the body in order to examine it, Aria followed, though she did not attempt to draw any closer to the dead woman than she absolutely had to.

"She probably drowned in her own blood from a hemothorax", he finished, moving her body to one side. Curufea seemed to be quite adept at tossing off medical terminology and handling a cadaver.

The access tube below the murdered technician descended perhaps ten meters to another open hatch, below which seemed to be another room afflicted with flickering lights.

Nearby, Loden came to with a start. He gripped the sides of his pod with shaking hands, steadying himself as best he could as he leaned forward. He was a man of lean, medium build, not particularly tall. He was perhaps of middle age, indicated by some stray bits of grey in his long black hair, and his short beard. His face, with the narrow dark eyes, thick nose and rough jaw, was not lined with age but something in the set of it bespoke long, hard experience.

His expression was usually still as stone, but as he drew his hand down the front of his face, his gaze casting about, trying to absorb and understand the scene, an animal panic passed over him like a gust of wind. His bronze-coloured skin broke out in a sheen of sweat and he drew two ragged breaths inward. All was chaos, inside and outside and nothing made sense, but for a brief moment, a terrible familiarity gripped him and he muttered hoarsely to himself, "Not again! Not-" and then stopped himself and looked confused.

Loden then closed his eyes and inhaled a more deliberate breath, one that drew in his resolve and reasserted his presence of mind. His expression grew colder, as he quickly assessed the situation. Muscles in his jaw tensed and he stepped forward, and said to no one in particular, his voice hoarse, "We must be prepared to defend ourselves. We must be armed." He lifted a hand and pointed to the charred corpses on the catwalk above. "Perhaps they have something of use."

Again, a mind not far from Loden struggled with the new consciousness. "Reborn. Anew" was his first thought. No. It did not feel right. It was not the terrible yet familiar rebirth. Stop. What was familiar? Rebirth? "How may I have been reborn? And who am I?" The man muttered.

Names were important. Ausir. Ausir was HIS name. He jerked sat in the coffin. He was not alone. A roguishly clever man was standing behind an athletic blond woman, looking toward a blasted door. An imposing, tall male figure was crouched beside a female corpse. Another woman clung to his shadow, dark tresses falling down her shoulders...scared or merely wary, it was hard to tell. A last one was retrieving a kind of weapon from another corpse, on a catwalk. All were dressed the same way as him, with bands over their bodies. The females had an additional band across their chests, which was a sad thing in Ausir's mind.

"Who are these wretches?" he thought to himself. Ausir stood erect, beside his coffin, taking time to watch his companions. Obviously, they were lost. As good as he was. He smirked. They were trying to figure things out or simply do something, to fight back any potential menace. Which was the best idea so far, given the violent noises around them. Not to mention the fact he did not have the smallest clue on what was going exactly on.

Passing near a coffin window, Ausir took a view of himself. He froze."Is that me ?" Ausir did not remember looking like that. He was a long man, muscular and tanned. Untidy long brown hair. Cleft chin. Roguish smile. And unfortunately, eyes too hard and too tired to suit his face, ruining all the rest.

Ausir walked up the ramp past a few of the others, to the catwalk, reached the lean man and took a second pistol.

"Name's Ragabash. Yours? Do you know how to use this thing?"

Loden gave a small start as he was addressed. He held one of the firearms in his hands. Its use was familiar, but something about it was very alien to him all the same. There was no firm footing for him in this situation, except his name and the pregnant air of violence that hung all around. He turned the weapon briefly in his hand, examining it. He nodded curtly to the man called Ragabash and said "My name is Loden. I can use this, yes." He changed the manner in which he held the gun, readying it.

Ausir instinctively felt has already used such a weapon, but not often. He aimed his weapon at the burnt corpse of the previous owner and warned, "Step back Loden, I am going to try this out". He shot from a close two meters. A loud "hiss" whispered through the vault as some sort of propellant gas shot a mass of small needles forward in a narrow arc. The body shivered slightly. It was porcupined with tiny, translucent shards. "Well, working I guess."

Kingsley tried to grab Ragabash's gun. "No chance, woman," scolded Ausir, his gaze unwavering, cold stare meeting cold stare.

Kingsley's nose wrinkled at 'woman' comment. Strong bastard. Stronger than me. Good to know. "All right," she said, meeting his stare with an insolent grin. "The magazine catch is the left button on the grip. Push it if you want to count the rounds left. Or you can keep shooting dead guys. If you're into that. I don't judge."

Kingsley turned her back on him, and studied the still-closed door.

"Well, I guess we all had a bad night. What's your name ma'am? Mine's Ragabash, and I am not even sure of this thing." Taking on the same grim as hers, Ausir stated, "Armed people make obvious targets but you appear to need no caretaker."

"Yeah, they do, don't they?" Kingsley grabbed a nasty-looking chunk of bar from the shattered walkway bits. "I'm used to being the caretaker. But thinking it over with a clearer head, none of us are likely to be simple civvies, now are we?"

"Call me Kingsley. Pretty sure that's not my name, but it's familiar enough."

Ausir shook his head. "Civvies? What are those?" Showing weakness and ignorance was not his favorite move but both may well kill him here. "And Kingsley sounds good. Willing. A name fit for a warrior". He delivered that last with his no-nonsense voice, as if talking to a fellow fighter and not to an half nude woman. He realized that he may feel much more comfortable with the bar, not knowing why. "An exchange? Your club for the tiny metal needle thrower?"

"Sure, no problem." Kingsley traded easily. "Sorry if I got a little grabby earlier. Guess we're both off our game from the snooze. Oh, and civvies are civilians. People who don't kill other people or monsters on a regular basis."

Making an effort to remember, Ausir answered her. "I think I have no name for such as them. Or perhaps victims, then," he added, with a wolfish smile. The club in hand, he had the urge to test it on something. He knew he was strong but how much? With all he had, he struck a coffin's side with his makeshift club. The bar struck the pod with a resounding clang, and the thick steel of the pod's outer surface lay dented several inches deep. Ausir hid his response. Such an effortless blow was already much more than he intuited regular people were able to do. He followed with two more swings. The pod suffered further, the steel tearing into a large long gash. Sparks fizzled within. This bar was not his favorite method of mayhem, but he could not point out why. He hoped the display may have intimidated the others, to avoid further confrontation.

Kingsley's smile faded when "Ragabash" mentioned 'victims', but she took pains to keep a poker face when he was looking.

Loden watched the exchange between Ragabash and Kingsley with some tension. He did not want to turn his back on these strangers, these unknown variables. There was no pattern to their make-up that he could discern and it bothered him. Still, he was more concerned with the people outside the room. Ducking low, he edged his way to the frame of the door blasted off its hinges, listened for activity and upon discerning no movement, peeked quickly around the corner to assess what lay beyond. Before him lay a wide corridor of the same reinforced gray metal. The far end was blocked by partially opened blast doors. A serious firefight had occurred recently, with at least a dozen bodies littering the floor. Beyond the blast doors came the bark of slug-throwers and shouts. The smell of powered filled the air, and a slight haze wafted in the breeze of circulated atmosphere.



Down below the catwalk, Aria cowered a bit behind Curufea, eyes wide as she looked from person to person. Who were they? What were they doing here? Throughout the entire room, tension throbbed almost painfully, setting her teeth on edge. A cloud had settled over her mind and she wasn't quite sure she was awake, a fog veiling more comprehensive thoughts, unable to quite grasp all that was occurring and what to do about it. She shook her head, unable to push it away and wishing her head would clear so she could think of something to do. What was she supposed to do? There had been a purpose, but that purpose eluded her. As the others began to congregate, she cautiously remained on the edge of the crowd, silent, her verdant gaze shadowed by strands of mahogany hair which refused to be tamed by the clumsy attempts of her ringers.

From above, at the railing of the catwalk, Hotei let out a short, loud whistle to get everyone's attention. "Okay, boys and girls," he began, "It looks like we are currently guests of the Mitsubishi-Seido Global Dynamics Corporation...whoever the hell they are. And we are apparently floating in the void of space aboard some sort of station...as best as I can tell that is..." The words seemed weird as he explained their current situation but the concepts of space and an orbital station were not completely foreign to him.

How did he know?, Aria questioned to herself. The words he spoke were strange in her ears, for all the meaning they held to Aria. Space? Station? She observed markings which had to be words, but that fog refused to allow definition and she reached up, slender fingers curled into fists as she rubbed at her eyes.

Hotei continued a moment later, giving everyone time to let the information sink in, "I can't tell what is behind this door," he motioned to the locked vault door, "Nor do I have any idea where the path below us leads." He paused for dramatic effect, "But I do have a route traced that would lead us to the docking bay. Your guess is as good as mine as to what we might find there, but it is where I am heading. Unfortunately it also leads directly through the exploded door and into whatever battle is raging through there..." But Hotei just shrugged, as if he was not concerned with that danger ahead.

Then Hotei turned to examine each of his new companions in turn, trying to judge their strengths and looking for any weaknesses. His gut instincts told him each of these fellow escapees were dangerous.

Even the nervous and apparently traumatized-seeming brunette named Aria.

As he surveyed the disparate bunch, Hotei could observe in return calculations and assessments behind the gazes of the others.

We are a careful lot, a distrustful pantheon of rogues and vagabonds, Hotei mused.

With a shrug, Hotei was at least hopeful for the group's survival and each did, at least, seem healthy and strong-willed; maybe they would have a chance of escaping this laboratory. He continued to study each survivor as he waited for a decision to be made; he watched their gait, looked for scars or identifying marks, skin discolorations or any obvious tendencies or habits - anything that might help him. He did not know these people whom he had awoken with - were they enemies, allies, strangers? What attribute connected them all, he wondered? Some instinct inside of him was driving him to be sure he was prepared for anything.

But mostly, he would like to find someone to give him some answers very soon...he was starting to feel a bit like a rat in a maze. Hotei took a cautious step towards Loden's position, but he was more than happy to let the other man go first into the unknown corridor.

Kingsley frowned as she considered Hotei's report. "Huh. So it's a 614, not a 492. All right. Thanks for the update, friend. Guess the burned out door's the way to go then."

'Ragabash' put his club on his shoulder. "How convenient this all seems, little master. You awake first of all of us, you conveniently acquire those informative goggles and you figure an exit, right into the middle of a firefight. But I feel this place is faked. The door was blasted by heavy fire, not a chance shot. Then why is this vault itself unharmed? Maybe attackers had to retreat before storming in, but then do you really care to find what they faced? We were prisoners of sorts and the attack party may have been here to rescue us." Ausir shook his head. "I love killing, that I know. But fighting the wrong foe will take us back into to our coffins. We have to consider a course of action before rushing forth at the first opportunity."

The last figure to have emerged from one of the pods straightened to his full height, more than six feet certainly. He spoke slowly, as if dredging the words from some distant place, "What is the place and who are you all?" He was a tall figure, dressed in the same immodest white garments that failed to cover his entire body, was well and fully marked with tattoos of symbols both familiar and unfamiliar. "I know my name is Lysander," his tone firm, "and I do not know where we are or what I am doing here."

"Hey Lysander. Name's Kingsley. General consensus is that we shouldn't be here, and need to find a way out. That's what I'm getting from this group, anyway."

Curufea nodded in agreement.

Kingsley glanced at Ragabash.

"Here's another scenario. We, awesome though we doubtless are, are secondary to whatever goal the invaders have. So they blew in here, had a fight, and withdrew when they didn't find their... MacGuffin. In which case, this fella..." She indicated Hotei, "Is on the level."

"But there's only two courses of action I can see. We head through the blown-up hatch and find a flight offa this station before it blows up, or we break through the sealed door and find the master control room, while hoping that the station doesn't blow up."

Kingsley flipped the gun up in the air, caught it, popped the magazine, checked the shots left, and replaced it with a 'snik'.

"Nothing saying we can't do both. There's enough of us. So let's everyone who wants a fast escape out to the docking bay, head into the blown-up door. And everyone who wants answers more than escape, feel free to bust through the sealed door."

Kingsley smiled at Hotei and Loden. "There. Two courses. I'm docking bay bound myself, I have a feeling these gentlemen have the right of it."

While the others discoursed, Lysander's gaze fell on a toolbox lying partially hidden beneath a computer console. He shifted it out, flipped the lid open and scanned the interior - the keeper of the tool kit apparently did not believe in customary organization - the contents were haphazardly tossed in and it took a moment or two of digging to extract a few useful items but Lysander did so quickly and efficiently, laying them out in a neat row on the floor - a utility knife, a few screwdrivers and adjustable wrenches for basics, a couple more esoteric items - a plasma flow inhibitor, a hand unit that looks like a portable computer diagnostic device and a weld and solder kit with a decent torch and goggles. He palmed a utility knife for himself.

"Getting people on the right assumption is the first step for manipulating them. Better to let them guess rather than telling them what is going on. That way, they figure they are their own master." Ausir did not remember how and when he had received this lecture but he was sure it worked only with people smart enough to find out. Or with enough time to let ideas grew, which he had not now.

With a snarl, "Ragabash" answered Kingsley with his suspicions. "Well mistress Kingsley, both are good, provided we perform proficiently enough to impress those who set this test up. Question is, what do we have to display for those who put us here? Anyway, I will stick to the larger group, I myself feel in need for company."

Loden's stomach turned over as Hotei spoke of stations in space. He felt he grasped the concepts at a fundamental level, but his anxieties surrounding the situation only increased. The questions he had were becoming an avalanche, threatening to bury what composure he managed to gather about himself since he awoke. He mopped his brow with his forearm.

Loden leaned over the catwalk railing and pointed. "Please, what is your name? Hotei?" he asked. "You will have to guide us as we move down these corridors. Those of us with weapons will take the lead, but we must know the potential angles of attack that will come up as we move." He leaned over and addressed the others below, "Are there any of you who will not come with us to the docking bay? We must not hesitate any longer."

He then added, "My name is Loden, and that is all I can tell you about myself, except that armed conflict feels sadly familiar to me, and my instincts scream at me to flee with all haste."

Kingsley took the lead, followed by "Ragabash". The later asked: "Mistress Kingsley, Master Loden, how do you want to fight together? Both of you have a ranged weapon, albeit probably with a limited range. I have a melee weapon, I cannot use it unless getting close to our opponents. Do you prefer providing me cover shoots to allow me reaching the opposition or a more cautious approach where we all stay out of trouble? We may even try to speak our way out of here without fighting."

Loden spoke quickly, Kingsley nodding in agreement. "As noble as words may be, at this juncture, I think we're beyond them. Kingsley and myself at the front, melee in back, ready to swarm any opposition. Let the tactics remain straightforward." As the words left his lips, Loden's mind reeled. Somewhere, someplace....he HAD spoken similar words before to a group of desperate people striving

to escape. He knew it. When? Where? A memory tugged at his periphery, but then dissolved even as he strove to pursue. He pushed aside his frustration. There would be time for that later.

Lysander took it all in quietly but when looked at for comment on the discussion, smiled, "A hunt always works better with a pack, even if its members are...uncertain of one another. I see the suggested course as the best one."

'Ragabash' gestured toward Aria, Curufea, Hotei and Lysander, "What do you feel we must do with the civvies? In the rear the rear with them, in order to provide them more protection?"

Lysander coughed. "Ahem. Civvies. Yes." He passed his hand over the items lying to the side, from the toolbox. "Anyone need anything from this lot, be my guest, not much of a weapon I grant, but a knife or torch from this soldering kit are better than bare hands I wager."

A number of empty hands made themselves less empty in short order. A few offered thanks were given to Lysander.

Turning toward Hotei, "Ragabash" grunted at the display, then added: "Master Hotei, do you have an idea of how far is the docking bay? How many choke points do we need to cross?"

Hotei's eyes flashed over the unruly goggle displays. A long moment passed. "A number of choke points. If we can keep up a good jog, its about six minutes. Assuming we don't run into delays in opposition."

Hotei looked in Lysander's direction and motioned towards the toolbox. "Just bring up the whole thing," he suggested, "I'll carry it. Who knows what we will need to escape this place." Hotei let out a sigh, "And worse case scenario, it looks pretty heavy - I can just hit someone with it."

Well, then, "Let's be off", Kingsley ordered.

Over the charred remains, through the blackened metal frame of the hatchway, the group of eight strode cautiously. The stasis chamber grew relatively quiet. Of the twelve pods, eleven were open. Three were still occupied, but the bodies within were withered and gray under the yellow cooling mists.

The final pod was still sealed, and the body within twitching in restless slumber.

From somewhere on the computer core, a monitor flickered back into life. A feminine visage again, same black hair, pale skin, glowing white business suit. Eyes like search engines fueled by lasers, flashing across the chamber. Seeking.

End Part 1

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