

The Hall of the Betrayed
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Lestari's palms were sweating so badly he could feel the sweat trickling down the controls in his hands. He breathed in deeply, the chill air blowing gently in his face being sucked into his lungs as he tried to calm his pounding heart. He closed his eyes and breathed again, focusing on the feeling of his heartbeat, trying to slow its rapid thumping. He remembered being taught this meditation technique by his father during one summer's visit to a lake house on a planet far away.

Feeling somewhat better Lestari opened his eyes again. The holographic image being projected on the inside of the cold steel cockpit had not changed. Just the peaceful image of a million specks of light, the cold unblinking shine of faraway stars.

It was a quiet, peaceful scene. Completely at odds with the state of nervousness he felt. He turned his head and the sensors in his helmet detected his thoughts, displaying the information he was looking for on the hologram that surrounded him. Green dots flashed into being around him, tiny scrolling words underneath each telling him what each dot represented and how far away it was from his position.

Damn. They had mobilized the entire planetary fleet. Whatever was happening really must not be a drill.

Lestari thought back to only an hour before. He had been asleep in his bunk when his roommate had burst in and woken him. The other young man had been excited, babbling, and nearly incoherent. It was all Lestari could do to wrap his sleep muddled mind around the fact that they were being put on alert. He needed to grab his flight uniform and get to their assembly area as quickly as possible.

Months of training had kicked in. Habit over rode his sleepiness and Lestari had found himself seated in the meeting room with the other nineteen young men who made up his fighter squadron. All of whom were talking at the top of their lungs. Something had happened, everyone knew it. But what that something was no one

really knew. Only that their wing had been mobilized and it was supposedly not a drill.

Their flight leader, the twenty-first and final member of their wing, knew a little more when he arrived a few minutes later. A warning beacon in the next system over had sent a partial transmission before going silent. There was no war going on, no enemy expected. But whatever had been in that transmission was enough for the planetary defense force to mobilize. Their wing was being designated Yellow Two. They would be on the far edge of the defensive line.

Lestari had not had time to be nervous before now. Each second had flown by as his feet had carried him down corridor after corridor to the launch bay where his fighter was standing ready. He had to dodge station crew and members of the other wing which shared the high orbit defense station with his wing. The bay crew had already prepped his fighter and he managed to be the first member of his wing to launch, although the others were not far behind him.

They formed up a few hundred meters outside the station, green lines appearing on his display, directing him to his place in the squadron. Once they were all in place another set of lines appeared, directing them to the far side of the planet to their place in the defensive line.

Even though their assigned position was on the far side of the planet and they had to dodge most of the satellites, small ships and other traffic, Lestari's wing was the third to arrive. His wing mates had kept the squadron communication system buzzing the entire flight. They were extremely excited. A quarter of them seemed to think the entire exercise would prove to be a false alarm. The rest were sure something enormous was about to happen. Not a single voice on the entire communication system seemed to share the sinking feeling Lestari had.

They arrived at the designated coordinates and slowed to a stop. It was then that Lestari really began to get nervous. It was all he could do to keep himself from shaking until he calmed himself down using the meditation techniques passed down to him through his family.

To keep himself distracted Lestari spun his seat in the cockpit. The controls rotated with him and issued a quietly rhythmic clicking noise as he turned. Behind him the rest of the battle line was beginning to form up. The display blinked again, showing him not only where every fighter was, but where they would also be when the line was formed.

The plan was for a line to form near the axis of the planet, just inside the orbit of its second moon. It would not be a line exactly, more of a gentle curve along the gravity well. Space battles were always a matter of guess work and positioning. The ideal defense was far enough from the planet to avoid becoming entangled in the space born infrastructure that surrounded a densely populated world like this one. But there was also the danger of

forming a line too far out, in which case the enemy would drop back into normal space on the inside of your battle line and wreak havoc. Most attacking fleets preferred a more cautious approach, dropping back to normal space far beyond the gravity well of the planet. It gave the defenders advanced warning, but it allowed the attacker's time to check their shields, launch fighters, vent explosive engine waste and a hundred other tasks which could only be completed safely in normal space before going into combat.

The lessons on planetary defense ran through Lestari's mind as he studied their position. Behind the line of fighters a second line of the light frigates was beginning to form. These were jump capable ships, usually manned by less than fifty men but fitted with far heavier armaments than a fighter carried. Those heavy weapons would be needed to punch through the armor of large, jump capable attack vessels. A group of fighters could take out a frigate if they swarmed it, but not if they were also contending with enemy fighters as well.

Directly behind and a little above Lestari's wing was one of the thirteen cruisers assigned to this planet. He recognized it as the Magni. Named after the ancient Norse god of brute strength, it was an appropriate name for the heavy cruiser. Far larger than a frigate, a cruiser carried a crew of four hundred. From its position in the line it could fire over Lestari's wing with its powerful missiles and lasers without the fear of friendly fire. Its loading bays were large enough that damaged fighters could be pulled inside at a pinch. A set of armor thick enough to withstand a barrage from a capital class ship completed the ugly war machine.

Lestari rotated his seat some more to scan the rest of the line. Nearly two hours had passed since he had first been roused from bed and some of the fighter wings still had not taken position yet. He had to smile. This was why his squadron trained incessantly. And why they were one of the best.

The battle line was going to be huge. Ten squadrons housed in five orbital defense stations made for over two hundred fighters alone. Combined with the thirteen cruisers, it made this planet one of the most heavily defended planets in the middle ring. But the military had thrown everything they had into space. Lestari saw that some of the heavily armored frigates were painted with civilian emblems, deep space exploration ships in the line. A number popped onto the lower corner of his display. There were nearly three hundred ships and fighters taking their places around the planet.

No wonder everyone else was so confident. It would be madness to attack a planet this heavily defended. Lestari finished his cycle, facing back out now into the depths of space. Surely this was going to be a short engagement. A large fleet of pirates would probably drop into normal space, realize they had bitten off more than they could chew, and jump out again without a shot being fired.

But somehow he couldn't shake the feeling that something was massively wrong. Warning beacons malfunctioned or gave false alarms

all the time. The planetary council would not have mobilized the entire planet, including the civilian ships, for a possibly faulty beacon. Perhaps all the fighters and a few of the frigates, but not every single fighting asset the planet had.

The time dragged on. Conversations crackled across the com lines only, to fall silent. One hour turned into two. Then three. Hunger began to gnaw at Lestari's stomach, reminding him that he had not yet eaten breakfast.

Lestari was facing the battle line again, drawing up the history of each of the larger ships to pass the time, when his screen began flashing red. At the same time a conversation about what the squad was going to do that night fell silent. Spinning quickly, he turned just in time to see the blinding flash of a ship dropping into normal space.

Far out of the planet's gravity well, the ship appeared to be roughly the size of a frigate. As Lestari focused on the ship, the screen in front of him magnified it. Then the screen magnified again; and again; and again. His jaw dropped as a note flashed below the magnification, stating that it had reached its maximum size. Gulping, his eyes darted to the number displayed next to the ship, its estimated size.

Over hundred and twenty miles long, the behemoth was larger than many small moons. Orange vents glowed as they released gasses and heat from the jump, casting the ship in sinister shadows. A low curse echoed through the coms link as someone gave voice to the shock they were all feeling.

The attacking ship was easily three times as large as the capital ship Lestari had seen before. And a capital ship carried four squadrons, as well as armaments that could decimate continents. A ship that large could only have its armor penetrated by the heaviest of weapons. Everything else would just bounce off its hide, not even damaging the most sensitive of areas.

The coms link broke into babble of confusion as everyone, including Lestari, began talking at once. The squad leader had to yell for silence, and then when no one listened, sent a punishing screech through the line, stunning everyone to be quiet.

"Calm down!" The squad leader's voice trembled, betraying his words. "It's only one ship. No matter how large it is, the numbers are on our side. Besides, it is well outside missile range. HQ will have an attack plan for us long before it gets here."

Another lighting flash blinded Lestari for a moment, and another ridiculously large ship appeared besides the first. Then another flash forced him to look away. Too quickly to count, the space on his screen began to flash as ships larger than the largest galaxy class cruisers dropped into normal space.

Smaller flashes began after the larger ships finished their jumps. Dozens of far more normal sized vessels appeared around the fourteen huge ones, showing once again just how large the ships were as they provided contrast.

Instantly the defending battle line descended into chaos. Fighters swarmed in every direction as their pilots panicked. Several were destroyed or were severely damaged as the civilian frigates supporting them jumped out of the solar system without waiting for the fighters to get to a safe distance. Behind Lestari the Magni began to move forward, scattering his squadron in every direction as the cruiser slowly picked up speed. Across the screen a message flashed, letting everyone know that the Magni was opening its bay doors to any fighter that wanted to attempt a crash landing before they also jumped out of the solar system.

Dismissing the message, Lestari set his display to only show official directions from the fleet commander. Green lines appeared, signaling his squadron to re-form and collapse down into a tighter line. Only seven of his wing mates obeyed.

Of the three hundred defenders, only forty-three of the fighters and two frigates responded to the new battle line. A new set of instruction flashed in red. Command instructed them to delay the attackers as long as possible, to give as much time as possible for the civilian evacuation of the planet. There was a grim silence as the few defenders watched the advancing enemy. Lestari's warning sensor beeped its warning continually as the civilian ships from the planet's surface jumped behind them. The noise was annoying, but he couldn't find the energy to turn it off.

Everything felt like a bad dream to him. Surely he was going to wake up in his bunk at any moment! This could only be a bad dream. Why would anyone want to attack their planet? None of it made any sense.

Slowly but surely the attacking ships approached. Two of the other fighters broke formation and fled towards the planet. Lestari watched them go. It was all he could do to keep himself from following. His hands were shaking so badly that he could barely hold onto the controls. Wiping his palms on his pants helped for a moment, but soon his hands were drenched in sweat again. He could not remember ever being so scared in his life.

Still far outside his weapon's range, the thin orange line of a laser slashed out from one of the enormous ships. One of the fleeing fighters had gotten too close and had been mercilessly destroyed.

A grizzly voice spoke over the coms link. "May the gods be with us all. Thank you boys for doing your best, for trying to defend us. I'll be staying here with you until the very end." The message had come from the Planetary Defense Commander.

A moment later the attacking ships launched their first attack. So many missiles firing at once that the glow from their engines obscured the attackers.

Strangely enough, Lestari felt calm. Firing his own weapons, he watched several of the missiles in front of him explode. Not that it would make a difference, but it felt good to finally be doing something. A laser from the frigate behind him swept across the line of approaching missiles, causing even more of them to explode before

the deadly projectiles could reach the fighters. But the remainder of the missiles flew through the debris as they locked onto the waiting fighters.

Suddenly a patch of different color caught Lestari's attention. Instantly his display zoomed in on what he had seen. Running in front of the missiles was what looked like an angel.

Lestari sat there, in the first battle of his life and just stared. He had heard some of the pilots who served on exploratory missions talk about "The Angel of the Deep" before. Supposedly this incredibly beautiful woman would appear to pilots who were about to die and guide them to safety. Or so the rumor went.

The angel certainly was the most beautiful woman that Lestari had ever seen. Far taller than the average person, her features were impossibly perfect. Blue eyes shown from her face and long golden hair flowed behind her as she ran. She was dressed in a pure white robe, much like the pictures he had seen of the angels the ancients used to believe in. Lestari noticed that she seemed to be crying. He didn't know how it was possible for her to exist in the vacuum of space and he didn't care. At that moment, all he knew was that miracle had appeared in front of him.

The angel was trying to say something. Her lips were moving as she ran, but he couldn't hear what she was trying to say. The display zoomed in on her lips as Lestari tried to make out what she wanted. Finally he understood.

"Twist right and down!" He obeyed immediately. And not a moment too soon, as a laser flashed through the space his fighter had just occupied. The angel was running besides him now. A soft voice, almost impossible to hear breathed in his ear. "Now spiral." A missile explosion that would have killed him instead just jostled his ship. "Turn...."

Everything fell silent. The quiet hum of his fighter, the noise and confusion that had come through his coms link with the attack, it all stopped. Even the violent thudding of his heart stopped.

Lestari opened his eyes. He couldn't remember shutting them in the first place. Around him everything had changed. He was standing in space next to a fighter. His fighter, he noticed. Everything seemed to be frozen in place. Looking around, he saw the battlefield. Almost every fighter had been destroyed, one of the frigates was burning and the other was frozen in the middle of exploding. The attackers had moved on and already begun firing on the planet.

Besides his fighter Lestari saw the angel. She was frozen in place, just like everything else. He tried to walk towards her to get a better look. But after a few steps he bounced off a solid surface. The impact knocked him down. Shocked, he looked back at whatever he had hit. Yet there was nothing there.

Getting to his feet, Lestari put one hand on the invisible wall in front of him and slowly began to explore. After a few steps he ran into another wall. A little bit of exploration proved that he

was in a small cube, perhaps twenty feet by twenty feet. Lestari had to wonder what was happening. He had never even heard of anyone else experiencing anything like what he was at that moment. Perhaps the angel had something to do with it? He decided to take a closer look at her.

She really was tall. Easily twice his height, the angel was nearly as tall as his fighter. Following the edge of the wall to get a better view, Lestari noticed something he hadn't seen before. Only two or three feet behind his fighter was a missile.

As he stared at the projectile, for the first time Lestari wondered if he had died. Maybe the angel had been sent to guide him into the next life. But if so, why was she frozen with everything else?

A soft rustling noise broke into his jumbled thoughts. Turning, Lestari found that he was no longer alone. Standing on the opposite side of the cube from him was a man.

The new comer could have been one of a thousand different businessmen from the planet below. Shiny black shoes peaked out from underneath a black coat. Brown hair, a little bit longer than the current fashion, was combed back. Serious blue eyes studied Lestari from an average face.

The man stood still as Lestari inspected him without saying anything. Just when Lestari was about to break the silence he noticed something distinctly odd about the stranger. The bottom of his coat was swaying gently in one direction. Almost as if a gentle breeze was playing with the hem. Yet the air was completely still.

"Hello." The stranger broke the silence, drawing Lestari's attention away from the coat. All things considered, a non-existent breeze was the least of the strange things that had happened he decided.

Focusing his attention on the man, Lestari replied. "Hi. Who are you? Where am I? What is happening?"

A small smile pulled up one corner of the stranger's mouth. "Good questions. Unfortunately they are questions without easy answers. I am not someone you would recognize. You have not heard any of my names before. Instead you may call me 'First'."

"First, right. Where am I?" Lestari insisted.

"You are in the space between movements. I stopped you here to give you a choice. A choice that most people are never given. You can continue on with your destiny in this reality as it is. Or you can come with me to stand between stories."

"That doesn't make any sense. What do you mean my destiny in this reality? Are you talking about that?" Lestari pointed to the missile about to impact his fighter. "Am I dead?"

"Not yet. But you are within moments of death. Should you choose to stay here, then within milliseconds that missile impacts your space craft and you die. You will then continue on with whatever afterlife this reality has."

"So I can come with you or I can die. Is what you are saying?"

"Not at all. You are mistaken to believe that I am threatening you in some way. What I am saying is that your life here has already ended. Only instead of going wherever you will go after death, I have intervened to give you a very rare choice."

"What happens after I die?"

"I do not know. I have never died. And I have died times beyond count."

"You just contradicted yourself."

"It is only a contradiction from your perspective. If you were in my shoes then that statement makes perfect sense. But regardless, I cannot tell you what will happen after you die here and now. Only offer you this choice."

"So if I come with you, then what will happen?"

"You will enter a space between times. That unique space takes the form of a library. There you will experience things beyond your imagination. You will learn, grow and become more."

"Do you purposely try to be vague and confusing?" Lestari demanded.

"Somewhat. I try to not reveal too much information so that it does not influence your choice. And some of what I say appears vague because you and I have no common frame of reference. We are two completely different beings." The man sighed. "Unfortunately it has been so long since I left my life behind that I really cannot remember what it was like."

Thoroughly confused now, Lestari turned away to look back at his ship while he tried to think. His eyes traveled to the frozen features of the angel. "Can you tell me who she is?"

"She has no name. An unfortunate accident resulted in the consciousness of a human being becoming trapped in your communications network. Unfortunately the process left her without memories. As a result that consciousness was forced to learn anew. As it did so, the consciousness grew, and she chose the form you see now. What you call the 'Angel of the Deep'. She spends her time trying to save the lives of those doomed to die in space. A noble endeavor, trying to save people. But one that she fails at most of the time, like with you. However, it has drawn to her the attention of those like me and earned her the same choice as what I am offering you. When she reaches the end of her life, someone will come and offer her the chance to enter our Hall."

"Why are you doing this? Why don't you let everyone in?"

"Because we only offer this choice to those beings who have been betrayed by their stories. Beings who have tried their absolute best to be good, honorable and true. But through no fault of their own they are forced to be the villain, to unpleasant and unhappy ends. That spark which fights to resist impossible odds over and over is essential to our way of life. Without it, those who live in the library would wither and stagnate until eventually it would be the same as never having lived at all."

"I still don't understand. I haven't been 'betrayed' at all."

I've had a pretty good life." Lestari asserted. "I can understand why you would offer this choice to the Angel. But not why you would offer it to me. How have I been betrayed?"

"I cannot answer that question for now. It would provide you with motivation in this choice I am offering, one way or the other. But either way you choose, you will learn the answer shortly."

"Is everyone in this library of yours as frustrating as you are?"

"Yes." The stranger was definitely smiling now. The smile completely transformed his looks. Before there had been a slightly sinister cast to his features that Lestari hadn't realized was there. But smiling, the stranger emitted warmth that Lestari could almost feel.

A thought occurred to Lestari. He could not believe he had not thought to ask it before now. "What about my family? My friends?"

The smile vanished. "You won't like that answer."

"I still want to know."

"Alright," First sighed heavily. "I do not know what will happen if you stay here. I have never died here before. But you should know that most forms of afterlife remove the memories of those who die. If you enter the Hall, on the other hand, you will remember them. You may even see them again, some time when you return to this story. But if you come with me, you will change. You have never experienced anything like it, so I have no words to describe the change in ways you will understand. Just know that you will remember your family and friends. But they will not mean the same to you as they do now."

Lestari closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall of the cube. When he spoke, his voice was low and quiet. "Maybe this is the 'betrayal'. Either way I'm going to lose the people I care about."

"Perhaps it is."

"Can I think about this?"

"Yes. Time has no meaning here. So take as long as you want. But in the end, I think you will find that thinking about it changes nothing. You will be forced to trust your heart. And your heart has already decided, although your mind is not listening"

Lestari sat down, facing away from the man and his infuriating answers. He looked out over the battlefield, at the explosions killing the people he had worked and played with for years. In some ways they were his second family. Beyond them he could see the edge of the planet. A mushroom cloud was forming over one of the major islands, devastation certainly caused by the attackers or a futile defense he couldn't know.

He tried to think of everything he knew, tried to think about everything the man had said, so that he could make the best choice. But his thoughts proved impossible to organize. The idea that he was dead, or so close to dying that it did not matter, was so alien he could not wrap his mind around the thought. He thought of his

family, who he hadn't seen in almost a year. Would they ever know what happened to him? Or would they be killed in the attack on the planet as well?

Thoughts raced through his mind, until he realized that he was not really thinking about anything at all. He was just sitting there, staring at the angel's tear stained face. A new thought appeared as he looked at her frozen features.

"You said that the angel is also going to be offered this choice?" He asked.

"When it is her time to die, yes, she will." Lestari could hear the smile back in the First's voice. "Although I will warn you, if you are the one to offer her that choice, you will not be allowed to attempt to persuade her in anyway."

"Somehow I have the feeling that she won't need persuading." Lestari scrambled to his feet and turned to face the man again. "I will..."

He trailed off. Next to First a door had opened in space. Through it he could see what looked like a private library. Tall wooden bookshelves were filled with leather bound books. A comfortable chair was pushed close to a warm fire. He could smell the warm, friendly scents spilling out of the room. Everything was perfectly combined to make the most relaxing looking room he had ever seen.

"But I hadn't answered you yet!" He tried to sound offended but failed miserably.

"Yes you did. You answered long ago, before you were even born. And you have not answered yet."

"You're being vague and confusing again."

"So I am."

"What will I do in there?"

"What we all do. Learn. Learn more than there is to know. Forget and learn it again. This is the journey without end, a story with no finish."

Lestari swallowed and took a step forward. The first was the hardest. His feet kept moving until right before the door. Turning at the entrance, he took one last look at the angel's face. Then he stepped through the door. As it closed behind him, Lestari heard First say:

"Welcome Friend. Welcome to the Hall of the Betrayed."