

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Generations: Part 5

Blake Jackson · Tuesday, August 17th, 2021

Read parts 1, 2, 3 & 4

Hexlia swiped up on her Glass—years and models ahead of Jed’s—and a rendition of the *Wayfarer* hovered over them, glowing faintly blue. She waved her fingers and the *Wayfarer* expanded around them until they saw the engine rooms at the back of the ship.

“Apparently, before I was born, the engines had even tighter security than they do now. Then the Opeal Nisen incident happened...”

“The Opeal Nisen incident?” Jed asked. She looked at him in bewilderment.

“The whistleblower? They teach everyone this shit now. It’s part of our ‘New History.’”

“Please just explain it to me. I grew up...sheltered.”

“Yeah no shit,” she huffed. “Well she revealed to the public that the fusion engines were a lie and our fleet is powered by some insane dimensional rift. Opeal was imprisoned, but she got released after the government realized that no one actually cares about their special dimensional engines or whatever. Like cool science shit, but we got bigger problems out here. She’s like a cultural hero now. You must’ve seen her reality show, right?”

Jed shook his head.

“Under a rock, damn. Well the reason this matters is that after Opeal was released, the security died down. I mean it wasn’t some huge secret anymore so they didn’t need to keep up the muscle. Until recently.” She bit her lip in thought, pulling up a new image on her Glass.

“I didn’t think much of it until you started asking about the engines, but this...” she swiped and a short video of the engines hovered in between them, looping over and over. The hue of the rift inside was a dark purple, and blue lightning flashed. “One of the head honchos leaked this image, and it’s been everywhere since yesterday.”

Jed’s eyes widened.

“That must be why you want to go them, right? To study the change?” Hexlia’s eyes searched his

face, looking for answers. Jed was careful not to let his excitement show. *I can get back.*

“Yes. Of course.”

“For someone who knows jack about this ship, how did you know about the color change?”

“Just focus on the job.” Jed avoided making eye contact.

“Well it’s going to be hard to focus with all the increased security. You think you’re the only rubbernecker?” She swiped on her Glass again, and a video of a crowd of people jostling each other in the halls outside the engine rooms filled the room. A line of security guards with riot control weapons blocked the entrance. A scientist approached, showed her credentials and was let through the line. “Nobody gets in with clearance. They locked that shit down.”

Jed dropped his head into his hands. “Damn. Then how...?”

Hexlia just laughed. “They’re trying to keep Center folk out, and people who think like Center folk.” She grins mischievously. “But we’re from the Web. And you’re looking at a Jumper.”

“A what?”

Hexlia frowns. “Oh, come on. You *really* don’t know shit, huh?”

She stood up, walked to the overflowing closet, and rifled through the piles of clothes. Grinning, Hexlia pulled out another spray-painted jumpsuit. Hesitating, she sniffed it, nodded, then threw it at Jed. “Time to go, prettyboy.”

The airlock *whooshed* shut behind them. Hexlia hovered over Jed’s helmet, making sure everything was tight and locked. The gloves she had him wear looked thin, but had more padding than he realized. The suits looked more fashionable than practical, but he supposed that was the point. Civilians weren’t meant to have spacesuits, but it seems the people of the Web improvised.

“Are you sure this is safe?” Jed’s voice was muffled through the face shield.

“Of course it isn’t!” Hexlia breath fogged up her helmet, but Jed could still see her grin. “That’s what makes it fun!” She clicked the side of his helmet, and suddenly he could hear her voice clearly through the short-range mics. Fiddling with the small can of oxygen on his back, she twisted something and then Jed tasted the telltale canned air filling his suit. “If you want safe, you can go back to wherever you came from and forget all about these engines.”

“I need to get there. It’s important.”

“That’s what you’re paying me for.” Hexlia clipped a five foot line from the back of her suit to the front of his. “Try not to flail around too much.”

She slammed the button to open the airlock, and the pressure *dropped*. His arms lifted suddenly in the zero gravity. His ears popped, the air—or lack of air—felt extremely cold against his jumpsuit. Hexlia noticed his teeth chattering and nodded.

“We have about thirty minutes to get back inside the ship before we catch hypothermia. And it’ll take about twenty five to make it to the engines, and another five to access the emergency airlock. They’ll never see us coming. But...we gotta hurry.”

She hefted a magnet gun onto her shoulder.

“Time to go.”

Hexlia *pushed* against the floor, *pulling* Jed after her as they floated out through the airlock and into the open expanse of space. The darkness of the void was tangible, the two of them enveloped in oblivion. The shimmering pinpricks of stars seemed to undulate in waves around them. Jed had never felt so *small* before.

“Don’t look too long out there. It’ll mess with your head.” Hexlia tugged on him, turning him to face the *Wayfarer*. The vacuum of space seemed too large to comprehend, but the *Wayfarer*’s enormity was comforting, and solid, and...*MOVING AWAY*. Jed’s breathing became shallow and panicked. He couldn’t speak, his lips blubbering like a fish. *I’m going to drift away and choke on my own CO2. She’s killed us. We’re going to di—*

Hexlia calmly fired her magnet gun at the passing bulk, and slowly reeled them in. Jed grabbed the warm, vibrating metal, almost in tears. Hexlia grinned wildly. “Congratulations, you completed your first jump!”

It didn’t get easier. With every push, fire, and reel they inched their way across the massive ship towards the rear, where he could see the faint white roar of the dimensional engines in the distance. He avoided looking at the infinite reach of stars surrounding them, not wanting to get dizzy and puke in the jumpsuit. Once he got past the mind-boggling terror of jumping, he was found a sort of calm within the motions Hexlia took them through.

He still needed to take a breather after every jump.

“So...” he stared at the ship, avoiding the stars and eye contact with Hexlia. “Kino’s your dad right? What happened to your other parent?”

For a second, Jed thought that something had gone wrong with the connection but then Hexlia spoke. “He left. Before I was born. While dad was pregnant.”

“Did you ever try to find him?” Jed asked, trying to temper the hope in his voice.

“Why would I? He chose to leave us, and Kino wouldn’t talk about him. My dad’s the only person who matters. The only who was actually there for me. So fuck that other guy. Just because I have his DNA doesn’t make him my dad.”

Something in Jed broke, as Hexlia grabbed him and *pushed* away from the ship again. Part of him wanted to pull his line from Hexlia’s belt and let himself drift off into the endless darkness.

“Did Kino ever...find someone else?”

“No, because he’s an idiot,” Hexlia hissed. “He was convinced that my other dad would just come

back. Just walk through the door one day like nothing had changed. That's why we never moved, even after he started showing his paintings in galleries. He was featured on Opeal's show for fuck's sake! The dumb bastard was so in love that he let it ruin him."

Her voice shook, wavering on the edge of tears as she shot the magnet gun and began to reel them in. Jed smiled faintly. *He never stopped loving me.*

"And because we never moved, we were sitting ducks for when Byaz came. He took over our sector. Most of the kids my age starting running drugs for him, smuggling weapons. The only person I could really talk to was that old man next door. All the other kids just tried to get me to join their sects. They would start little turf wars for fun and Byaz loved it. It wasn't safe to leave the house much. So mostly it was just the two of us. Dad painted and I couldn't wait to leave."

The reel stuttered but kept pulling them towards the ship. Hexlia's hands were shaking from the cold. "It wasn't long before they came for us. Big famous artist still living in the Web? We were nothing but a fucking target."

They landed on the ship and Hexlia faced him. "So the only reason I didn't kick you out on your ass is because we could *really* use that money. There's something strange about you and I don't want to trust you. But for some reason I do." She held his helmet to hers, staring at his face. He could feel the vibrations from her voice echo through the suits as well as through the coms. "There's something so *familiar* about you. Have we ever met before? Go to the same primary or something?"

Jedrian shook his head as much as he could. "No. We've never met."

Hexlia's facade broke, her arms shaking. "Then *who are you?* And why do *I know you?*"

You're my daughter. The words were right there on his lips. He just couldn't bring himself to say them.

He wrapped his arm around Hexlia and gently pushed them away from the ship. "We don't have much time left, right?" His body shuddered, wracked by the coldness of the void. "Let's get this done." Jed could feel her glaring at him.

"Asshole." She fired the magnet gun, reeling them towards the ship, the bright corona of the engines' wake just a few short jumps away.

The emergency airlock was right above the drive plume from the engines. There wasn't an intense heat like Jed was expecting, but instead the bright lights pulsing in waves from the ship almost looked like stardust. *A ship powered by magic.*

Hexlia motioned Jed over to the airlock's handle, large and never before been used. It took both of them leveraging against both each other and the ship's exterior to pry it loose. The door swung open and Jed lost grip, gasping as he was flung down towards the engines. With a soft yank, he swung back onto the ships' surface, Hexlia grabbing the five-foot line between them.

"Let's get inside before they notice this has been opened," she grunted as she pulled him closer.

They both collapsed in the airlock as the door shut and it began to run through the decontamination sequence.

In Jed's time at working on the dimensional engines, the engineers were always bored because they never had much to do other than sit around and wait for something to go wrong. He hoped in the twenty-five years since they'd found more things to do. And seeing as they were dealing with a massive fluctuation in the rifts' hue, maybe they wouldn't notice one airlock beginning to cycle through.

Even still, once the interior door hissed open, he expected the mousy scientist from earlier to be standing in front of them *tsking* as she got security to take them away. But the corridor was empty. Jed stepped forward, grateful to be under gravity once again. Hexlia hesitated.

"I got you here. That's the job." She fidgeted with her gloves, pulling one finger off at a time, then sliding them back on.

Jed cocked his head. She looked...scared. "Aren't you curious?"

Her laugh was the facade's laugh; indifferent and deflecting. But her eyes glowed with want. "Those old things? Nah. If you wanna get caught go right ahead, but I'm done."

"Hexlia." It was the first time he'd said her name aloud, and he could see the hope in her eyes. The situation was strange and not at all what he would've wanted. But in that moment, he saw that she desperately hoped for the impossible to be true. "Come with me."

She nodded, stepping forward with him into the darkness. Towards the eerie purple glow pulsing in the distance. Towards—hopefully—a better life.

(Featured image by [icedestroyer](#) on DeviantArt)

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