



THE CROSSOVER PARADOX

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BY

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CHAPTER 1

SUDDEN ARRIVAL

My name is Grey and I'm a student superhero.

Technically, Grey isn't the name on my ID, but since that name is also fake, I'm not sure why I should be limited by it. Grey is who I chose to be, and so far, he's been the most successful me I've ever been. The first year I was Grey, I made a lot of friends, enrolled in college (although that was under yet another name) and stopped an alien invasion.

Identity. It's a complex issue.

At the end of that first year, during the summer break, most of my new friends went back to families and home-worlds. Me, I don't really have either of those. My family and I, um, parted company when I was eight. As for a home, I spent the better part of a decade drifting from space station to space station, seeing the galaxy from a variety of orbital boxes. I survived. Prospered, on one level. Although I did get into a whole lot of trouble.

The most important thing to me during that summer break was not to fall back into old habits.

#

"There he is! Get him."

Well, so much for *that* hiding place. The gantry swayed as the two Cholbren climbed the ladder near my feet, and I power-crawled away as best I could. Far below us, the Cholbrens' boss shouted encouragement. To them, not me.

This was getting me nowhere. Really nowhere; I was rapidly running out of gantry, and there was no ladder at the far end. Just a long drop to the sloping roof of the Kirby class star cruiser docked below. Another gantry swung from the ceiling across from me, but it was a good twenty meters away. Earlier in the holiday I'd have just snapped out my grapnel gun and swung across, but the propellant cannister was long-since out of gas, so now I had no way to bridge the gap. A quick glance back, and the golden shoulder fur of the first of the Cholbren just crested the top of the ladder.

Can't go up, across or back. That only leaves one direction.

I pulled the grapnel from my belt, hooked the claw onto the gantry. No propellant, but I still had plenty of cable and the inertial reel on my belt should, in theory, slow my descent. We hadn't covered it in Grapnel Gun Basics at the Academy, maybe it was an Advanced topic, but I couldn't see a reason for it not to work. *No choice anyway.*

The second Cholbren topped the ladder. The gantry shifted, tipping slightly as the first Cholbren passed the mid-point. "Mr Bowrider wants a word with you," he growled.

"Popularity is a curse," I said and threw myself off the gantry.

I fell, faster than I hoped, but slower than I might, the cable paying out smoothly. When I hit the roof of the cruiser, it was with enough force to blast the air from my lungs, but not enough to break bones. By reflex, I clicked the gun control to release the claw and retract the cable. Immediately, I started to slide. There was just enough curve to the canopy of the cruiser to restart my acceleration ground-wards. I let the grapnel gun go, it clattered behind me, the cable still retracting.

Picking up speed, and spinning as I slid, I scrambled for handholds. I caught at one edge, a safety grip designed for extra-vehicular work. *Too fast.* My fingers slid across the hard edge; I couldn't secure my grip. All I did was add a little extra spin to my fall. The world whipped by in a whirl, as I slipped and clattered along. I bounced off something, suddenly airborne. When I landed it was on the smooth plexiglass of the main bridge window, I caught a glimpse of a startled Zalex crewman working on the bridge, but I spun by too fast to catch his response.

The front of the Kirby dropped away sharply after the end of the bridge section, I had to slow my descent before I hit that. I abandoned the idea of handholds, instead fought for drag, stretched myself as wide and as flat as I could, put as much surface area against the ship as I could manage. My slide slowed as the incline grew shallower. I was running out of spaceship, though. If I couldn't find a way to stop before I went over...

Now I needed a handhold, something, anything, to grab onto, but the sleek nose section of the cruiser was not obliging. I slowed, slowed... and then the world dropped away, as I reached, and plummeted over the edge.

I fell five meters, then came up sharp as my belt cut into my waist. That was going to leave a bruise. But my grapnel gun, still rattling along behind me had caught on something above, left me dangling ten meters above the docking bay floor. I hit the control on the reel to pay out cable, let it drop me to the deck. I lay panting, bruised and battered, on the cold deck of the docking bay, the Kirby loomed above me, its name painted across its hull in meter-high lettering. *The Sudden Arrival.* I liked it.

Booted feet pounded the deck. That and shouting told me the chase wasn't over yet. I cut the cable, no time to unsnag it, and clambered to my feet. *Where to now?*

Perhaps I could lose myself amongst the cargo pallets stacked against the near wall. I set off at a hobble, as the Cholbren boss and two more of his minions gave chase.

I grabbed the edge of the first pallet I reached, used it to swing around the corner.

There, looming out of nowhere was a wall of green muscle, a Brontom warrior, four arms braced, a grim set to his jaw.

I tried to stop, leaning back enough that I fell, my momentum carried me up to his shins, just as the Cholbren chasing me also rounded the corner.

The Brontom swung, connected, and the gang leader fell to the floor, unconscious.

Standing behind the Brontom, five station security officers braced their stun bolters ready to cover him. The Cholbren's minions staggered to a halt, hands raised in surrender.

I looked all the way up to the Brontom, grinning above me.

"Seventhyfour!" I said.

"Hey, Grey," he rumbled.

#

Station Security took over the problem for me. They cuffed the three at ground level and coaxed the two Cholbren off the gantry above. I let them worry about it, my work here was done. For once it hadn't needed to be a huge on-going caper; it made a nice change of pace.

"So, who were those guys?" Seventhyfour asked.

"Just some random mobsters. Part of the Bowrider smuggling operation out of Bantus. I recognised one of them, so I spoke to Security and offered to help bring them in. Funny, this time last year I was running from Station Security, now I'm actively working with them."

“We’ll make an upstanding citizen of you yet, Grey.”

“One thing at a time. I’m still working on ‘superhero’, ‘upstanding citizen’ sounds more like a post-graduate course.”

We watched the last of the Cholbren get jostled through the exit, on his way to the station brig.

I cast a sideways glance at Seventhyfour. “I have to ask. You know I have to ask, right?”

In the long and glorious history of victories achieved by the proud Brantom warrior race, Seventhyfour’s battle to hide his grin was not one. “Ask me what, Grey?”

I gestured broadly, taking in his outfit. He’d spent our first year in jeans and an x-shirt, but he’d clearly decided it was time to step it up. Most of the outfit was made of some tough but close-fitting material in a shade of deep purple, accented with dark blue on his arms and legs. It was armoured, or at least padded, in strategic locations. The upper shoulder pads and combat boots were chunky and black, good quality, but from a different aesthetic. At the centre of his chest, a golden circle with “P(k)” drawn in. “I mean, that. What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s my costume, Grey! I’d hoped to have one by the end of first year, but things kind of got in the way, you know?”

“Sure, I remember.”

“Even some freshers arrive with costumes and names in place. I couldn’t have turned up as a second-year with nothing. It would have been embarrassing.” He bit his lower lip. “You’ll be fine, of course, it doesn’t really apply to you, but for me, you know?”

I laughed. “I really should come up with something, I guess.” I was all in for the Academy, what it stood for and what it could offer me, but there was no getting away from it, the code names and costumes were still a bit silly.

“You’ll come up with something, Grey. I know you will. Oh! You haven’t seen the best bit.” He pressed a button on his collar, and a hood, no, a mask, folded out and over to cover his head and the top half of his face. “There? See. That’s so cool. And I’ve worked the Psionic Crown into the mask, too. Another toggle engages that when I need it. I don’t know if this is the final version, but I needed a starting point. What do you think? First impressions? Be honest.”

“It looks great. You might want to fine-tune the colours to go with your skin tones, I’m not sure if that blue works with your green, but yes. I like it. It’s a good start. Kind of classic.”

Seventhyfour beamed. “Thanks, man. It is, isn’t it?”

“Do I want to ask why you have PK here?” I tapped his emblem.

“Ah! That’s about my name. I’m thinking of going with Probability Kid.” He gestured broadly with his right hands for emphasis. “It works because of my precognition, and with my name being numbers and P of k being the probability of ‘k’. It does work, doesn’t it? You know we Brantom aren’t great with names.”

“Sure, Seventhyfour. Although, ‘kid’? Don’t you want something cooler? Captain? Doctor? No, not Doctor. ‘Probability Man’?”

“I can’t call myself Captain, it might be years before I earn my commission. And as for ‘Man’, Brantom don’t technically have genders, although most of us do identify with one. I think having ‘Man’ in my name might confuse people.”

I nodded. “That’s a fair point. Okay. Well, we can think about it, we have time. But, yeah, Probability Kid, I like it. Is that what you want me to call you?”

“On missions, yes please, but when it’s just us, or

around the Academy, Seventhyfour is still fine. Or.” His face fell a little, I could see even with his mask up. “Yeah, about that. I have some news.”

“More exciting than your new name and costume?”

“No,” Seventhyfour said. “Unfortunately, not. Come on, let’s head topside. There are some people I want you to meet. Or, well, there are some people you probably *should* meet, anyway.” He pressed the button to stow his mask and we headed off to the hangar-level lifts.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen over summer?” I asked.

“No. No, summer was great. Got to visit with my old vat mates, check up on how they’re doing. They’re deploying out again next month, but that’s the life of a Brantom clone warrior, you go where you’re needed.”

“You certainly do. Thanks for showing up today. How did you find me?”

He rallied a little, waggled his eyebrows. “I have my methods.”

Seventhyfour was a mutant Brantom; not only was he a few centimeters taller than he should be, but he had psychic powers too. “You had a premonition about me? You’re getting better at that.”

He rumbled a soft chuckle. “No, actually. I saw the station alert on the security feed and figured I’d find you in the middle of it. It’s good to see you, Grey.”

“It’s good to be seen.”

The lift arrived and we stepped inside. Seventhyfour gestured through the top of the control field, and the elevator dutifully ascended.

As it slowed to a stop, Seventhyfour squared himself up to his full height. “Okay, Grey, here goes.” He stepped out of the lift and as he did, hunched his shoulders, dropped his head a little. “There was one development over sum-

mer. My superiors were impressed with my report and decided the Academy might be a useful place to put other Brontom mutants.”

He ducked into a cramped coffee shop, made all the smaller by the presence of three more Brontom clones. I'd never seen so many in one place before, four Seventhyfour's in all. At first glance, identical apart from their uniforms and Seventhyfour's slouch which made him notably shorter than his duplicates.

We slid into their booth as Seventhyfour made introductions. “Grey, I'd like you to meet Nine, Two and Three. Sergeant, this is Grey.”

The Brontom whose chest emblem was a large red 9 looked down at me. “Four has told us a great deal about you, Grey. It's a pleasure to meet you.” Even his voice was the same as Seventhyfour's.

He extended his lower right hand, and I shook it, somewhat bewildered. “Likewise.”

“They have signed up as new students at the Academy this year,” Seventhyfour said.

“Oh, great. Are you precognitive like Seventhyfour is, Nine?”

“Please, call me *Sergeant* Nine, it's my rank, but also my chosen 'hero identity'”

“Clever.”

“Two has been designated ‘Twin Strike’, and Three as ‘Triple Threat’. To answer your question, no. Our... our mutations,” he stumbled over the word, “are all different. My apologies, it is not a subject we Brontom speak easily about.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend,” I said. Offending a group of full-grown warrior clones was *incredibly low* on my to-do list.

Sergeant Nine shook his head. “No apology necessary.

We must adapt, particularly if we are now to study how best to use our... individual... abilities. My body temperature runs higher than it should, and if I focus..." He held out his upper left hand. A small yellow flame danced in his palm. "Like so."

"Cool," I said.

One of the cafe wait staff, a Polifan girl, wings furled in the cramped space, approached our table. Nine hastily closed his fist to extinguish the flame.

The conversation dissolved into a round of drinks orders, and the girl left to collect them.

"You're going to love the Academy," I said. "There's always something going on, most of it... strange. It keeps you on your toes, right, Seventhyfour?"

He nodded but said nothing. He was being noticeably quiet.

I tried another conversational line. "I'm looking forwards to trying out some new classes this year. I've applied for some pretty exciting ones. Have you selected your courses for this term yet, Twin Strike?"

The Brantom with crossed swords on her chest emblem cast a glance towards Nine before answering. "I am beginning with combat and reconnaissance classes to assess the relevance to standard Brantom tactics," she said.

"Sure. Okay. Have you considered branching out a bit? There's so much more to learn, things I'd never even have thought of before I went. I can see the combat classes being appealing, but there's a load of other options."

Triple Threat said, "I will be assessing the survival and combat engineering instructionals. We have most of the bases covered between us."

They were missing the point of the Academy to my mind, but that was something I hadn't realised at first

either. They'd learn. Or not.

I looked at Seventhyfour, to see if he'd leap in and save the conversation, but he sat close-lipped looking kind of miserable. It was up to me then. They weren't biting on Academy small talk, and it's pointless discussing the weather on a space station. That only really left Galactic News. "They say piracy is on the rise again out east," I tried.

"Brontom command is aware. To comment further could impact operational security," Nine said.

"Ah." That was it, I was out.

I finished up my coffee in silence, none of the others seemed inclined to lead the chat.

"Well, it was great to meet you all," I said, at last. "And I'm sure Seventhyfour will enjoy having some more Brontom around the place. When you know which accommodation block you're in, be sure to tell us, and Seventhyfour and I will come over for a visit."

"That will not be necessary," Sergeant Nine said. "I have spoken to the Academy administration, and Four has been reassigned to billet with us."

"Seventhyfour? I thought we were—?"

"I'm sorry, Grey," Seventhyfour shrugged his four-shoulder shrug. "I was looking forward to sharing again, but I have... my squad needs me more."

"Oh."

"Brontom work best when together. It is our design," Nine said. The other three nodded in unison.

CHAPTER 2

WELCOME HOME

The flight from Meanwhile Station to the Academy was uneventful. I'd hoped to spend the time catching up with Seventhyfour, I suddenly had a lot of questions to ask, but Sergeant Nine seemed set on treating the trip like a military operation and sat his squad together. I was disappointed, but there would be time to check in with Seventhyfour later. Nine couldn't keep him bottled up permanently, right?

We disembarked, and I followed everyone else out through the terminal building. The Academy's climate was warm, tempered by a sea breeze blowing across the nearby beach. The sky was wide and blue, and the sun welcomed us warmly. Did I pause before stepping out into the quad to check that the sky wasn't doing anything strange? Yes. I don't know if I'll ever trust places without a proper ceiling, but I'd developed coping mechanisms, and stepping into the quad didn't immediately send me into a panic attack. This time.

It helped when I had distractions, and the first day of term at the Academy could distract anyone. The colourful costumes, a few thousand excited happy students from a dozen different species. I spied a few familiar faces among them, exchanged waves and greetings. My chest swelled. The space stations of the galaxy might be my natural habitat, but the Justice Academy was my *home*.

As the crowd moved around, I caught a brief glimpse of Dez. I couldn't hear her clearly over the general hubbub, but she looked to be engaged in a sing-off with a Frantium student. Dez's reptilian tail tapped in time to the beat as she wailed into her microphone, her rival retreating before her. I waved, but she didn't respond, too wrapped up in her song. No doubt she would crush it and her opponent. I couldn't help smiling, even as the flow of the crowd hid her again.

"Grey!" A bolt of light flew over the heads of the assembled students, gliding to a halt above and in front of me. Pilvi's hair glowed white, and her eyes blazed as she grinned. Like Seventhirtyfour, she'd decided to lean into the whole costume thing. Hers was a sky-blue body suit with white shoulders, gloves and boots. A single yellow stroke cut across her body, from her left shoulder to her right hip. "What do you think?"

"Could you...?" I gestured down towards the ground.

"Oh! Sorry, yes." She floated down, but didn't quite land, I noticed. "Better?"

"Much, thanks. I like the new costume, very nice. A beam of light through clouds?"

"Yep. It honours where my powers came from, and who I was." She spun in the air. "It's so good to be back here. Can't wait to get started. I've spent the summer practising my flying, I think I'm going to ace the flight skills course."

"Given your approach to your studies, I don't doubt it, Pilvi."

"Call me Säde."

"Sarday?"

She laughed. "Not even close. Shorten the vowels. Säde. It's an old Finnish name meaning 'beam'; like a beam of light. I thought it made a good superhero name. Don't tell

Dez before I do though.”

“Wouldn’t, if I could.”

“Oh there’s... sorry Grey, I need to go say hi to... I’ll catch you later.”

“Sure thing. I—”

Pilvi hurtled skywards again, I kept my gaze down.

I shook my head. “Seventhyfour is Probability Kid, Pilvi is Säde,” I muttered to myself. If everyone was picking codenames this year things were about to get confusing. “Seventhyfour, Probability Kid. Pilvi, Säde.”

A burst of green flame illuminated the front of the Hall of Justice emanating from whoever was in charge of corralling the first years. They began calling out names. I had my accommodation sorted already, so I didn’t need to hang around for that. Instead, I forged on through the crowd, looking for the last two members of my team.

I spotted Avrim’s grey-feathered wings first. He tended to keep them furled in company, but they were out now, he held them in an arc, wingtips forward.

“Avrim!” I called out.

He beckoned me forward.

“Hey, Grey,” he said. “Don’t step on Gadget Dude. He’s decided that the middle of the first-day ruckus is the perfect place to do a spot of kit-bashing.” He nodded to the ground in front of him.

Gadget Dude, the blue Zalex of our group, sat cross-legged on the ground, protected from being trampled by the curve of Avrim’s wings. Surrounded by a spread of motors and circuit boards, Gadget Dude hummed happily to himself as he combined pieces together seemingly at random.

Avrim rolled his eyes. “There’s no talking to him now, he’s in the zone. But I’ll tell him you were here.”

“How was your summer?” I asked.

“Pretty good. Visited the family cabin on Artamantis, spent a couple of weeks there sailing the thermals. Just feeling the wind on my wings.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Yeah. Quite the change of pace after Nymanteles. I didn’t get shot once.”

I grimaced. “Sorry again about that. How is your shoulder?” I asked.

“Fully healed, thanks. Your leg?”

“Same.” Our trip to Nymanteles had been... fraught. I looked down at Gadget Dude. “What is he making? Did he say anything?”

“No idea. I’ve never any idea. Sometimes not even when he’s finished. No doubt it will be astonishing, at least until it breaks,” Avrim said dryly.

“No doubt. Good to see you both. I’m going to stow my things in my room. Oh! I meant to ask. You’re still Avrim, right?”

“What?”

“I’ve spoken to Seventhyfour and Pilvi so far, and they’re both using codenames this year. Seventhyfour is Probability Kid and Pilvi is Säde. Just checking you’re still Avrim?”

“I’m still Avrim. I’ve not worked out what my ‘thing’ is yet, hard to find a codename without a thing.”

“I know what you mean.”

I left Avrim to continue his watch over Gadget Dude and headed to my dorm. My room this year would not be as grand, but I’d been looking forward to having Seventhyfour across the corridor again. Instead, I’d be sharing with strangers. I gave a wave to a couple of them as I forged through the shared kitchen. I’d do the introductions thing later.

###

The comm light on my console was blinking when I got in. I slumped into my desk chair and gestured to accept the call. The woman who appeared on screen was around sixty. She wore an expensive business suit, her steel-grey hair pulled back from her sharp-angled face. From the window behind her, I could see it was night wherever she was calling from.

“Mrs. Gravane, hello, this is a surprise,” I said, sitting up straight again.

“Mr. Grey. I trust you are well. I’m afraid this is not a social call,” she said. “I have news. I don’t know that it directly affects you, but I feel you should be made aware.”

“Is this about Mirabor?” I asked.

My relationship with Mrs. Gravane was a complicated one. I’d spent a good part of the previous year impersonating her son, Mirabor. First, because he asked me to, then later when she had, to cover her son’s kidnapping. I’d eventually mounted a rescue mission to the world of Nymanteles only to discover Mirabor had faked his own abduction. Oh, and he’d used an alien device called the Ascension Machine to give himself and others superpowers that were slowly driving him insane. Exhibit A, he’d started calling himself ‘Doctor Gravestone’. He and his alien Vadram allies were intent on some dastardly scheme or other. My friends and I had stopped all that and captured Mirabor so that he could get treatment. Mrs. Gravane had been grateful and gifted me with a scholarship so I could continue my studies.

But I’d told you all that already.

“Yes,” she said. “Nine days ago, there was an attempt made to break him out of the facility that had been caring for him. An attempt that only failed because my son had been transferred to another location only that morning.”

“Is Mirabor okay? Where is he now?”

“I am told he remains well, and secure. As to his location, the fewer people who know, the better.” To most, her face would have been an impassive mask, but I’d seen her worried for her son before. The slight frown, the way she refolded her hands on the desk—a fidget she would never have displayed in normal circumstances.

“Of course, I get that. That’s worrying news. Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

“Continue with your studies, Mr. Grey. I have no intention of calling you away for little adventures this year. However, I felt it important that you knew of the attempt because all three of the perpetrators exhibited powers. While I do not believe an attempt to extract my son should have any implications for you, the confluence of superpowers and your association with Mirabor... I felt it was my duty to warn you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gravane. Can you tell me who I should be on the lookout for?”

“I have the file in front of me now. Two of them were well known to Galactic Police. A cyborg Welatak who goes by the name ‘The Incapacitor’—” Mrs. Gravane sighed. “Really? Very well. ‘The Incapacitor’ can disrupt technology and caused much of the facility’s security grid to deactivate. A Germile who, for reasons that elude me, uses the name ‘Big Bang’ kept most of the facility security forces occupied, letting the third member of the team infiltrate the hospital and reach what had been Mirabor’s room.”

My console pinged as two new files arrived—detailed descriptions of The Incapacitor and Big Bang. “Thanks,” I said. “Do we have nothing on the last one?”

“Very little. She was spotted several times during the assault, but the descriptions were largely unhelpful. Human, female, dark hair, early- to mid- twenties. The only consistent factor is that she laughed frequently. All of the

people who reported seeing her said she was laughing.”

“Laughing?”

“Yes. Apparently, this has led to some referring to her as ‘Laugh Riot’ but I’m not sure we should condone such a thing.”

“No, probably not. It’s an odd team,” I said, skimming through the profiles. “Incapacitor and Big Bang look like mercenaries. How would they know Mirabor? Has, I mean, awkward question, but has the Gravane Corporation ever hired them before?”

“Certainly not!” Her indignation flashed away quickly, then she admitted, “We have been known to access certain legally ambiguous resources on occasion, but never any with powers.”

“Okay, so their link to Mirabor is either through the Vadram, or this third member, Laugh Riot.” I jotted a note down.

“I know that look,” she said, holding up an admonishing finger. “I did not bring this to your attention for you to investigate, Grey. I do not authorise such an investigation. I simply felt it best to inform you, should these events somehow reflect upon you.”

I shrugged. “Okay, Mrs. Gravane. I shall leave it alone. Thank you for the warning.”

“Then, warning delivered, I must return to other business. Study hard. I expect a return on my investment.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After she hung up, I stared at the two profiles. Not the start to the year I’d hoped for. But maybe Mrs. Gravane was right. There was no reason that these three would come after me, right?