

# **The Starlight Contingency**

**By: Kyoko M.**

*For Erica Rodela and Sharon Sibley, who believed in my work even when I didn't.*

## CHAPTER ONE

## DUKE

The binoculars in my hands were stolen.

It wasn't hard. The clerk had been swamped on a Saturday night when it was still warm and people populated the street like schools of fish in the ocean. Besides, Scarlett was perfect for distraction if he hadn't been anyway. The process is simple, almost childishly simple. Scope out the shop two days ahead of time. Mind the cameras. Browse. Remain casual. Ask the clerk questions about the products, make it look like you're gonna make a purchase. Clerks think that shoplifters avoid eye contact and immediately head for the corners of the store. Those are the amateurs. The kids looking for cheap thrills. The poor single moms struggling to make ends meet. The pathological liars.

We weren't like them.

A leather jacket would be too obvious. Cargo pants too. My favorite was a pair of old, ratty jeans that hung low off my ass. The clerk was a straight guy so he wouldn't be paying attention to my ass when I carefully slipped the binoculars inside the back pocket after skillfully removing the tag with my pocketknife. 3.2 seconds. I had down to an art.

My eyes met Scarlett's and she knew the deed was done. We weren't twins, but sometimes people thought we were because we had so many non-verbal cues. Thieving wasn't like in the movies. We didn't have elaborate schemes and escape plans. We didn't wear rubber masks with nuns or presidents on them. Though we did wear all black at night robberies. That was actually pretty useful.

My mind reeled itself back in to the task at hand. We had been planning this haul for a month. No more petty crooks. Big leagues. But more money also meant more time in jail and so we had to be careful. Cautious. Smart. Direct.

"Traffic?"

"Nothing. It is three am, after all," Scarlett replied with a mild tone in her voice, sticking out her hand for the binoculars. I handed them to her and lowered my hands to the belt. The darkness of the alley concealed us. I didn't need light. I felt the tools one by one with my fingertips to check that they were all there and breathed a sigh of relief. Things would be fine. Fine.

"Alright, let's cross. Head low, casual."

"Yes, boss," she snorted, tucking the binoculars in her own belt. I walked across the street first, scanning for cars or people. It was a cold October night and no one was around. I liked it that way, even when we weren't working. The rear entrance to the Jared's—embarrassing, I know—was directly across from a pet store, which provided us with cover. No cameras on this street, but there were some two stoplights down, which is why we were on foot tonight.

Scarlett came over a couple minutes after me. I pried the rear entrance open, having already turned off the alarms. Cold silence and shiny linoleum greeted me. I breathed in and out and walked inside, holding the door for my sister. I motioned for her to put her ski mask on and then did so myself. I shut the door and locked it before doing a quick scan of the employee lounge. Everything was laid out just like Scarlett said. Perfect.

There were a lot of ways to crack a safe, but we had found the fastest method was through using a torchlight. The modern safe of a place like Jared wasn't spectacular. It sat in the corner of the room like a scab on a bended knee, short, squat, unwanted. Like most retail stores, there wouldn't be a sizeable amount of cash inside because most customers paid by card or check, but some bills were better than none. But that wasn't all we were here for anyway.

Scarlett burned through the metal door of the safe and flicked the torchlight off, her gloved fingers tugging at the mostly melted lid to reveal the drawer inside. I unfolded a bag and dumped the drawers from the cash registers inside, calculating that we had maybe two thousand dollars in cash. Not bad.

We walked out of the back room to the front display and split up. She went to the far side of the shop near the window, staying low, and I worked on the alarms set up on each display case. Once they were open, I stuffed the important pieces in individual sacks: necklaces first, bracelets second, rings last. Anything else wouldn't be worth the trouble because we only had another two minutes to get the hell out of dodge. Scarlett called me a Five Minute Man. I found that both disturbing and irritating, but it was still better than my usual nickname.

I lifted my eyes towards her to let her know I had finished my half, but then I saw it. Sleek and shiny like a Great White cruising through the surf, aching for prey. My mouth felt as if it had been filled with sand, making it difficult to talk.

"Lettie, drop!" I shouted as the cop car glided past the window. She hit the floor with a loud thunk and I did as well, panting for air as panic gripped my chest. I froze, listening for the sound of the tires scraping against the road but heard nothing. Slowly, I tilted my head upward to see the cop car had stopped in front of the building. I caught a glimpse of two patrol officers climbing out and one of them touching his walkie talkie. As soon as both of them shut the doors to their car, I hollered at my sister.

"Go!"

Scarlett leapt to her feet and raced towards me. The officers spotted us and broke into a run. I slung the loot across my shoulder and led the way out of the shop, kicking the door open once I'd slid the lock back. Our feet punished the ground but it wasn't enough. I could hear the unintelligible jabber of their radio as they called in the robbery and ran even faster, turning down alleys left and right until we reached our escape route. Three streets and then straight into the woods. Five minutes and we'd be home free.

A couple of cars blared their horns as we pounced into the street and Scarlett had to do a front hand flip over the hood of one that didn't stop in time. Sirens cut through the air, meaning that they had a second unit nearby, further mucking up our plans. The ski mask stifled my heaving breaths and I wanted desperately to take it off as we crossed the second street, climbing over stone dividers over the freeway.

We reached the last and most dangerous road and had to stop as an eighteen-wheeler thundered past. My foot hit the concrete and then everything flashed white for a second. At first, I thought I'd been hit by a car and died, but then I heard the unmistakable roar of helicopter blades and squinted up into the sky to see a police copter.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" my sister spat, reading my mind.

I shook my head. "Keep going anyway."

We crossed the last street and dove into the woods, eluding the spotlight for a few precious moments by hiding beneath a rotting log. Dirt and loam clung to my ski mask,

making it even harder to breathe, and mud clumped on the front of my pants. We flattened ourselves as much as possible as the copter continued searching for us in the dark but I knew we couldn't stay there. I could see the pair of cops who had spotted us crossing the second street. They would find us in mere minutes.

"This wasn't part of the plan," Scarlett hissed, her brown eyes slicing into mine.

"I know," I snapped. "Will you just give me a second to think?"

"Sure. You take your second and the cops crawl up our asses. Where did they even get a chopper? How are we this unlucky?"

"No one gets away with everything." I craned my neck to peer at the forest behind us, trying to remember where it led. Then it hit me.

"The Rosewood mansion."

Scarlett stared at me. "You're kidding me, right?"

"They haven't spotted us yet. If we make a break for it, we should be able to get on the grounds before they see where we went."

"Duke, we don't know what's in there. We don't know how their security system works. For all we know, they have attack dogs with lasers on their heads!"

"We move on the count of three."

She swore at me, pointing a long finger in my face. "Duke, this is a stupid idea."

"One..."

"We're gonna get caught!"

"Two..."

"If you say three, I'll punch you in the nuts."

"Three!"

I jumped to my feet and bolted. Scarlett let out an unearthly growl and came tearing after me. Branches smacked my chest, leaves scattered beneath my feet, and the cold air made my eyes tear up but I kept going until the sound of sticks crunching and my ragged breath were all I could hear. A soundtrack of desperation and the need for freedom. A snide little voice in the back of my head told me it was pointless, that we'd get caught and locked up, but I didn't listen. Maybe God had one trick left up his sleeve and he'd slide it to me under the table.

The Rosewood mansion was surrounded on all sides by a four-foot brick wall with black fencing atop it. Lanterns adorned the front gate, allowing me a point to focus on as we ran. Not that we were going to use it. One does not simply walk into Mordor, nor does one simply waltz into one of the most expensive homes in the state.

My lungs ached and my hands were shaking as I hoisted my sister up over the fence in the backyard, straining to hear where the helicopter had gone. I saw dashes of light in the forest and followed the skyline to find the flying mammoth thirsty for our capture. Briefly, I wondered if there were families at home eating buckets of popcorn and watching us like we were the circus, their entertainment for the night. They were programmed to hate us, the bad guys, the criminals, the scumbags. Blind mice searching for their cheese, sightless eyes glued to the tube. Bastards.

Thankfully, no attacks dogs with lasers on their heads greeted us. If anything, we might have tripped a silent alarm triggered by cameras but I hadn't seen any wiring in the fences to indicate otherwise. It was possible that the mansion itself was wired instead of the surrounding premises.

The spotlight hit the grass four feet away from us and I shoved my sister forward, pointing to the wooden porch connected to the third story floor. We scurried over to it and flattened ourselves against the wall, praying that they hadn't seen us yet. The light veered back and forth on the ground like a drunk driver, drifting closer, making my heartbeat drown out the sound of the helicopter blades beating in the air. It passed over the porch and the slats let in some of the blinding light, shocking my dilated pupils to tiny stars, and then it vanished.

Scarlett's shoulder bumped mine as she slumped down, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath enough to make a smartass comment.

"Well, wasn't *that* fun?"

"Exceptionally," I replied, yanking the horrid ski mask off my face and mopping up the sweat dripping down my skin. Once clean, I pulled it back on and crooked a finger at her.

"The cops will be searching the premise in no time. Let's get inside and get supplies so we can move on."

Nodding, she pressed her face to the plate glass window of the first floor. I watched as she scanned what she could see of their kitchen.

"What kind of system?"

"A damn good one," she admitted, flipping her black hair over one shoulder. The ponytail had come loose during our escape. She'd have to tuck it under the mask, which she hated to do.

"From what I can see, there's a security pad on all the doors. Cutting the power might give us enough time for a hit-it-and-quit it, but not much else. It might be on a separate power source."

"We'll have to risk it. We've got to get out of here before the cops come. Let's just hope none of the Rosewoods are night owls."

I took out my flashlight and crept around the long brick wall, searching for the power line. It was about three feet behind the porch, nestled just out of range of the garden and the tree line. I reached into the last pocket on the left side of my belt, lamenting the fact that I'd have to use a miniature charge. These things weren't cheap and I'd only gotten three of them over the course of the past year. Emergencies only.

"Spot me," I said, sticking the flashlight back into my pocket and climbing up the pole. This was private property so the pole had thin metal sticking out to serve as steps for maintenance purposes. I ascended as quickly as possible, occasionally checking for the helicopter's current position, and then withdrew the flashlight and charge.

I stuck the small explosive on the transformer between the lines leading towards the mansion. It would shut the power off for about a minute or so and then the back up generator would kick in, but we'd already be inside at that point. I set the charge and climbed down, motioning for Scarlett to follow me to beneath the porch for safety. We both plugged out ears just before a muted pop crackled through the backyard, punctuated by sparks and a bright flash. Power out.

Scarlett went to the sliding glass door and flashed a nervous look in my direction. I nodded once. She picked the lock and gingerly slid the door back as I held my breath. Silence. Thank God.

She crept inside and I followed, closing the door and pulling the curtains shut. We both stood still, breathing in light unity, ears straining to hear any commotion in the

house. I estimated that there were probably about ten rooms on this floor, maybe more in the basement. The main goal was to get a set of wheels, meaning that we were heading for the garage on the other side of the compound. The cops would be looking for people on foot, not in a vehicle, until they found out that we'd broken in to the mansion, and by then it would be too late.

I found a knife rack on the counter and took the butcher knife and a long, slender knife that fit on my belt. Scarlett took three of the smaller ones. Neither of us intended to kill or maim anyone, but they were good for intimidation.

I held the long knife in my left hand as I started past the den and down the hallway, mindful of every creak in the hardwood floor. There were four closed doors on either side. I stared at them, keeping my steps as light as possible. They looked like gigantic mouths waiting to swallow us whole.

We were past three of them when I heard an unmistakable click indicating that someone had turned a light on. I whirled to see the light at the end of the hall was on and heard a doorknob turn. Two choices: run or hide.

Cursing, I opened the door to my right and waved Scarlett in. We darted inside and closed it, praying no one heard us. I pressed my ear to the door, listening. No footsteps. I couldn't tell if that was good or bad.

"Duke," Scarlett whispered, but I shushed her. She grabbed my arm and squeezed, saying my name again.

I glared at her. "I can't hear, what are you--?"

She was looking at the bed. I shut my mouth, my throat going dry as I realized there was an elderly woman sitting there staring at us.

Immediately, I lowered the knife to my side and held out my other hand towards her.

"Ma'am, I need you to stay calm. We're not going to hurt you. We just need a car and we'll be out of here, I swear."

"They're waiting to take us," the old woman said. I glanced at Scarlett. She shrugged. I kept my voice low as I addressed the woman.

"What?"

"Waiting and waiting. Long time. Cold, where they are. Dark too. It's all they know."

Her voice was soft and trembling, but the Jamaican accent made it sound cryptic. The darkness made it hard to tell, but she looked to be nearly eighty years old. No wonder her mind had gone. She didn't seem upset by our presence. It almost felt like she had been expecting us.

Scarlett decided to try to get her to focus. "Ma'am, where is the garage on this property? Is it connected to the house?"

The old woman put her bare feet on the floor and walked towards my sister. Scarlett tensed, not sure of her intentions, but the old woman lifted her frail hands and touched her hair—ran her fingers down the black satin and the streaks of red at my sister's forehead.

"Chosen, you two. Never thought I'd see the day."

Scarlett glanced at me. "What the hell is she talking about?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but then a screeching sound tore through the silence like a knife through a veil. I clapped my hands over my ears, nearly keeling over at the

volume of the alarm. It was unlike anything I'd ever heard—louder than ambulance sirens, louder than police sirens, damn near louder than God himself.

“What is that?” Scarlett shouted, panicking.

I shook my head. “I don't know! Just hide! Now!”

I ran to the closet and pulled the double doors back, stuffing myself inside next to the fur coats and silk pajamas. Through the slats, I could see Scarlett flattening herself on the carpet and crawling beneath the bed. The old woman didn't move from her spot as if she were deaf, staring at the door as if expecting something.

Seconds later, a bald black man opened the door and spotted her, wrapping his large hands around her forearms.

“C'mon, Nana, we've got to get ready.”

He pulled her into the hallway and disappeared. What the hell was going on? Why were they leaving? Had the police notified them to our presence?

I could hear some sort of commotion from the hallway—panicked voices, footsteps, the clamor of dishes hitting the floor, and the urge to run increased tenfold. I closed my eyes and counted to ten, trying to slow my heartbeat but my pulse wouldn't cooperate. It beat hard and fast in my throat, along my tongue like the salty flavor of sweat, clinging. I couldn't think with this damn alarm slamming against my eardrums, plowing the sanity from my skull.

I felt the carpet beneath my muddy boots start to vibrate. At first, I thought it was because of the alarms, but when I knelt and pressed my gloved hand to the ground, I knew it wasn't them. It rumbled like thunder had been trapped underneath the house. What the hell was going on?

The rumbling abruptly changed to shaking, unlike anything I had ever experienced. I pressed my hand to the wall on my left, trying to stay on my feet as the quaking worsened and shoes began falling off the shelf over my head. An earthquake in Alexandria, Virginia? Impossible.

The alarms and the falling shoes almost blocked out the sound of something outside of the house clicking and whirring like the innards of a clock. I stumbled back over to the closet doors to see the window on the far wall, ignoring the painful bumps on the head from boxes sliding off the shelf as I saw something amazing. Huge metal panels shot up from below and clicked into place over the window, swallowing me in complete darkness.

The house was...*transforming*.

It didn't matter if we got caught any more. We had to get out of here. I shoved the closet doors open and turned on my flashlight. Scarlett crawled out from beneath the bed, her eyes red and wet with tears. I pulled her to her feet, my voice nearly giving out because I had to shout so loud.

“We have to get out of here. Come on!”

I went for the door, which had slammed shut after the man and old woman left, but it wouldn't open. I pushed my sister back and kicked the doorjamb once, twice, a third time, but it didn't budge. Scarlett joined me, kicking in unison at the white oak until it splintered. I stuck my hand in the hole we'd made over the doorknob and ripped a chunk of the wood out. The flashlight shook in my hands as metal glinted out from beneath the wood. Solid steel. Escape was impossible.

We stared at each other, the light allowing me only a glimpse of her face, but I knew our expressions were the same. End of the line.

I wrapped my arms around her and knelt, kissing the top of her head.

“I’m sorry, Lettie. I’m so sorry,” I whispered hoarsely, hot tears tracing the lines of my cheeks as the quaking and clicking and screaming alarms worsened.

An explosion rocked beneath the house and before I blacked out, I felt one sensation.

Flying.

\*

## CHAPTER TWO

## SCARLETT

*I fucking hated this job.*

*I probably should have been more grateful. Not many sixteen year olds in Alexandria were fortunate enough to have a job, especially not at a place like Panera. They were usually stuck with drive thru jobs and unpaid internships. Raking leaves. Mowing lawns. Prostitution. Whatever.*

*But repetition is repetition, whether you were the President of the United States or just some unlucky bastard working a minimum wage job, and that was why I hated this one. With high school no longer hanging over my head like a hormone-filled piñata, they gave me morning hours most of the time and it was always the same damn thing day after day. Percy opens the doors, turns on the lights. We count down the safe. I wash the windows. Mop the floors. Turn on the ovens. Turn on all the machines. Wrap my apron around my waist, tie my hair back into a bun, and act like I have no personality. Smile at the creeps who tip me a quarter or check out my breasts as they swipe their cards. The only joy I get is the look on their faces when I tell them I'm only sixteen. Assholes.*

*Duke hated my job, too, but he knew we needed the money and being a hot Korean chick usually got me good tips. Not that I really believed I was all that good looking. My claim comes from experience more than self-recognition. Older guys tended to treat me as if I were their ultimate fantasy, but only because they knew nothing about me. They knew nothing of my potty mouth, or the illegal tattoo of a butterfly on the inside of my left thigh, or the way I loved the smell of menthols but hated the smell of Marlboros. They only knew what their minds wanted—the stereotypical Asian girl that their TV shows and illegally downloaded porn told them. Obsessed with tiny phones and K-Pop bands and large cocks. The good life, apparently.*

*Luckily, I had managed to charm my way into getting a night shift. I liked the people who cruised the late hours because they were much more relaxed. They weren't in a hurry to get their food like the morning rush. It was refreshing.*

*Five minutes before closing time, Percy had gone to the bathroom. I snuck my mp3 player—a birthday present from my big brother—out of my apron and poked in the headphones into my ears so I could listen to a song by the Kills. Before long, the broom in my hand became a microphone and I was thrashing around the empty restaurant like an emo kid on a Simple Plan binge. So not sexy. It was mildly reminiscent of someone having a seizure. But I didn't care. I had air conditioning and a few bills in my wallet and frantic lyrics rushing through my veins. That was living in my book.*

*“Nice moves.”*

*I whirled, popping the headphones out of my ears upon hearing Percy's amused, but authoritative voice. I flashed him an apologetic smile. “Sorry, it...got quiet. I was kinda bored.”*

*He shook his head. “Nah, 's cool. You gotta cut loose every once in a while.”*

*I relaxed a little. “Y-Yeah, I guess so. Is everything ready?”*

*Percy glanced around the shop, his blue eyes noting things. “Yeah, looks like we're good. But...can I ask you something?”*

*“Yeah, you can ask me anything. You're the boss, after all.”*

*“We’ve been working together, what? Four and a half months, right?”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“I don’t know about you, but I’ve always, y’know...kinda liked you. I was wondering if you just wanted to hang out for a while and talk. We never get to talk that much outside of work and I thought it’d be nice.”*

*My cheeks filled with hot blood. It was easy refusing assholes who knew nothing about me. This was completely new. I had never thought about Percy that way—partially because of his name (Let’s just say it’s not something you’d want to call out during sex) and partially because I wasn’t really dating these days. After all, any guy I picked would eventually find out about my parents and how I lived alone with my brother in a crappy loft above a Laundromat.*

*I couldn’t look at him while I talked. I just couldn’t. So I stared at his belt buckle instead.*

*“What, do you mean like...now? Like right now?”*

*He shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t have anything better to do. You?”*

*I shook my head. “Just going home and getting dinner, that’s all. Maybe just for a while.”*

*Percy’s office was tiny. They had converted an old broom closet from the shop before this one. He sat in his chair and I sat on the desk, trying my best not to drum my fingers nervously even though the conversation went well. Thirty minutes flew by without my notice, but I still felt on edge about something and I didn’t know quite what it was. Then again, Percy was three years older than me and there was no way my brother would approve. He always had the final say about everything I did.*

*“I should probably get going,” I said with a long-suffering sigh, glancing at the closed door. Chipped white paint, rusted metal underneath. It had been through a lot.*

*Percy glanced at his watch. “Already? Your brother keeps you on a short leash, huh?”*

*I bristled. “I’m not on a leash. He’s just careful. So am I. Besides, I have to walk home from here. Bus fare’s too expensive.”*

*“Fair enough, but you know what I mean. Part of the reason you’re so nervous around me—” He held up a hand, noting the offended look on my face. “—yeah, I noticed—is because you’re worried he won’t approve. I don’t blame you.”*

*“Then why’d you ask if you already knew?”*

*He stood up, surprising me with an intense look. “Cause I do like you, and I think you should decide for yourself if you like me too instead of letting him do it. But for the record...”*

*He leaned forward, tilting my chin upward. “I think you do like me.”*

*He kissed me. I could have stopped him, but I didn’t. Mostly because I wanted to know what being kissed felt like. He tasted like coffee—bittersweet. I didn’t know what to do. Should I touch him? Should I open my mouth wider? Should I be a good girl and tell him to stop? What the hell was I supposed to do?*

*He kissed me softly at first and then moved his tongue into my mouth. I made a noise. It was weird. Heat flared across my skin and part of me knew it wasn’t because I was madly in love with Percy or something. He was male, relatively good looking, and tall. I liked tall men. I worked up the courage to lay my nervous hands on his shoulders*

*as he continued kissing me and let it happen for a little while longer, trying to decide if I liked it or not.*

*I jumped when his hands wandered down to my bare legs and pushed them apart so he could stand between them. I felt his hips press to mine and his hot breath as he started kissing my neck, and knew this wasn't what I wanted.*

*I pushed against his wide chest, shaking my head. "Um...this is going kind of fast. I think we should stop."*

*He didn't stop touching me, instead mumbling in a vacant voice, "Just relax. It's okay."*

*I pushed a little harder. "C'mon, I have to get home. Let go."*

*His large hands started pushing my t-shirt up and I felt the first stab of fear in my chest.*

*"I mean it, let go. Seriously."*

*When he touched my bra, I shoved him away with my feet, holding onto the desk for dear life. He stumbled, his legs hitting the chair with a loud scraping sound.*

*"What the fuck, Scarlett? I thought you wanted this."*

*"I did too, but I was wrong," I snapped, shoving the hem of my t-shirt back down.*

*"You don't do that. Don't lead me on like that and then just pull out, that's bullshit," he shot back, growing angrier by the minute. Fear bubbled inside me, spilling outward into my hands, making them tremble.*

*"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I just wasn't sure. I have to go."*

*I got up but he grabbed my upper arm, squeezing. "You're not gonna tell, right? Don't you fucking tell anybody about this."*

*"I'm not gonna tell anyone, Percy! Jesus, what the hell is your problem?"*

*"If you tell, I'll lose my job. Do you hear me?" He shook me a little, pulling me closer. I started to panic when I realized how much stronger he was than me.*

*"Answer me, you little bitch!"*

*"Fuck you!" I punched him as hard as I could, right in the lip. He crashed into the chair, knocking it over. My knuckles erupted into fire, or at least that's what it felt like. Blood dripped down from the corner of his mouth. He touched his lip and stared at the crimson droplets in shock, and then glared at me. Before I could move, he slapped me. I fell to the floor, clutching one side of my face as it ached. Tears oozed down my cheeks as I looked up at him, unable to stifle a sob. I felt like a child. A stupid little child.*

*He seemed to realize the enormity of what he'd done and the anger subsided for a moment. "Fuck. Fuck, I'm sorry, Scarlett, I mean it."*

*Percy reached for me. I screamed. "DON'T TOUCH ME!"*

*I scrambled to my feet and threw the door open, running out. He called after me but I raced out of the restaurant and down the street. My tennis shoes echoed on the pavement and my cheek hurt and my eyes were burning but I ran until I reached the Laundromat. The stairs groaned under my weight and my fingers shook so hard that it took me nearly a minute to unlock the door.*

*Duke had been asleep on the couch but my entrance startled him awake. "Lettie, where were you? I—"*

*He stopped dead in the middle of chastising me when he saw my tears and the side of my cheek. He dropped the newspaper in his hands and walked over to me, his face ashen white.*

*“Lettie, what happened?”*

*“He wanted to talk. He just wanted to talk,” I sobbed, pressing my face against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me, rubbing my back in soothing circles.*

*“I didn’t know that was gonna happen. I didn’t know. I’m sorry, Oppa. I’m sorry. You were right. You’re always right,” I mumbled through broken gulps of air.*

*My brother pulled back and held my face in his hands. The whiteness was gone. In its place was a firm resolve, one that nearly scared me.*

*“Who did this? Who did this to you, Lettie?”*

*It took me several breaths to answer. “Percy.”*

*He sat me down on the couch and wrapped a blanket around me. I huddled in the cool suede, arms wrapped around my knees, and cried until exhaustion took over and I fell asleep.*

*I woke up when the front door closed. My eyelids peeled back, sticky from dried tears, to see Duke stalk past the couch and walk straight into the bathroom. His shoulders were shaking. It scared me half to death.*

*I clutched the blanket around me and wandered into the doorway of our small bathroom. He stood in front of the sink and the water was on. His knuckles were bleeding and so was his nose. He said nothing, but I knew what had happened.*

*He took a washcloth and started wiping the blood out of his nose, wincing here and there when he touched a tender spot. I swallowed twice before speaking, and when I did, my voice sounded hollow and soft.*

*“Did you kill him?”*

*He kept wiping and wiping and wiping, but the blood didn’t stop. “No.”*

*“Did it hurt?”*

*“Him.”*

*“I’m sorry.”*

*Duke shook his head. “Don’t be. You didn’t know. Neither of us did.”*

*“I guess I’m fired, huh?”*

*“I guess you are.”*

*The bleeding finally stopped. He spat blood into the sink and then began washing his hands. The water turned pink, and then slowly faded to clear again.*

*“I’ll get dinner started.”*

*“Okay.”*

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Cold water hit my face. I came out of unconsciousness gasping for air like a fish that had been dragged onto dry land. My wrists were in handcuffs, strapped behind my back, and I could feel the icy metal of a chair beneath me. There was a blindfold over my eyes. My wheezing breath echoed, meaning that the room I was in had to be pretty large. My ankles were chained to the chair as well, and it sounded like tile beneath my boots. These thoughts whizzed through my head for the first few seconds of being awake, and then I realized someone had *tied me up and thrown cold water on me.*

*“Who are you?”*

A man's voice, frigid, hard, and authoritative. I licked my lips, coughing as the water dripped down into my nostrils. I tried to calm down, but I could feel my body shaking in fear. *So cold.*

"Where is my brother?"

"Answer the question. Who are you?"

"Where is my brother?" I asked, louder this time.

"I'm not going to ask you again."

"Tell me where my brother is first, you son of a bitch!" I yelled at the voice, my anger warming me. I heard movement and then another wave of icy water slapped against my skin, making the tank top cling to my upper body. So cold, so fucking *cold.*

"How did you find out about the Starlight Contingency?"

"What are you talking about? Where am I?"

"Answer the question. Are you a spy? Who do you work for?"

"I don't work for anyone," I said through chattering teeth. "I haven't had a job in over a year."

"How did you find out about the Starlight Contingency?"

Frustration climbed out of my throat. "I don't know what the fuck that even is! Who are you people?"

"Are the Rosewoods part of the conspiracy? Did they promise you safe passage?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

Another huge wave of water. I cried out, unable to help it. My skin ached all over.

"I don't know anything! I've never met the fucking Rosewoods and I don't know what a Starlight Contingency is! Let me out of here! Now!" I screamed, hating the sound of my hoarse, grief-stricken voice as it echoed. My chest heaved with every breath and I couldn't stop shaking. It felt like the tremors were coming from inside my very soul. The voice didn't speak for a long moment. I could only hear my breath and the dripping of the water off my clothes.

Footsteps. I tensed. A large hand grabbed my head and jerked it aside, so hard that I thought it would break my neck. I struggled, trying to kick and thrash out of the invisible grip.

"Get off of me! Get off! I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!"

Sharp pain in my neck. The cold subsided, replaced with liquid warmth. My limbs went loose and floppy like Ramen noodles. My lips just barely worked as I started to pass out.

"Where's my brother? Where's *Oppa*?"

\*

DUKE

"How did you find out about the Starlight Contingency?"

"Where is my sister?"

"How did you find out about the Starlight Contingency?"

"Where is my sister?"

"Are you a spy? A mercenary? An assassin? Who hired you?"

"Where is my sister?"

“Were you under orders to kill the Rosewoods?”  
 “Where is my sister?”  
 “Is she in on it as well?”  
 “Where is my sister?”  
 “The sooner you cooperate, the sooner we tell you.”  
 “Where...is...my...sister?”  
 “Take him away.”

\*

## SCARLETT

I woke up on the floor. It was colder than ice, colder than the Artic Circle, colder than a penguin’s ass. Thankfully, my wrists and ankles were no longer in handcuffs, but my head was splitting and I felt nauseous. It took a few minutes for the nausea to pass and that was when I opened my eyes.

The room was white. The walls, the floor, both blindingly white. I closed my eyes again and pushed up on my hands as slowly as possible because my arms felt like they were gonna fold under me at any second. The room was only about ten feet across, from what I could tell with my blurry vision.

I sat up and my back hit something solid. I glanced behind me to see a plain green cot, a white pillow, and a blue blanket. I turned my head to the left and saw a man in black leaning against the metal bars on the far wall.

I scrambled backwards on my hands and knees, panicked. The man shook his head.

“Don’t get up too fast. You’ll—”

I stood up, walked two steps, and vomited in the corner of the room. My entire body shook and the headache got worse. It felt like my brain was vibrating inside my skull.

“Told you so.”

I wiped my mouth clean and glared at him. “Who the fuck are you?”

My vision cleared somewhat and I could see him properly. He was white, late twenties, tall, grey eyes, brown hair, goatee, wearing an expensive suit, tie, and dress shoes. His hands were in his pockets as he watched me.

“Travis Hallstead. Not that I owe you anything,” he said in a smoky voice.

“You owe me an explanation,” I sneered, trying once more to stand up. This time, I didn’t puke and my legs held.

He narrowed his eyes at me.

“So do you.”

I snorted. “Don’t tell me. You’re gonna ask me about the Star Wars Contingency.”

“It’s the Starlight Contingency,” Travis corrected. “And yeah, I was.”

“I’ll tell you like I told the last guy. I don’t know what the fuck that is and I don’t care. Where is my brother? Where are we?”

He shook his head, smirking. “You’re a hard ass, I’ll give you that. But that’s not gonna get you what you want. If you play ball, maybe you won’t spend the rest of your

life rotting in this cell. If you don't, you'll be in here forever and all the charm and anger in the world won't get you out."

I walked closer, my mouth set in a firm line. He pushed off from the wall, staring me down without an ounce of fear.

"I'm gonna ask you one last time, Mr. Travis Hallstead.

Where...is...my...brother?" I enunciated each word with a venomous tone.

"That's the least of your worries right now, trust me."

"Wrong answer." I threw a punch at him.

He ducked and grabbed my wrist, throwing me against the wall behind him.

"You really don't wanna do this, little girl."

"Fuck you!" I threw another punch, two more, but he dodged them, stepping back so that they went right past his nose. I switched to low jabs, trying to hit him in the stomach, but he blocked them each time with liquid fast reflexes. This man was trained, and well. There was no way I could beat him with my fighting skills. But that didn't mean I wasn't gonna try anyway.

I faked a haymaker that made him sidestep and the back of his legs hit the cot, giving me a couple seconds to move. I shoved him and he fell back onto the cot. I grabbed his tie and yanked him up so that he dangled there awkwardly, raising my right fist.

"Tell me where my brother is or I'll pound that goatee right off your pretty face," I growled.

To my surprise, he offered me a slick grin and then punched me in the right kidney, making me let go of the tie. I fell forward onto his lap and he grabbed my arms, crossing them over my chest so that I couldn't move.

"You done?" Travis asked in an infuriatingly calm voice.

I struggled, but his grip was like iron. I couldn't move backwards out of his lap or to the side, which made me even angrier. "Not by a long shot."

"Well, as much as I've enjoyed playing with you," he replied in a sharp, sarcastic tone.

"You need more time to cool off and think about your priorities."

"Oh, I've got those straight. Kick your ass, get out of this cell, get my brother, and get the hell out of here."

He shook his head. "You don't get it. There is no 'out of here'. Like it or not, this place is all you have left now. It's what we all have left."

"What are you talking about?"

His dark eyes searched mine for a long moment and a look of interest spilled through them. He tilted his head a bit, frowning.

"You really don't know, do you?"

"How many times have I said that already? I don't know what happened before we blacked out. We were in the Rosewoods' mansion and then everything started shaking and that's all I know. Nothing else."

His hands loosened on my wrists somewhat. "Why were you in their mansion?"

"We..." I bit my bottom lip, choosing my words carefully. "...were on the run. We needed a place to hide and that's where we hid. They weren't our targets—they were just convenient. Nothing more."

His grip tightened to the bruising point. "You're lying again."

“I’m not lying. What do you want me to say? The Rosewoods’ aren’t dead, right? If we had been sent to kill them, then we would have known about their freaky steel doors and magic house vibrator and crazy grandma,” I snapped, frustrated with his continual suspicions.

His eyes widened. “You spoke to Evelyn Rosewood?”

“Briefly. She was just babbling. I figured she was senile.”

“What did she babble about?”

“Something about us being chosen, that there was someone waiting in the darkness.”

Another look went through his eyes—not fear, but maybe a cousin of the feeling mixed with genuine surprise. Before I could ask him about it, he spoke again.

“Last thing—what’s your name?”

I eyed him. “Who wants to know?”

His fingers finally went slack around my arms and a ghost of a smile returned to his lips.

“Me.”

I stared at him. I couldn’t really lose anything by answering him. I was already in a prison. Things couldn’t get much worse than that, by my account.

“Scarlett. With two t’s.”

He glanced at the two streaks of bright red hair at my temple. “Changed your name to fit your hairstyle?”

I smiled. “No, but I get that a lot. It’s after my birthmark.”

His eyes immediately started searching for a blemish on my skin. “Birthmark? Where?”

My smile stretched. “Not on a first date, Mr. Hallstead. Though I think we’re about halfway there anyway.”

He then noticed I had been sitting in his lap this entire time and let me up. I flopped against the cot as he stood, letting the humor drain out of me.

“I answered your questions, now answer mine.”

Travis dusted off his suit and adjusted his tie, then regarded me with a serious look.

“Your brother is being detained and questioned in this facility as well. It’s unlikely that the two of you will see each other again any time soon.”

His words scared me to my very core. I took a deep breath to calm myself.

“Who are you? CIA? FBI? NSA? Division?”

“It doesn’t matter. The point is that if your brother corroborates your story, you might have options but as of now, you’re to remain a prisoner.”

“For how long?”

He said nothing, only rapping his knuckles against the metal door to his right. A guard dressed in black walked over and unlocked the jail cell, letting him out. He left. I pulled my legs up to my chest, blanketed in total silence.

“...where do I pee?”

## CHAPTER THREE

## DUKE

There was a first-degree electrical burn on my left hand.

I had examined the metal bars of the holding cell—slick silver, like a newly minted nickel—and the first touch sent my spiraling backwards towards my cot with a shock running through my veins. The hairs on my arm hadn't settled yet and the burn stung in time with my irregular heartbeat before eventually fading away. My captors were very thorough, it seemed. Not a good sign.

The cell across from me was empty, and so were the two next to it. I wasn't sure if this was some sort of trick to make me uneasy, or if I was the only one in this particular prison facility. Every thirty minutes, an armed guard wandered past to check on me. Clockwork. They were organized.

I rubbed the burn on my palm again, resisting the urge to scratch it. The nub where my pinky used to be on my right hand had not liked the shock. When I awoke each morning, I had a couple minutes of Phantom Limb syndrome and the electricity brought it back for a second or two. It unnerved me every single time it happened, even though it had been over a year since the incident. Yet the wound was still fresh, raw.

When we decided to start being thieves, I had contemplated this sort of situation. Prison didn't scare me much, but it wasn't something I wanted for Scarlett. She was like a cardinal. The world tried to mute her colors, but she never let it. She sang fiercely and flew where the wind blew. She didn't deserve a cage, even if I did. Every fiber of my being wanted to tear out of this cell to find her, make sure she was safe. But I would have to wait. Wait for them to underestimate me. Wait for my chance to escape.

Memories diffused out of my mind and hung in the air like overripe pears. I ignored them. I had to focus, to pay attention to every little detail about this place. The white walls were concrete so there was no way I could burrow out. The floors were linoleum, which made me question what lay beneath them. I suspected we were underground because of the bone-piercing coldness of the floor, but when I inspected the corner, a hole automatically opened up and it was too dark to see anything. It looked like that was where I was meant to relieve myself. How courteous of them. That, or they didn't want to clean up after me in here.

My thoughts were interrupted when the guard returned with a man in a black suit: white, 6'0", brown hair, grey eyes, goatee, serious disposition. I remained motionless on the cot with my hands crossed, knees bent, face placid.

"My name is Captain Travis Hallstead. Have you ever heard that name before?"

"Where is my sister?"

The Captain shook his head. "You're a very persistent man, aren't you?"

I stared at him. "Where is my sister?"

He sighed and tucked his hands into his pockets. "Your sister is in this facility. She's been questioned. That's why I'm here. Our other extraction tactic didn't work with you so they called me in."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "How do I know you're not lying?"

He eyed me for a moment and then answered. "Your sister's name is Scarlett with two t's and she's named after her birthmark."

I stood up so abruptly that his eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Did you hurt her?”  
He held up his hands in supplication. “It’s the opposite, actually. She tried to hurt me.”

“Tried?”

“I didn’t hurt her. Once she realized she couldn’t win the fight, she cooperated. Force was not entirely necessary, but you probably already know that, being her brother and all.”

I sat down again, letting the tension flow out of me. The Captain leaned against the wall, keeping his voice level and conversational.

“How did you get into the Rosewoods’ mansion?”

I remained silent. He continued onward. “Your sister says you were looking for a place to hide in and then everything went crazy after that. Is that true?”

“I’ll answer that if you tell me about the old woman,” I said, guiding my gaze up to meet his.

He lifted his chin an inch, seeming intrigued. “What did she say?”

“Something about us being chosen. About people waiting in the dark and the cold. Waiting. What did she mean by that?”

“It’s classified.”

I snorted. “So is how we got to the mansion.”

He massaged the bridge of his nose, growing frustrated. I relished the moment.

“Look, I’m trying to save you and your sister from an entire world of pain here. If you don’t give me answers now, my superiors will send in the big guns and they will get an answer out of both of you through blood and tears. Is that what you want? Do you want that to happen to Scarlett?”

“Don’t say her name so casually,” I replied with a warning tone. “You can’t scare me with threats. You’re not here to be nice. You’re here to make a deal. So make it and get out.”

The Captain ground his teeth for a moment. “If you tell me who you are and how you got into the mansion, then we won’t have to torture either of you. Deal?”

I weighed my options. He could be lying. He could kill us right after we told him what he wanted to know. But I wasn’t in a position to stop him either way.

“How do I know she’s not already dead?”

He reached into his suit jacket. I tensed, expecting him to pull out a gun, but instead he removed a phone from his inner pocket and hit a few buttons. He held it out to me. It was security camera showing a room similar to this one with Scarlett inside, curled up on a cot identical to mine. There were tiny white numbers depicting the time and I checked the one on my watch. They were linked up. She was most likely alive.

“Satisfied?”

“No. Why the hell should I trust you? How do I know you won’t kill us as soon as you find out why we were in the Rosewoods’ mansion?”

“Because, believe it or not, murder is no longer an option. We have to keep everyone alive, no matter how much trouble they give us. Besides, if we were going to kill you we would have done it when we found you. No reason to take the extra time to drag you in here and question you if we wanted you dead.”

“I want my sister released.”

“I can’t give you that. Not torturing her is the best I can do. Take it or leave it.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Fifty-fifty. Might as well get it over with.

“Fine.”

“What’s your name?”

“Duke Nam.”

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“What were you doing in the Rosewoods’ mansion?”

“We were on the run and we needed a car. We ran in there looking for the garage, but then someone came out into the hallway so we hid in the old woman’s room. Alarms went off and then the house started transforming, somehow. I heard something like an explosion and then we blacked out. That’s all I remember.”

“We found a duffel bag full of jewelry and cash with you. Are you thieves?”

I gave him a flat look. A small smile touched his lips. “Yeah, I guess that was a rhetorical question. Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Nam.”

He knocked on the door. It didn’t shock him, meaning that there was some way to turn it off from the outside. I logged that away in my mind for later and watched him leave.

Silence folded in around me. I pressed my hands to my lips, replaying our conversation over and over again, noticing his speech patterns, the look in his eyes, trying to decode anything he’d given me.

About five minutes into my thoughts, I realized that I could hear something—not the tiny clicks of my watch ticking or the nearly imperceptible hum of the electrified bars on the cell, but a tapping sound that echoed down the corridor. It sounded as if it were coming from the hallway. I held my breath, listening. It wasn’t footsteps or water dripping. They had a pattern. It took me nearly a minute to figure it out.

Morse code.

\*

## SCARLETT

My hand had gone numb by the time I repeated the message a tenth time. The heel of my boot made a harsh slapping sound that bounced off the walls and made my eardrums ache, but I knew it was loud enough to hear in other cells. Five minutes of this crap and no response. I couldn’t do this forever. Eventually, someone would catch me even though I tried to do it before the guard made his thirty-minute patrol.

As if on cue, the guard walked up to my cell, his voice harsh. “Would you cut out that noise?”

I spat at the bars, nearly hitting him. Goggles obscured his eyes, but his mouth was thin and angry, which made me smile. His gloved hand gripped the butt of the gun on his waist as if he were aching to use it on me.

“You should be more respectful of your elders, little girl.”

I spat a bigger mouthful at him that time.

He jumped back, growling at me. “You like picking fights you can’t win, huh?”

“Open the door. I’ll prove you wrong, old man,” I sneered.

He spared me a nasty smirk. “I saw what Hallstead did, honey. You couldn’t handle me if you wanted to.”

That stung, but I brushed past it. *Keep taunting. It might give you a way out.*

“Sound like someone’s jealous. What is it? That he’s better looking, he has a better job, or that he’s not as rock stupid as you seem to be?”

The guard gritted his teeth. *That’s it. Open the door. Teach me a lesson.* He gripped his gun again and then let go, stalking off down the hall. Damn.

I resumed the Morse code for another five minutes but then I heard voices nearby. The guard and someone else. Someone with a smoky voice. *Uh oh.*

“You idiot, that’s Morse code she’s using!” Travis appeared and opened the jail cell, catching me just as my boot hit the floor again. He snatched it out of my hand and gave me a nasty glare.

“Do you have a death wish? Is that it?”

I shrugged, giving him wide innocent eyes. “I was just making music. What’s wrong with that?”

He let out a haggard sigh. “What were you trying to tell your brother? An escape plan? To continue the mission?”

“There is no mission. All I wanted was something to break up the silence. Looks like it worked since you’re in here yapping away at me.”

Travis exhaled through his nose. I snatched my boot from him and put it on. He grabbed my upper arm, pulling me to my feet.

“Let’s go.”

“That’s the second time you’ve touched me without my permission. Make a habit out of it and I might have to kill you,” I said in a low voice.

He watched me for a moment and then pushed me face-first into the far wall.

“Hands up, palms flat against the wall. Now.”

Begrudgingly, I obeyed. The guard handed Travis a pair of handcuffs and he caught my left arm first and clipped the cuff on. His breath was hot against the back of my neck. I couldn’t tell if he was doing it on purpose or not. He did the same with my right arm and then tied a blindfold around my eyes.

“I’m not sure if I like where this is going or not,” I remarked, only to mask the rampant fears rushing through me at the knowledge that they were taking me out of my safe little cell. This could mean it was the end of the road. Might as well go out like a smart ass.

“You don’t ever shut up, do you?” Travis said, kicking my legs a little further apart. He started patting me down at my right ankle and worked his way up my baggy cargo pants, checking all the pockets and loose cloth. Smart man.

“Not really. You’re not giving much to work with, after all. I need a good supporting cast. Can’t read lines on my own.”

I had to bite my lip when his hand swept past my thighs. “Is this part of my last request thing? ‘Cause I have to say this is kind of what I wanted.”

He made a noise in his throat that may have been a laugh and placed one hand on my shoulder, shoving me forward to walk. “In your dreams.”

I nearly stumbled over the doorframe as I walked, but I kept the conversation going to distract him. “Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you’re not even a little bit attached to me after all the times we’ve spent together?”

The guard chimed in. “Would you like me to gag her, Captain?”

“That won’t be necessary. Yet.”

Genuine surprise struck me. “You’re a Captain? Why didn’t you say that earlier?”

“The psychologist thought that you would respond better to a non-authority figure. Hence, I left out my title when I introduced myself to you.”

“Well, then I’m sorry I didn’t treat you with the respect you deserve, *sir*.”

“You’re a common thief. I doubt you know much about respect to begin with.”

The humor died in my mouth. “Who told you that?”

“We found you with a load of cash and jewels. It wasn’t hard to figure out.”

“You talked to my brother, didn’t you?”

No answer. We walked down a short flight of stairs in silence and then took a right turn. I heard a hissing sound of a door sliding open and then Travis’ hand on my lower back. His breath brushed my neck again and I heard him distinctly say, “I didn’t hurt your brother. You have my word,” in Korean before he pushed me into the room and the door shut.

This room was as cold as the hallway and the jail cell. I could feel the air pushing against my temples from a vent above me somewhere. I started to take the blindfold off.

“Do not remove the blindfold.”

A woman’s voice, but it didn’t sound human. It sounded automated. I licked my lips, taking a gamble.

“Will you hurt me if I do?”

“Disciplinary action will be taken if you do not follow instructions.”

“Well, shit. I guess I have to do what you say then, huh?” I snapped. This was not what I expected. I expected armed guards, a priest, and a jury of peers. Not VIKI from *I, Robot*.

“Take three steps forward and turn around.”

I swallowed and told myself to stay calm as I followed her orders. On the third step, the floor seemed to feel different beneath me. Not tile. Something mechanical, maybe. I heard something whirring as if it were being wound up and willed myself to stand still. If they were about to kill me, I would at least die with some amount of dignity.

Two metal bands snapped over my boots, trapping me where I stood. I heard something circling me, some sort of machine, but nothing else touched me. After about a minute, the woman’s emotionless voice spoke again.

“Analysis complete. You are free to go. Turn around and take three steps forward.”

The bands let go of my feet and I walked, completely baffled. No firing squad. It sounded as if I had been put in some sort of x-ray machine. But why? They already knew I wasn’t carrying anything when Travis patted me down.

I heard the door open and footsteps—only one pair this time. “Miss me?”

“Not hardly,” the guard grumbled, shoving me out into the hallway. We went back the way we came. I listened for voices, signs of life, anything, but it seemed like we were the only people on this particular level of the facility. However, the alone time was just what I had been looking for. Without Travis—excuse me, Captain Hallstead—shadowing me, I could focus on the hapless guard behind me.

I counted the remaining steps to my cell and tripped before I got there, landing on my ass. The guard sucked his teeth, telling me to get up. I kicked him as hard as I could

in the nuts and quickly slid my cuffed arms beneath my legs to the front of my body. I heard a click and knew that he had unsnapped the holster to his gun so I grabbed it and smashed the butt of it into his nose. He slumped on top of me, out like a light.

I yanked off my blindfold and wriggled out from under his heavy body. I tucked his gun in the small of my back and crouched there, listening to see if anyone had heard the tussle. Nothing so far. The hallway was long and there were a total of ten jail cells on each side. I rifled through his pockets and found the keys to my cuffs, unlocking them and stuffing them in my back pocket. I took the walkie-talkie and the key card clipped to his belt and crept down the hallway, checking each cell for signs of an occupant.

“Scarlett?”

Duke gaped at me from the last cell on the aisle near the wall. A rush of relief went through me, so strong that I felt tears spring into my eyes.

“*Oppa*, you’re alive. Thank God.”

He stood, coming as close as he could to the bars without touching them. “What the hell are you doing? How did you get free?”

I examined the lock on the door, digging for the key card I’d gotten from the guard. “Got lucky. The guard is gonna be really mad at me when he wakes up. Might have broken his nose.”

“Lettie, you can’t do this. Not now. Didn’t you hear my message?”

I shook my head, frowning and pausing to open the lock. “They took me right after I stopped using the code. What message?”

“We have to cooperate with them for now until we learn more about where we are.”

“Are you insane? The longer we wait, the more likely they are to kill us!”

“No, they won’t. That guy, the Captain, told me he’s not interested in killing us.”

“Duke—”

“And I believe him,” he interrupted, regarding me with that serious look he almost always wore.

“I’d rather die than play nice with the people who abducted and tortured us.”

“Goddamn it, Lettie, listen to me for once!”

“I am listening! All I’ve ever done is listen to you!” I shouted. “I’m not patient like you, alright? I don’t have plans, I’m not smart, I just do what I’m told! Now for once in your life, let me save you.”

I swiped the card and the door opened. He stood there, staring at me.

“It’s too late.”

Then it clicked. I knew what he meant. I turned my head and saw Captain Hallstead at the other end of the hall with four armed guards behind him. He walked towards me, no weapon, because he’d known that he wouldn’t need one. I withdrew the stolen gun, not pointing it at anyone, because holding it was enough.

Travis stopped within inches of me, saying nothing. I stared up at him.

“This was all a test, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I wanted to see what you would do if given the opportunity. You showed a lot of brains and initiative, but you’re still too naïve.”

“Looks like you have everything figured out,” I said in a mocking tone. “But how do you know I won’t lift this gun and shoot you in the gut?”

His eyes searched mine. There was intensity there, but behind that I saw a wealth of intelligence. The others might have been mindless drones but he wasn't. He was dangerous. Like a tiger pretending to be a house cat.

"Because you won't risk dying in front of your brother."

I aimed at his forehead. The men behind him then all took the safeties off their rifles and pointed them at me. "Don't act like you know me, Captain. You know nothing about me."

"Lettie, put the gun down," Duke whispered. "Now."

"Why, Duke? You seem to think I don't care about my own life. Maybe I don't. Maybe I should let these guys blow me to kingdom come."

Travis continued staring at me, seeming to ignore the gun entirely. "Do you really want to go down this road? Do you know where it ends?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "Everything ends, one way or another."

"Put the gun down, Lettie. Please." Duke's voice nearly cracked at the end. My throat felt tight and my arm started to waver a bit as I held the gun on the Captain. He was ready to die, here and now. But I wasn't. Not yet.

I lowered the gun and handed it to Hallstead, brushing past him as I walked back to my cell. One of the guards took the walkie-talkie, the key card, and the handcuffs. I stopped before going through the doorframe, raising my voice so the Captain could hear me.

"Thank you."

Hallstead frowned, confused. "For what?"

"For not lying to me about my brother."

I stepped on the unconscious guard on my way in, enjoying the pained groan that emitted from his chest. The guards shut the door and walked away, as did the Captain, but I could feel his eyes on me before he left. I curled up on my cot and dreamt sweet dreams.

\*

## CHAPTER FOUR

## DUKE

*I was seven years old when I saw my first dead person.*

*The Nam family had only lived in America for two generations. My grandfather went into the undertaking business because he had fought in a few civil wars during his time and had no trouble with corpses. The business was small back then, but steady.*

*My father had told me to go get him or we would be late for dinner so I went inside the funeral home, calling for him.*

*The boy on the table couldn't have been more than fourteen. I didn't know him, but I remembered his name. Billy Boubier. Hung himself from his bunk bed. Mother found him, nearly had a heart attack. I tried to picture something like that—walking in on a dead family member, but it was too harrowing to imagine so I didn't try.*

*His skin was pasty and nearly translucent. Grandpa hadn't gotten around to putting on the makeup yet to make him look fresh and peaceful. His lips were dark, almost blue. I bit my bottom lip, my fingers shaking as I reached towards his cheek to touch it. The skin was like wax—almost soft, but not quite.*

*“Get away from there!” My grandfather bellowed from the doorway. I leapt back, scared out of my wits at his sudden entrance from the bathroom. He marched over and whacked my backside, his grey eyebrows bunched in a scowl.*

*“Show some respect for the dead, sonyeon.”*

*“I'm s-sorry, hal-abeoji,” I cried. “I was just looking.”*

*“You got to treat them well once they're dead. We're all they have left. You remember that, sonyeon.” He took my hand and dragged me out of the room, slamming the door shut. His aggression was something I'd never experienced before. He was a very distant man, very traditional, and the only thing in his life that he seemed to take great care of were the bodies. Each one was always flawless, male or female. He took the American phrase “final resting place” to heart, it seemed.*

*I often found it fitting that my father was a mortician. His demeanor was just as cold as the bodies on his slab. My sister used to tell me how much she hated the Asian stereotypes for men—that they were the breadwinners and nothing else, never spending time with their loved ones, never letting them know how much they cared. Out of the four of us, she embraced the American culture the most. She loved how liberated the women were in this country. The Disney princesses were her role models. She tore pages out of her storybooks and plastered them on the walls. Pretty princesses grinning down at her from every angle, beaming with hopes and dreams and falsehoods. I couldn't bring myself to tell her that she was in love with a fairytale and so I never did.*

*My father never said whether he disapproved of her idols or not. He hardly said much of anything. My mother once told me not to take it personal because he had been a quiet man for as long as she'd known him. Their marriage was arranged. Scarlett used to ask her if she loved him and she would always smile and kiss her forehead and say, “Of course.” Scarlett believed her. I didn't.*

*Every Wednesday, my father went straight to the park from work and did ten laps in the pool. I used to ask him if I could go once I got home from school, but he told me he didn't do it for fun, but for work. To keep up his strength and discipline. I always found it*

*weird that he cared so much about staying in shape when his life didn't really require it. Most Americans Dads had beer bellies and goatees and big drunken laughs. Not him. Never him.*

*I only recall seeing my Dad smile once. Late afternoon. Bees thudded against the cracked windowsill in the kitchen. Sunlight streamed in unapologetically. He sat at the kitchen table eating Apple Jacks with his stained fingers. My shoes stuck to the floor. I couldn't move. It was everywhere. The entire floor. Sticky like honey.*

*He looked at my tear-stained face and smiled when I asked him why. He didn't answer. He stood up, dumped the cereal in the trashcan, patted the top of my head, and walked out the front door. I never saw him again, except in my dreams.*

I awoke when I heard echoed footsteps, rolling over on my cot to look at the door. The guard opened it and waved two fingers at me.

“Get up.”

I stood, frowning. “What’s going on?”

“You’re going to be debriefed on the situation. Hands against the wall.”

I obeyed, remaining still as he cuffed me and pushed me out the door. No blindfold this time. I logged that knowledge away for later.

At the other end of the hall, another guard hauled Scarlett out of her cell and a small part of me relaxed upon seeing her. She looked small and cold, but her brown eyes lit up when she spotted me. The guards stayed two steps behind us with their guns drawn, ordering us to walk.

“Where do you think they’re taking us?” She asked me in Korean, her voice low and filled with trepidation.

“Not sure. I’m starting to lose track of time in here. It might be more questioning about the Rosewoods or whatever went down last night.”

“Stop talking,” the guard snapped, jabbing me in the back with his gun. I quelled my anger and continued walking. We turned right at the corner of the jail cell and into a stairwell. I could see an elevator nearby but they didn’t want to risk being in an isolated space with us so we continued past it. The stairwell’s walls were concrete as well, but the floor was metal. Odd.

We went up two flights and entered another hallway. Instead of jail cells, there were what appeared to be interrogation rooms. It may have been the ones we were questioned in right after the abduction. There were large glass windows next to the door, and inside were the same white walls as our prison with metal chairs and a table across from a one-way mirror. My suspicions of being abducted by government agents seemed to be more and more true.

They stopped at a room at the end of the hall and there were two men waiting for us: Captain Hallstead and an older man I had never seen before. He wore an expensive navy suit and his grey hair was immaculately groomed. They stood in front of a table and two chairs, which the guards instructed us to take.

Scarlett bristled at the order. “I’d rather stand.”

“Lettie,” I muttered in warning. She glanced at me and sighed, taking her seat. The guards closed the door and stood against the wall behind us. The older man watched the two of us for a handful of seconds before speaking.

“My name is General Bridgewater. I’m the commanding officer of this establishment. I’m told that you are Scarlett and Duke. Is that correct?”

We exchanged glances and then nodded. He continued. “Normally, our organization is under the kill-first-ask-questions-later policy, but recent events have caused us to reconsider this course of action.”

He slid his hands out of his pockets and pressed them against the table, lowering his voice. “However, it would be unwise to take this as a sign of weakness. We are reluctant to kill you, but if necessary, we will. Do you understand me?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Scarlett said with the utmost sarcasm in her voice. I closed my eyes for a second, resisting the urge to kick her in the shin.

Bridgewater glanced at her. “You’re the one who’s been giving Captain Hallstead trouble, am I right?”

Scarlett’s eyes flicked to the Captain. “Aw, you told him about me?”

He ignored her. “I wouldn’t quite call it trouble, sir.”

“Call it what you will. I like your spirit. I’ve seen many girls like you make it places with that kind of fire, but it won’t work here. Here, you either get with the program or you live a hard life. I can wipe your early transgressions clean if you agree to cooperate for the duration of your stay at this facility. That’s an offer for the both of you.”

“That’s very generous of you,” I said in a measured voice. “But we’d both be much happier if you showed us the door.”

Bridgewater exhaled through his nose, straightening to full height. “There is no door. That’s why we’ve brought you here. You don’t seem to have any more information for us and so it’s time to open Pandora’s box.”

He snapped his fingers. Captain Hallstead stepped forward and placed a manila folder on the table. He opened it, revealing a large photograph.

“Do you know what this is?”

“A satellite. What about it?” I answered.

“It’s not just any satellite. This is a deep space satellite constructed for the purpose of exploring galaxies that are too far away for us to reach as of yet. It was put into orbit over twenty years ago. In 2013, it captured photos of an unidentified planet with similar qualities to Earth. We launched a campaign that year to find out if it had breathable air and other natural resources.”

“Yeah, I remember reading about this,” Scarlett said. “They were calling it Earth II. The program was canceled for unspecified reasons. I’m guessing you know why.”

He slid the picture aside. This time, it wasn’t a satellite. It was something that looked like a giant meteor with spikes coming out of it and an eerie blue glow at the center.

“Earth II was destroyed that same year.”

“By what? This meteor?”

“It’s not a meteor. It’s a ship.”

Both of us went completely still. Scarlett spoke first. “Wait, wait, wait. You’re telling us that this thing is an alien spaceship?”

“Yes.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “That’s great. Fantastic. It’s like we’re in *Independence Day*. Where are Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum when you need them?”

Captain Hallstead didn’t crack a smile. He kept going. “The ship has a cannon on board that harbors an energy source called Sorbatium. We believe it’s akin to solar

energy, as if they are harnessing small suns. They've managed to channel it into a destructive beam. They fired at Earth II and destroyed it in less than five minutes. The ship then deployed hundreds of smaller vessels to collect the fragments of the planet's core, which we believe they use either for energy or profit."

"And who is they?" Scarlett asked, still stifling a laugh.

"The astrologist who made the discovery was German. He called them the Bergleute des Todos. Miners of death. They travel from planet to planet destroying them and gathering their core material. We knew it would only be a certain amount of time before they mined all the usable planets in that galaxy and started coming for ours. That's when the Starlight Contingency was put into motion. We selected one hundred million citizens of Earth to be the continuation of mankind if our military force failed against the Bergleute. Their homes were converted into our most advanced space shuttles and outfitted with equipment for immediate exit of the solar system. The Rosewoods were part of that one hundred million, but your intervention brings that number up to one hundred million and two."

"So what now?" Scarlett interrupted. "We become soldiers in the war against the Bergs? For great justice? Give me a fucking break here. How stupid do you think we are?"

Hallstead's eyes narrowed a bit. "You really don't want me to answer that."

She glared. "Bite me, pretty boy."

"Is there a point to this conversation?" I interjected, trying to stop their squabbling.

Hallstead cleared his throat, taking a deep breath. "Last night, the Bergleute made their way into our solar system. We launched a full out assault on them. Every single one of the shuttles was destroyed, and not just ours. France, Germany, Russia, Japan, China, Korea...everyone's. We had no other choice. We launched the Starlight Contingency after the last infantry fell."

"Then what? You need us so you can launch another attack before they blow it up?"

"You don't understand. The Earth was destroyed six hours ago."

My sister couldn't hold it in any more. She burst out laughing, loud and unbridled. It took her a moment to get it under control, talking through giggles.

"This is amazing. I mean, I've never heard such a load of shit in my life. If you want us to work for you, just say so. You didn't have to come up with such an elaborate ruse."

General Bridgewater snapped his fingers again, this time at the guards. "Take them topside. Now."

"Yes, sir."

The guards hauled us to our feet and ushered us out the door. Captain Hallstead and the General trailed us. This time, we used the elevator instead of the stairs. Both men were relatively certain we wouldn't try anything in their presence. I could attest to this but Scarlett...not so much. She retained a look of bemusement at the serious expressions on everyone's face. I couldn't blame her. Their story was laughable and had little evidence to support it. I suspected it was part of a larger scheme of brainwashing. I was subject to many things, but manipulation was seldom one of them.

We rose for several minutes, to the point where my eyebrow started to lift when I noticed we were now in the twenties. The elevator was all metal, no windows, so I couldn't see the outside. However, the fact that it was about fifteen feet across in both directions certainly aroused my suspicion.

Finally, we hit the thirtieth floor and the doors opened. For a second, I didn't move.

It looked like the docking bay of a ship, but not a seafaring ship—a spaceship. More Starship Enterprise than the Black Pearl. There were at least thirty different consoles where men and women in dark blue jumpsuits sat wearing headsets and monitoring digital screens. Captain Hallstead and General Bridgewater walked in and the guards nudged my sister and I forward. By now, the skeptical expression on Scarlett's face had subsided and she began to look unnerved. The two men walked to the front of the deck and we followed, staring at the sight before us.

“Welcome to the Titan.”

There were windows at least twenty feet high in front of us and beyond them was a sky so black that it felt like night itself had been stretched across my vision. There was only one thing breaking up the blanket of darkness. To the right, I could see the atmosphere of a moon of some sort—its surface a pale orange. I had never seen anything like it. Stars sparkled out in the distance, but none of it looked familiar. These were not our stars. I had seen them as a child, studying charts in my science classes and naming their patterns while my mother hovered over me, smiling.

“Hey, Duke,” Scarlett said next to me in an alarmingly detached sort of voice.

“Yeah?” I whispered.

“This looks kind of...real.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I thought it was just me.”

Then, Scarlett went limp and started to fall. The guards reached for her but Captain Hallstead caught her with an expression on his face caught between surprise and pity. She had actually fainted. Not that I blamed her. The blood had retreated from my face and I could feel dread filling my stomach like cold poison.

“Take her to the infirmary. Let me know when she revives,” General Bridgewater said, his face impassive. He might have been used to seeing reactions like this, especially if this wasn't an illusion. Captain Hallstead handed my sister over to one of the guards, his eyes lingering as the man carried her out. I tried to read the expression on his face, but it was like taking impression from stone: flat, lifeless, cold. But there was something there. I just didn't know what.

“Do you have any questions, son?”

I glanced up at General Bridgewater and had to swallow before I could answer. Even then, my voice wavered. “Do you have...footage of the Earth's destruction? I'll admit that I am starting to believe you, but this could still be some sort of elaborate ruse.”

The General turned and motioned to a wide circular console different from the ones the crewmembers were using. He touched his fingertip to the surface and an enormous 3D digital map appeared. Briefly, I saw the coordinates for where we were in space and then he switched to a feed from a satellite.

“This is the last recorded footage we received before it happened. It's from one of ours. I'm sure other countries have their own versions of it as well. By the time the

Bergleute entered the solar system, the ships included the Starlight Contingency had already evacuated the Earth.”

The satellite showed the surface of the Earth as I always remembered it—seeming to hang in the darkness of space like a sapphire. The upper corner of the globe began to darken, confusing me until I realized it was a shadow from the alien cruiser. The satellite wasn't facing it so I couldn't catch a glimpse, but I knew it was there. I saw a bright flash and then a red beam burrowed into one side of the planet. My stomach jerked inside me at the sight of the land crumbling and the seas boiling in its wake. It had disintegrated part of Asia already and there were burning waves climbing outward from the entry point. After a few minutes, the beam burst out the other side of the planet and the tectonic plates on the Earth's surface began to crack apart. Bright yellow and orange spurted from the cracks, evidence of the planet's core peeking through as the weapon ripped it apart from the inside. At last, it exploded and the satellite feed went to static.

General Bridgewater closed the feed. He showed no emotion at seeing it. I got the feeling he had watched it a hundred times, his pale eyes filling the world just before it turned into nothing more than rocks and dust.

“General Bridgewater,” I said. “If this is some sort of trick, understand that I will do everything in my power to end your life.”

He nodded. I wiped my eyes and straightened my posture. “Then consider this my agreement to cooperate with your operation. I can't say the same thing for my sister, but I will do what is needed as long as I am on this vessel.”

“Good man. Escort him to the barracks.”

The guard reached for me but I held up my hands. “What is going to happen to Scarlett?”

General Bridgewater glanced at Captain Hallstead and he answered instead. “She needs to be examined for psychological damage and if she chooses to play ball, she'll be placed in the women's division aboard this ship. You're both going to become soldiers.”

“I need to be able to see her. She won't recover as quickly without me.”

Captain Hallstead paused, seeming unsure. “We'll see if we can make arrangements to that effect, but as of now she won't be released until we're sure she's stable. A lot of people suffer from PTSD after seeing the world destroyed. We'll keep her safe.”

I stepped forward, unafraid. “I want your word on that, Captain.”

He met my eyes. “You have my word.”

I let the guard take me back to the elevator and lead me to my new home. The only home I had left. God help us.

\*

## CHAPTER FIVE

## SCARLETT

*The first thing I ever stole was a lollipop.*

*I was eleven. My mother highly discouraged us from eating sweets before dinner, and she wasn't a fan of American candies, so I took it upon my own young self to pilfer an apple-flavored Blow Pop. Nothing tasted sweeter than when I hid in the bathroom sucking on the sweetness of free candy. No one had caught me. No one had thought to look at the little girl hiding behind her mother in the Kroger checkout line, one hand firmly clutched against her jacket pocket. Every second of my mini-heist, I expected to get caught. When the clerk smiled at me, I immediately looked away. It was the biggest high I ever experienced.*

*I told my friends about it and they treated me like a goddess. None of them had ever been brave enough to try it. I didn't encourage them to do it. I had just wanted an audience. Someone to shine a light on me and see that I was exceptional. Mostly because in reality, I wasn't. I was just a normal Korean girl whose mother didn't like candy.*

*However, the victory was short lived. My friend Bethany tried to steal something—the stupid bitch took a whole bag of marshmallows, what the hell—and squealed on me, saying that I had talked her into it. She lived a block away from me so of course her mother came a-knockin' and told my Mom what happened. I got the worst beating of my life, so bad that I had to lie on my stomach that night. One would think I'd never steal again.*

*I've never been easily discouraged.*

*I started to steal more because I got in trouble. I had fire under my skinny little butt because my mother had reacted so strongly to my nefarious actions. I stole out of spite, relishing every morning when I walked past her in the kitchen. For once, I held power over a parent.*

*My father was strict, but he never confronted me about the stealing after Bethany ratted me out. It was my mother's job to deal out discipline in the house. Dad ran things on a higher level—bills, taking us to school, those sorts of things. He felt like a landlord more than a father on some days, but other days weren't as bad. When my report card came in and things were good, he would stroke my hair and tell me, "Good job, little one." He never smiled. Value clung to the words, not the facial expressions.*

*I supposed that was why years later when my brother and I stood in the middle of a bare room with half the month's rent between us, the idea came to me easily.*

*"What if we stole it?"*

*He did a double take. "Are you kidding me, Lettie? Do you know how much trouble we'd get in for stealing?"*

*I shrugged. "I'm not talking about a bank vault, Duke. I mean shoplifting to get by. We can fence the stuff to make ends meet."*

*"Yeah, 'cause we just know tons of people on the black market," he replied, his voice laced with sarcasm.*

*I crossed my arms beneath my chest. "What do you want from me? We've got two days to get the rest of the rent or we're out on the street. If you've got a better idea, let's hear it."*

*Duke frowned. I could practically see the gears in his head turning. “I don’t want you in any more trouble than you’re already in.”*

*I resisted the urge to hit him. “We’re in, Duke. Not just me. You don’t have to take the responsibility all on your own.”*

*He sighed, shaking his head. “What kind stuff are you thinking about? Electronics?”*

*“Among other things. We have to start small since you don’t have experience in these things.”*

*Duke scowled. “You’re not an expert, you know.”*

*I couldn’t help but smirk. “I am in comparison to you.”*

*He rolled his eyes. “And who are we supposed to contact to sell this stuff to?”*

*“We go to the inner city and sell it. Word’ll get around after a while and then maybe we can find a professional. Someone with connections.”*

*“That’s dangerous.”*

*“Not if we travel. We can hop from city to city. That’ll keep the crooks and the cops off our trail.”*

*Duke took a deep breath. “Just...let me sleep on it, okay?”*

*I bit back another argument and nodded. He said good night and shuffled off to his room. I flopped down on the couch, touching my stomach. Butterflies gathered there at the thought of stealing, of being daring, of outwitting the authorities. Each thing I stole replaced that hole inside of me. One day, that empty space would be cluttered and I wouldn’t have to think about the void. Stupid thought, but I hungered for it.*

*Scarlett Nam, master thief.*

*I liked the sound of that.*

My head ached. My back was sore. There was thin cotton beneath me, itching along my spine. I groaned deep in my throat and rolled onto my side, fingertips skimming my forehead. My eyelids slid back to see a pale green curtain like the ones used in hospitals and a man in black standing in front of it with his hands in his pockets.

I closed my eyes again. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“General Bridgewater ordered me to make sure you revived. I don’t want to be here,” Captain Hallstead answered in a mild voice.

“And yet you are. I’m starting to see a pattern here, Cap.” I felt a pinch in my forearm and noticed that there was an IV in place. It freaked me out for a second. I went to remove it but Hallstead caught my hand, shaking his head.

“Don’t remove it until the doctor comes back.”

I shook my wrist loose from his grip, sitting up. “How long was I out?”

“An hour.”

I snorted, rubbing my pounding forehead. “Can’t believe this. I fucking fainted. How weak is that? I should be cast in a 1940’s horror film.”

He made that noise again—the one that was almost like a laugh, but not quite. “You were under a large amount of stress all at once. It’s not uncommon.”

I shot him a rude look. “How many times have *you* fainted?”

A smirk tugged at the edge of his lips. “Point taken.”

I rolled my eyes. “Where’s the doc? You suck at cheering up sick people.”

“You’re not sick. You’ve just lost your home and every person you know. Everyone on this ship has to face that at some point. Some people can’t handle it.”

I watched him for a moment, trying to read his face. “You didn’t want to do it the way General Bridgewater did, did you?”

He glanced away. “Not really. I thought if we gave you more time to adjust to your surroundings...”

“I doubt that would have helped,” I said, my voice soft. He started to say something else but I cut him off.

“Where’s my brother?”

“He’s been taken to the soldiers’ quarters. He’s going to start training soon.”

My eyes widened. “He agreed to your terms.”

Hallstead frowned. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

My suspicions immediately rose. “Why do you want to know?”

He sighed. It made me feel better. My brother once told me I had a sadistic streak. He was right.

The curtain slid aside and a black man appeared holding a chart, startled when he noticed Hallstead. “Captain, I didn’t see you come in.”

“I’m on orders,” he said, maybe a little too fast. I grinned. He rolled his eyes. The doctor glanced between the two of us and ignored whatever thought popped into his head.

“Well, she suffered from shock but there’s nothing else showing up in her blood work—”

“You took my blood?” I blurted out.

The doctor adjusted his glasses. “It’s standard procedure for unconscious patients on this vessel.”

I squirmed in my seat, happy to have been unconscious when it happened. Not that they needed to know that.

The doctor continued on. “She needs some rest and then her psych evaluation will begin.”

I stared between them. “Psych eval? You’re sending me to a shrink? I thought you said my reaction wasn’t uncommon.”

The doctor cleared his throat, seeming uncomfortable. “It isn’t, but your actions beforehand suggests that there are some behavioral issues that should be addressed before you are considered for soldier status.”

“Like what?”

“Your temper, your irrational behavior, your problems with authority. Pick a feature,” Hallstead said with a sarcastic tone. I glared.

The doctor gave him a look. “Captain, I would thank you not to purposely agitate my patient.”

He cleared his throat. “Apologies, Doc.”

“So what? You’re going to reprogram me into one of your little drones? That sounds like fun. Just make sure you don’t mess up my hair when you give me the lobotomy.”

“Scarlett—”

“Save it, Captain,” I snapped, crossing my arms and staring at the curtain, watching shadows of other people walking around pass by. After a moment, Hallstead jerked it aside and left. My eyes followed his outline as it retreated. Bastard.

“Get some rest. We’ll be moving you in another hour or so.”

“Yippeefuck.”

The doctor shook his head at me and exited, pulling the curtain back in place. My own little cocoon. I could still hear people talking—mostly doctors and nurses. It sounded like the other patients had problems similar to mine: trauma from the Earth’s destruction, psychological issues due to space travel, and even a few pregnant women. I imagined the ride into orbit couldn’t be too healthy for a baby. It made me wonder how the hell my brother and I survived without being properly secured or wearing space suits when the shuttle left the atmosphere. I’d have to ask the doc about that when he came back.

My curiosity piqued as I continued watching shadows pass back and forth from bed to bed, attending to people. I calculated that there were about twenty beds on my side of the room and another twenty on the other. This particular wing seemed to be non-emergency patients and there were probably several more of them on this vessel. The sizeable deck and the thirty or so floors made me wonder how many of the alleged one hundred million people were stationed on each vessel. The number sounded more and more preposterous as I thought about it.

An hour later, the doctor came and took me to another bare room with white walls. There was a black woman waiting for me there with silver-framed glasses and her hair in a tight bun. She wore a white lab coat over a dark violet suit. She smiled when I walked in and sat down across from her in yet another cold metal chair. What was it with these things? Did we lose all wooden chairs in the Earth’s destruction?

“Hello, Scarlett. My name is Dr. Tiana Warwick. I’ll be doing your psych evaluation for the next few days.” Her voice was unnervingly similar to the mechanical one I’d heard during my x-ray scan. A guard had warned me that our interactions were recorded and that if I displayed any overt aggression, I’d be sent back to my cell. Thus, I sat very still with my arms crossed staring at her with a blank expression.

“Why don’t you start by telling me a little about yourself?”

I stared at her. The silence stretched for over a minute. Her perfectly arched eyebrows lifted a fraction and she wrote something on the clipboard in front of her.

“Okay. Would you like to talk about your relationship with your brother?”

Again, I said nothing. She scribbled something else down. I found myself annoyed with this fact.

“Is there a particular reason you don’t want to talk to me?”

Finally, I couldn’t resist. “Oh, I don’t know, Doc. Planet blowing up changes a girl.”

“This is a very serious loss, Scarlett. I think it would be healthy if you expressed how you feel about it.”

I smiled, but it was completely hollow. “I would, but the guard outside told me that I’d be dragged back to my cell if I expressed any ‘overt anger’ at you.”

“So it makes you feel angry?”

“Does it make *you* feel angry?”

Her jaw shifted just barely. I could tell I’d surprised her. “This session isn’t about me. I asked you.”

“Well, you’re the expert. Why don’t you tell me how I feel?”

The hostility in my tone made something in her brown eyes light up. She clasped her hands and laid them on the clipboard in her lap.

“Fine. If you like, I can do a cold read on you.”

I shrugged. “Knock yourself out.”

She let her gaze rake over me from head to toe. “You use your anger as a way to get attention. It’s not narcissistic—it’s compulsive. I’m thinking that you didn’t receive a lot of attention from your father as a child and so you developed a problem with male authority as well as authority in general. You are very intelligent, based on the way you talk and how you observe everything in a room before reacting to it, and you use vulgarity to make people subconsciously underestimate you so that you have the chance to manipulate them later on if the circumstance arises. You’re aware of how attractive you are and you use it as a weapon rather than as a crutch. I was told that you were a thief before entering the Rosewoods’ mansion and that leads me to believe you were recently made an orphan. You did not relax around me just because I’m female and so I think that there was some tension between you and your mother figure. You let your actions make you seem like a brat, but it is mostly likely because you don’t want people to be disappointed in your true self so you act rude in order to keep yourself safe.”

I watched her for a moment and then nodded. “Very good, Dr. Warwick. Clearly, you went to the School of Blatant Female Stereotypes and got your degree.”

She flashed me a thin smile. “Thank you. But the bottom line is this: you will not be released into the women’s division of the infantry until I clear you. It would be in your best interest to cooperate.”

“You just described me as self-destructive. What makes you think I’ll cooperate if I’m just an angry brat?”

“I also said that you were smart. You know the consequences of acting out in here and they do not outweigh the benefits.”

We stared at each other through another bout of silence. I broke it first.

“One condition: you do not ask anything about my brother. Ever.”

“Agreed.”

“Thank you.” Another scribble. Damn her.

“So tell me about yourself, Scarlett.”

“My father murdered my mother when I was twelve years old and I had a near-rape experience at sixteen.”

\*

## CHAPTER SIX

## DUKE

As soon as I reached the dormitories where the soldiers were, I immediately wanted to be back in my jail cell.

The guard explained that I would be arriving a mere ten minutes before the T.I. (“Training Instructor,” he answered with an annoyed tone) would call for line formation. The dorms were on the lowest decks of the shuttle, occupying six levels. It turns out that the shuttle that the Rosewoods’ boarded was military bound as Mr. Rosewood acted as one of the commanding officers. The elevator usage was restricted for recruits—a protection precaution in case unauthorized personnel tried to enter certain floors—so we had to walk down more flights of stairs than I cared to count before arriving.

The floors were white linoleum, the walls were dark green, and there were bunk beds lining them from end to end. The room stretched forever. I lost count how many bunks were on this level. It had to be over fifty on each side.

The guard undid my handcuffs and warned me to be ready. When the doors opened again, it would be the T.I. and I didn’t want to screw up my first impression with him.

Unfortunately, there were only two doors leading into the dorms: the one I came in through, and the emergency door on the opposite side, which would trigger an alarm if entered. Thus, all the trainees’ eyes went to me when I stepped inside. Most of them went back to frantically straightening their bunks, but I knew already that my presence was going to be a problem when I noticed that all of the bunks had identification numbers. I was an uninvited guest and so there wouldn’t be one for me. Fantastic.

It also didn’t help that they were wearing dark green uniforms that matched the walls and I was wearing the black turtleneck and cargo pants from when we had pulled the heist, so I stuck out even more as I walked down the aisle, trying to figure out where I was going to sleep. It took me nearly two minutes to walk from one side of the room to the other and I discovered that there was little to no extra space except next to the emergency exit. The guard hadn’t said anything about giving me supplies, either, so I was completely out of luck.

“And you are?” One of the trainees asked with a voice full of disbelief as I took a seat beside the door. I regarded him with a contemplative look before deciding to reply. He had a bit of a Russian accent that years of English couldn’t reprogram and freckles dotted over his cheeks to match the flaming red hair. I estimated he was maybe two or three years older than me.

“Duke.”

“You got a last name, Duke?”

I set my jaw. “Duke Nam.”

“Holy shit, are you serious?” A gangly dark-haired boy around my age snorted with a gleeful expression.

“Duke Nam? Do you know who that sounds like?”

I sighed. “Yes, I’ve heard it before.”

The Russian guy looked confused. “Heard what?”

“Duke Nam is kinda like Duke Nukem. He’s an old video game character from back in the day. Shit, I wish my name sounded that cool. I’m Sam. That’s Han.”

Sam studied me for a moment. “Where’s your uniform?”

“I don’t have one yet. I’m...new.” Explaining my plight to them would be a mistake. I didn’t know if these boys had been selected voluntarily or not. Telling them I was a criminal wouldn’t benefit me in any way.

“Sorry to hear that,” Han replied with absolutely no sympathy. “Doesn’t look like you’ve got a bunk tonight.”

I nearly smiled when I thought about where I had been sleeping beforehand and that it wasn’t much worse than this place, but I chose not to reply.

“You’d better get up. We’re expecting the T.I. any minute,” Sam said, glancing nervously at the other end of the room. I pushed up on my hands, starting to stand, and then the door behind me opened. I froze.

When I turned my head, there was a bald black man standing there in a navy suit much like General Bridgewater’s. A bit of grey bled into his goatee around the edges and his skin was nearly as dark as his polished shoes. In an instant, the trainees lined up and I followed suit, allowing my expression to go blank. He walked up and down the aisle once without saying anything but I could tell he noticed every object in the room.

“My name...is Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood.”

*Shit.*

“I am in charge of every man currently staying on this floor. That air you’re breathing? Mine. The blood in your veins? Mine. The artificial gravity, the water you’ll get to enjoy every once in a blue moon, the clothes on your back, and the goddamn empty space around you is my world and you will do your very best to abide by it if you want to live. Do you understand me, trainees?”

Dozens of voices answered, “Yes, sir!”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“That’s more like it,” the older man mused. “You will address me by my full title at all times, is that understood, trainees?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Beautiful. You’ve been on this hunk of junk for a good while now and that’s the last vacation you ever got. If you want these alien shit-stains to pay for what they’ve done, then you will delete every memory in your mind in order to become weapons capable of destroying them all. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

He walked back over to our area and stood in front of me, sizing me up as I stood there staring at the wall. He crossed his hands in front of him and smiled.

“Well, well. Good to see you, trainee. And what might your name be?”

“Duke Nam, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!” I said at full volume.

He chuckled. “Motherfucker, I *know* your name. But these fine gentlemen do not. Say it again for me, trainee.”

“Duke Nam, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Nice name. Tough. I’m sure your girlfriends must have loved it.”

A couple chuckles sounded from down the line. If he heard them, he ignored it. Sergeant Rosewood stepped close, hoping that I would flinch but I didn’t.

“Let me make one thing clear to you, trainee. You do not deserve to be here. You better thank whatever god you worship that you don’t slip up once or I’ll put your ass in solitary confinement for the rest of your miserable life or until time stops, whichever happens first. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

He turned, glancing at the lines again. “Pick up your skirts, ladies. It’s time to get to work. We’re gonna play a little game called Thud.”

I had played a lot of games in my nineteen years of living, but none of them were anything like Thud.

For good reason.

We stood at the bottom of the winding staircase that led to the floors above us. The steps were metal and the stairwell was narrow, meaning that only three trainees could line up at a time. Sergeant Rosewood stood in front of the first trainees to explain the rules.

“You are going to run up all fifteen flights of these stairs. If any one of you trips or falls, the entire troop will walk back down the stairs and start over. You will continue this exercise until I say stop. Do you understand me, trainees?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Good. Now march!”

We made it four floors up before the first trainee tripped, making a dull sound against the unforgiving steps. There were groans and a handful of curses as we went back down the stairs to start over. Anyone caught talking was forced to do one hundred push ups at the sergeant’s feet while we all waited, watching him struggle. The second time, we only made it two flights because the guy who had done the push ups fell. The third time, we made it eight flights. Fourth, five. Fifth, six. Sixth, ten. Seventh, thirteen. Eighth, nine. Ninth, ten. Tenth, twelve. Eleventh, fourteen. Twelfth, thirteen. Thirteenth, fifteen.

By the time we walked back down the final time, my thighs felt like rubber bands that had been stretched across a bicycle from wheel to wheel. The pants chaffed against my calves until they were raw and itchy, but I couldn’t scratch them while we were in line formation. Sweat poured over every inch of my skin beneath the woolen shirt. I tried visualizing a bathtub full of ice and it helped somewhat. Mind over matter.

“Was that fun, trainees?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Glad to hear it. You have exactly three minutes to hit the showers and another five minutes to get back here in line. Anyone who is late will do another round of Thud. Is that understood, trainees?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Good. You are dismissed.”

Pandemonium erupted. Everyone grabbed their individual bars of soap and raced for the stairs. The showers were on the floor below us. I didn’t have anything to clean myself with nor did I have a uniform, but I still took a shower anyway to wash away the sweat. Guys tripped over each other toweling off and racing back up the stairs to get back in line. At least twenty people were sentenced to another round of Thud. We all waited for them, slowly dripping on the linoleum and shivering in the ice-cold room. I found myself wishing my hair were shorter. I’d slicked it back in the shower, but the water

dripped onto my shoulders and made me want to shiver to warm up. Just as the last trainee came in from his latest game of Thud, I sneezed.

Sergeant Rosewood's head whipped around—a bizarre movement that reminded me of an owl with a goatee. “Was that you, Nam?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Did you get your germs all over my nice clean floor?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“That’s a damn fine job, trainee. You’re gonna spend the rest of the night cleaning your spot until it shines like the sun.” He marched over to someone’s bunk and grabbed a shirt, tossing it in my direction. I knelt and began scrubbing the spot, quieting the raging monster of an ego inside me that wanted to tell him to shove this shirt right up his ass.

“The rest of you, head upstairs. Orientation starts in three minutes. Straight line. If I see any of you mess it up or break rank, that’s one hundred push ups.”

The trainees marched out, leaving me behind. I stayed where I was, polishing the same spot. Water dripped from my hair, giving me new things to mop up every few seconds, and some of it ran into my eyes, making them sting. I stopped, breathing hard, my shoulders and arms shaking like leaves in the wind on a cold morning. Wind that I would never feel on my face again.

I squeezed my eyes shut and told myself not to think about it. *Get it together, Duke.*

The nub on my hand stung from deep within and I ignored it. It was an ugly little reminder that the past never left me. It clung to my back like a zombie, its undead flesh pressing heavy against my skin, wanting to devour me whole. I had been running from it for as long as I could remember.

When I opened my eyes again, the water had turned a sickening dark red and I scrambled backwards, a scream building my throat. Sticky sweet, everywhere. Under my shoes. Splattered on the counter. Dripping from the sink.

I shook my head frantically and the visions stopped, bringing me back to the empty room. My breathing slowed but the shock raced through my veins for another handful of seconds. I ran a hand through my sopping hair and went back to cleaning.

God help me.

\*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## SCARLETT

Dr. Warwick couldn't hide the shock on her face, even though it wasn't the exact same look I was used to when I told people my father had murdered my mother when I was twelve. Some people gawked. Others turned white and averted their eyes, not wanting to draw attention to the ugly thought. She, however, licked her lips and crossed her legs, seeming to take a moment to process this information, or decide if I were lying.

"Do you want to talk about that with me?"

"Do you?"

She adjusted her glasses. "It may help me to understand you better, but that's your decision to make."

The doctor paused and her voice softened. "Were you there when it happened?"

"No. I walked in after he'd already left. My brother was the first to find them."

Dr. Warwick lifted her pen once more. "How did she die?"

"Stabbed," I said. "Once in the stomach, twice in the chest. My father walked out the front door, got in his car, and drove away. The authorities never found him."

A bitter laugh escaped my throat. "Guess they never will, with the Earth gone and all. Maybe that's the silver lining."

"What happened after that?"

"Social services. The rest of our family lived in Korea. They are...*were* very poor so they couldn't afford to keep us. We went to a foster family for a while, but they didn't really care much about us. They just wanted a check from the government. When my brother turned sixteen, we ran away and got jobs to make rent. He started out taking odd jobs outside of Home Depot and then eventually got hired to work there. Once I was sixteen, I got a job at a Panera. My boss and I had a...misunderstanding one night."

"Do you feel it's your fault?"

I nodded. "I was stupid. It could have been prevented, but I got curious. With my mother dead, I didn't really know anything about boys and sex."

"How was it resolved?"

I winced and squirmed in my chair. "Not well."

"You're being evasive. That's repression, and repression is not going to help you control your anger."

"How is dragging up my past going to help?"

"We need to get to the root of the problem. Why do you feel so resentful towards men of authority? What's the cause of your impulsive nature? These are the answers I'm looking for, Scarlett. You can't continue on like this or you'll be locked up for the rest of your life."

"Like that would really be a bad thing? I'm not a good person, Dr. Warwick. The army wouldn't be suffering that much of a loss if you didn't clear me."

"So that's it? You'd rather resign yourself to be alone and imprisoned for the rest of your life?"

I stared at her. She shook her head. "What did you do?"

I frowned. "What?"

“You had to have done something awful that you won’t admit to that makes you do this to yourself. You’re actively trying to sabotage your own life because you think you’re inadequate. So what is it?”

My throat felt dry. I swallowed. The answer crawled up the back of my tongue, desperate to find its way out. Just as my lips parted, I heard another sound. A loud whooping, similar to a police siren. A male’s voice came over the intercom, startling the both of us.

“Attention all personnel: please report to your dormitories. All activity aboard the shuttle has been canceled until further notice. Proceed immediately to your lodgings.”

Dr. Warwick frowned, standing up and heading for the door. I stood, not sure of what to do just yet. The door started to close and I caught it, trying to listen in as the doctor addressed the guard in front of the room.

“What’s going on?”

“Don’t know, ma’am. But that’s a Code Nine so I’m going to have to escort the two of you out of this facility.”

“Lionel, don’t you stand here and lie to me,” Dr. Warwick snapped, surprising me with the harshness in her tone.

“Tiana,” the guard said with a patient voice. “Please just head for your room. I’ll tell you what I know after the evacuation is over. I promise.”

She gave him a sour look and then beckoned for me to follow her. The guard put my handcuffs back on, much to my annoyance, and we walked at a brisk pace out of the psychology ward. She took the elevator to one of the upper floors and then the guard and I walked down the stairs to the prison section. I’d gotten a quick peek at the doctor’s quarters and everyone seemed as confused as Warwick had been. My mind instantly started to formulate possibilities: an imminent attack, a mutiny, or maybe one of the ship’s systems had started to fail. None of these theories were fun to entertain in my head.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got anything to eat in one of your eight million pockets?” I asked as we walked down the hallway to my cell. The guard didn’t reply. I thought about it for a moment and then tried again.

“I haven’t eaten in seven hours. I would appreciate it if you found something for me to eat, if you can.”

He opened my cell and I went in without a fight. He paused and then nodded. “I have to check in with my squad, but I’ll be back shortly with something.”

“Thank you.”

The guard’s goggles hid his eyes but I could tell he was surprised. “You’re...welcome.”

He walked off. I sat on my cot and tried not to think about how much the sirens reminded me of home.

\*

DUKE

“What do you think it is? Generator’s gone out? Someone’s got Space Madness?”

“Nah, they’d only shut down a section of the ship for that. This is full lockdown. Shit just got real.”

“You think it’s the enemy?”

“I dunno, man. Do I look like an intelligence officer?”

“Obviously not.”

“Ah, shut up. If we’re about to die, I don’t want my last word to be with your dumb ass.”

“Too late.”

The trainees gathered in groups by their bunks to speculate about the sudden order for everyone to return to their lodgings. Thankfully, this rescued me from cleaning duty as Sergeant Rosewood was called away to meet with the other military leaders.

Han sat on his bed with his large fingers drumming on the mattress while Sam leaned against the post of his bed, chewing one corner of his lapel. I sat on the floor, legs crossed, soaking in the scattered conversations and analyzing them.

“So what do you think this is all about?” Sam asked me, unable to hide his trepidation.

I sighed, annoyed that my concentration had been broken. “I don’t know much more than you guys do. Hell, I probably know less.”

“Got that right,” Han snorted. I ignored the comment.

Sam continued as if he hadn’t said anything. “C’mon, throw me a bone here. What do you think it is?”

I went silent, thinking. “They want us out of the way. That makes me think they’ve made contact with the Bergleute.”

Sam’s brown eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“You asked.”

He glanced at Han. “What about you?”

“He could be right,” the big guy said. “Standard protocol is to secure everyone aboard and then construct a plan from there. If it’s as serious as we think...we probably won’t be briefed on it.”

Sam frowned. “That’s bullshit. We’re already gonna lay down our lives for what’s left of the world’s population. The least they can do is tell us the truth.”

I shrugged. “He’s only guessing. They might tell us, they might not.”

“Oh yeah? How much did they tell you before they brought you in?”

“Not much,” I said, which wasn’t a lie. “What about you? How were you recruited?”

“I was set to enter basic training in the fall. They told me this was an early special program they were prepping me for and put me up with other recruits. That’s where I met Han, actually. We knew something was fishy based on who they were taking for this program, though.”

“How so?”

“People weren’t really chosen for endurance or stamina. It’s sort of like they were collecting specimens. I mean, look at all the different ethnicities in this room alone,” Sam said, gesturing to the other trainees. I glanced around the room, noting that he was right. There were boys from nearly every continent, most of them in their late teens or early twenties. That was definitely on purpose.

“They gave us a speech about how we’d be humanity’s last hope and all that stuff, but I didn’t take it seriously. I wish I had. I mean, I’m happy to be alive but...thinking about all those people who didn’t have a choice. Sucks, you know?”

I lowered my eyes to the floor. “Yeah.”

“That’s all the more reason for them to tell us,” Han insisted, his brow furrowing in anger. “We were chosen. They cannot treat us like children.”

“Truth among the masses almost always leads to panic,” I interrupted. “That’s why they didn’t tell the general public about the Bergleute. Can you imagine what would have happened? Society itself would have collapsed overnight.”

“Not them. Us. We have training. We have discipline.”

“But that’s not what they’re looking for. They want obedience. We’re not here to be independent thinkers, we’re here to follow orders.”

“He’s right,” Sam murmured. “We’re soldiers, not leaders. Maybe we should just face the facts.”

“That’s not good enough.”

I arched an eyebrow. “What are you gonna do about it?”

“What if we bribed one of the guards to tell us what’s going on?”

“C’mon, money died with the Earth,” Sam groaned. “Plus, I left my fifties in my other uniform. We’ve got nothing they want, unless you can get some keys from the women’s dorms.”

“What if we figured out a way to eavesdrop on the leaders’ meeting?”

“Dude, their conference room is on the fourteenth floor. How the hell would we even get up there without getting caught?”

They stared at each other and then turned to look at me. I held up my hands.

“Leave me out of this, Larry and Curly.”

“Hey, we didn’t say you had to be a part of it. You could just...y’know...give us an idea,” Sam replied with his most earnest expression.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “No thanks.”

“What? You chicken?”

I shook my head. “Great reverse psychology there, Sam.”

“Damn. He’s too smart. Maybe we should just threaten him.”

That made me chuckle finally. “Look, I’m not gonna help you get yourselves in trouble. We’re probably better off not knowing.”

They ignored me and kept going with theories. “What about the trash chute? It connects all the floors together.”

Sam scoffed. “Yeah, and it would only work if this mission were impossible, if you catch my drift.”

“Ventilation?”

“And *that* would only work if one of us were John McClane. How many American movies have you watched lately?”

I sighed. “You guys are driving me crazy. If you really want to know so bad, you’d have to break into one of the equipment vaults I saw on the way in to get one of those tiny microphone transmitters. Attach it to one of the security guards and that’s your ticket in.”

They went quiet for a moment. “...why the hell didn’t we think of that?”

“No clue.”

“Where’s the closest guard?”

Han pointed to the exit. “Outside that door. I heard something about them taking attendance in a few minutes. That means we’re gonna have to move fast. The vault’s on

the end of the hall beside the elevator. I can pick the lock, but I need something small and metal.”

I tapped the bunk bed. “Mattress spring.”

“Perfect.”

He lifted the mattress and tore a small hole in the cloth, digging out one of the wires and straightening it out. “Sam, you’ll have to be the distraction. Do something to get the guard in here and I’ll go out.”

“Got it.”

Han started for the door. Once he reached the other end of the room, he gave Sam the thumbs up to create his distraction. The gangly teen looked at me.

“Think the guard knows CPR?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” He hit the floor like a sack of potatoes. I nearly jumped out of my skin. It took me a second to realize he was pretending to be incapacitated. Smart move.

The trainees freaked out and crowded around us like little boys around a newly discovered corpse. After they finished gawking, someone had the sense to call for help. The guard appeared within a minute or two, giving Han the chance to slip out. I didn’t exactly approve of their plan that I had unfortunately contributed to, but I played along acting worried about Sam. The guard started CPR and called on his walkie-talkie to request that he be transferred to the medical ward. Curiously, they told him to see if he could get him stabilized and they would send someone if he couldn’t be revived. They didn’t want anyone in the halls. Interesting.

For a moment, I wondered if my hardheaded sister had escaped the medical wing, but she wasn’t dangerous enough to warrant shutting the entire vessel down. Though I’m sure she would be disappointed if I told her so. She seemed to enjoy being a troublemaker, on some level.

I sidled behind the throng of people to see the door, waiting for Han to reappear. Sam and I hadn’t established a sign, but I assumed that he would pretend to come around once his partner in crime came back to his side. He needed to hurry. Sam’s ribs were taking quite the beating from the guard’s rough resuscitation methods.

Mercifully, Han returned and went to Sam’s side, his voice gruff with fake concern.

“C’mon, man, snap out of it!”

Like magic, Sam’s eyes pried open and he let out a dramatic groan that made me stifle a laugh. His audience of course bought it because they didn’t know any better. The guard seemed relieved and instructed him to lie on his bed for a while and let someone know if he felt sick again. We waited for him to go and for the rest of the trainees to lose interest before asking Han how it went.

“Did you get it in place?”

“Yeah, when I patted him on the back and thanked him. Put it right under his collar,” the redhead told us. He unbuttoned his shirt a bit and pulled out the radio receiver and began fiddling with it.

“We can’t stay out in the open like this,” Sam murmured, glancing behind us. “One of the other guys’ll catch on and might tell the Sergeant. I don’t know about you, but I’m not up for another three rounds of Thud.”

Han reached into his backpack and handed us both books. Mine was *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu and Sam's was *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. Interesting choices.

"Here, just act like you're reading. They won't bother us then."

I cracked open the book and leaned my back against the bedpost, doing my best to look casual. Sam did the same. Han grabbed another book and flipped to a random page, keeping his head low so he could hear the receiver. The guys behind us continued talking and paid us no mind.

"Sounds like the guard has reached the meeting room," Han began in a low voice. "I think it's just people on staff in there, no civilians. General Bridgewater's getting ready to speak."

He paused, listening in. "He's saying that the information is completely classified, not to leave the room for any reason. Says anyone who talks will be imprisoned indefinitely. I think he's got some sort of footage to show them."

"Tch. A lot of good that does us," Sam said, but Han shushed him.

"He's saying that the ship picked up an anomaly several miles out from our position. At first, they thought it was one of the ricochets from the other planets the Bergleute destroyed because it was so small but it was giving off an unusual signature."

He heard something else that made his face go blank. I couldn't help staring at him as his skin paled and the freckles stood out like blots of ink on a sheet of paper.

"What?"

"They said they received a...message."

Shock twisted through my guts like a snake. "What kind of message?"

"Just two words, in very bad English. Sounded like, 'please help,'" Han continued, his voice nearly hoarse with disbelief.

"Do they think it's a surviving ship from before the Earth's destruction?" Sam asked, but I could tell he didn't really believe his own question.

"No. The ship is unlike anything they've seen before. General Bridgewater says they let it board in the cargo bay and the alien is in custody."

"Shit," I whispered. "They've got one. I can't believe it."

"What are they gonna do with it? Interrogate it?" Sam asked.

I nodded. "And not nicely. They'll get all the information they can, kill it, and dissect it."

"Smart move. It'll help us find a way to kill them," Han replied. The shock was now replaced with a deep sense of vengeance. I didn't blame him.

"But it still bothers me that it came to us looking for help," I said, looking between the two of them. "It has to know we're going to kill it sooner or later. Why take the risk?"

"You think it's a trick?"

"Could be. Or maybe it really does want our help. Maybe it's one of the aliens that survived after they blew up his planet as well. They didn't tell me if they knew what the Bergleute look like. What about you?"

Both of them shook their heads. "What's he saying now?"

"Be on high alert for an attack. Regular scheduling will commence in 24 hours. That means we're stuck here until then."

The doors to the room opened and Han stuffed the receiver back in his jumpsuit, buttoning it up as we hurried into line formation. I wondered why this guard hadn't been

briefed at the meeting but then I noticed that he had an earpiece and had probably been listening to it. He went down the line with a clipboard calling names. When he was about halfway down, I noticed that a low murmur coming from Han's shirt. A horrible realization came over me: *he accidentally hadn't turned it off.*

Sam mouthed frantically for him to turn it off and he glanced at the guard as the man got closer. Sweat started to bead on his forehead as he lifted one arm and reached inside his jumpsuit. I tapped him on the left leg and opened my palm as he pulled the receiver out. He dropped into my hand just as the guard got over to him and called his name. I slid it into my pocket and continued standing at attention as he came to me next.

"Nam, Duke!"

"Present, sir!" I bellowed, hoping he wouldn't be able to hear the faint murmur coming from my pants. He gave me an odd look and then shrugged.

"Nice set a pipes you got there, son."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Your clothes aren't regulation so I'm gonna have to have you change out of them." He handed me a folded up uniform and I subsequently started having a heart attack as I undressed. His attention went back to the clipboard and I tried to figure out a way to get the receiver out of my pants pocket without him noticing. I pretended to drop my shirt and picked it up, but as I went, I slipped the receiver out of its hiding spot and kept it in my palm. I put the uniform on and managed to tuck it in the band of my boxers as I finished buttoning the pants.

I handed him my old clothes and he went on his way. A relieved sigh escaped me. We were safe for now.

"Your orders are to study the materials you received during orientation and to stay in this room. If you disobey, you will be subjected to punishment directly from Staff Sergeant Rosewood. Instructions for bathroom breaks and lunch will be given later."

The guard closed the door and I heard it lock behind him. Trapped. Fantastic.

Han let out a long rush of breath, glancing at me with a grateful expression.

"Thanks."

"Forget it. At least we have a link to the outside. We just have to be a little more careful," I said, handing it back to him once the guys broke out of line.

"Agreed. I'm sure a lot has happened during the attendance. He's probably no longer at the meeting. I'll keep an ear open to see if anything else comes up. For now, we just have to wait."

"My favorite game," Sam said with a dry voice, climbing the ladder up to his bunk above Han's. I resumed my spot on the floor, trying to ignore the cold linoleum underneath my ass, but then Han tossed me his blanket. He gave me a small smile when I sent him a questioning look.

"You've earned it."

\*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## SCARLETT

“So,” I said through a mouthful of ham sandwich. “I don’t suppose you can tell me what’s going on?”

The guard stared at me for a moment and then smirked ever so slightly. “Sorry. Not my department.”

“Not even if I ask nicely?”

“Afraid not.”

I shrugged. “Well, you do what you can.”

My casual words were nothing more than an act. I was trying so hard not to stuff the sandwich in my mouth in one bite that my hands were shaking. I hadn’t really realized it had been hours since my last meal. We ate before the heist back on Earth, nothing fancy, just a bucket of KFC’s. He’d gotten me something from the break room—thin slices of ham, a layer of mayo, a piece of American cheese, all on two pieces of wheat bread. It was like a meal of the gods to me.

I licked my fingers and nibbled on any crumbs I found, which caused the guard to chuckle. “You really were hungry, huh?”

“Starving,” I sighed as I leaned my back against the wall. They had taken my sweatshirt sometime after my brother and I arrived on the shuttle and I honestly missed it. The blanket could only do so much against the cold. Still, I wrapped it around my shoulders and noticed that the guard didn’t immediately leave. He didn’t seem to be in a hurry. It had been about three hours since the lockdown. Only the guards were allowed out and about.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why...are you being so nice to me?”

He seemed to think about this for a moment. “For one, you stop being such a hard ass and asked nicely for the food.”

He had a point. I let it slide. “Two, I’ve got nothing better to do right now. There’s no activity and I’m on duty for the next eight hours.”

The guard stepped a little closer, lowering his voice. “And three, between you and me, you gave Simmons a bloody nose. I hate that guy. He’s such a pain in the ass.”

I giggled. “Happy to help.”

He grinned. “Though I’d be careful if I were you. Because of his failure to keep you contained, he’s been reassigned to another division. If he sees you again, I’m sure he’ll be holding a grudge.”

I snorted. “Well, I doubt I’ll be out and about any time soon so I think we’re safe.”

The guard stepped back, leaning against the bars on the opposite cell. “So what’s with you, anyway? All they told me is that you snuck aboard the Rosewoods’ shuttle and that’s what landed you here. Standard procedure would have called for your release after interrogation.”

“I have...problems with my temper. And that’s putting it nicely,” I admitted, letting some of the humor drop out of my voice.

“They want my behavior adjusted before I join the ranks.”

“You okay with that?”

“Don’t really have a choice.”

“Point taken.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a quarter. I watched with interest as he pulled off his glove and started to flip it across his knuckles. At first, I wondered if he were trying to impress me but then I picked up on the fidgety nature of the movement.

“You used to smoke, didn’t you?”

He lifted his goggles to look at me and I could see his eyes—brown. He looked to be in his mid-thirties and I could tell he was of Middle Eastern descent, though he didn’t have an accent.

“How’d you know?”

“You look like you’re the kind of smoker who needs something to do with his hands. They won’t let you smoke out here because of the limited oxygen supply, I’m guessing.”

He nodded. “Yup. Hardest thing I ever had to do was give ‘em up. But I also did it for my baby girl so it’s not all bad.”

“How old?”

“Three. She’s on one of the other shuttles. They’re set to transfer over here when we reach the rendezvous point.”

“Where’s that?”

“Not far from here. They want us at a safe distance in case the Bergleute feel the need to pick a fight. Doubtful, but better safe than sorry.” He stopped and then frowned.

“I probably wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t.”

“Thanks,” he grunted.

I hid another smile. “So what are you allowed to tell me? Can I ask anything about the ship?”

He eyed me. “Depends. I can’t tell you anything that would help you escape your cell again. I’d rather not get reassigned.”

I grinned, holding up my hand. “Scout’s honor I won’t try again. I meant about the technology. The stuff in here—artificial gravity, traveling at the speed of light...this is all stuff I’ve seen in sci-fi movies. How did we get this advanced?”

“Truthfully? This tech’s been around for longer than you think. Thirty, forty years, actually.”

My jaw dropped. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“Nope. It’s called hiding in plain sight. The government knew people wouldn’t really get suspicious about things they see in movies so we put it all out there. They didn’t release this stuff to the public because most of it would be used for the Starlight program. We couldn’t risk the Starlight Contingency coming to light so all the tech was strictly utilized for the Contingency only.”

“Damn shame. I could have used a jetpack back on Earth,” I lamented.

He chuckled again. “Flying cars and jetpacks were pure fantasy. They never intended to actually make them. People have a hard enough time not killing themselves on the ground, forget the sky.”

“So the Contingency was a worldwide agreement instead of just the United States?”

He nodded. “I was stationed in Pakistan. The idea originally came from Germany and they reached out to all the other nations for suggestions about what to do. Things got pretty ugly, but as time went on, they put their differences aside. Those space stations that they made a big deal about in the 2020’s were fronts for the military spacecrafts. We sent the parts up and then built them in space to avoid suspicion.”

“How many battle fleets were there?”

He shook his head. “Can’t remember. Hundreds.”

I winced. “Jesus. I can’t believe they didn’t make it.”

“Yeah. We had a hell of a run, though.”

He sighed, flipping the coin into his palm and closing his hand around it. “It’s hard thinking about the Earth not being there any more. No more Sunday walks, no more Saturday nights at the bar, no more ocean, no more sky. Shit. I don’t know how people are getting by these days.”

“Not thinking about it helps,” I murmured, resting my chin on my knee.

“It won’t work forever.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

He met my eyes and smiled again. “Y’know, you’re alright.”

“I try.”

“Uh-huh. I’ve got to go check in. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

He started to walk away and I called out to him. “What’s your name?”

“Evans.”

“I like it. See you around, Evans.”

He left. I lay down on the cot and tugged the blanket around me. I was still alone, but for the first time, it didn’t feel quite so terrible.

*The water was cold, ice cold, so cold that my skin went numb. It was at chest level, lapping against my breastbone and making the tank top stick to me like glue. I had never seen this room before—the walls were white as chalk but the water was tinted blue. The pool had to be about twenty feet across and my feet touched the bottom so it wasn’t very deep.*

*A strange gurgling sound made me turn. To my horror, there was someone at the other end of the pool with his thin arms thrashing as he tried to stay afloat.*

*“Hold on, I’m coming!” I shouted, plunging in. I swam in quick, strong strokes over to the boy and grabbed him around the midsection. As soon as my hands went around him, he clung to me, coughing mouthfuls of water out of his lungs. I waded over to the steps leading into the pool and climbed out, sitting him down. He was so small and thin with brown hair plastered over his eyes and his lips were nearly purple. He would have died in seconds if I hadn’t gotten to him. He continued coughing up water while I rubbed his bare back in calming circles.*

*“Just keep breathing. You’re alright,” I said in my most soothing voice. When all the water was gone, he looked up at me with large brown eyes that were red in the corners as if he had been crying.*

*“Can you help me get it off?”*

*“Off?” I asked, confused. That was when I felt it. When I drew my hand away from his back, his pasty skin came off in wet clumps, sticking to my hands. I should have panicked but I didn’t because he wasn’t upset by this bizarre development. I crawled behind him and found that there was a strange greenish brown skin poking through the hole I’d made, almost the color of a turtle’s shell. I stuck my fingers into the hole and continued peeling off the layer along his back. The skin came off easily, almost like a snake’s yearly shedding. I removed all of it from his back and shoulders, moving on to his arms next. He had four fingers on each hand with black claws at the end and a hard exoskeleton covered everywhere else.*

*Eventually, the only thing left was his face and I carefully pulled off the skin from his neck upward, revealing his head. His nose and mouth were like a hawk’s beak, curved with two pinpricks as nostrils, and each of his four eyes had a thin film over them like a frog’s rather than an eyelid. His eyes were completely black with a tiny dot of white in the middle. The top of his skull formed a point and there were two oval-shaped ears on either side of the sharp angle.*

*I dropped the skin and stared at him in wonderment. “What are you?”*

*“In trouble,” he whispered. The creature reached up and touched the side of my face. The clawed hand was surprisingly delicate against my skin.*

*“Please help me. I’m the only one who got out. They need us. They need you.”*

*“Who does?”*

*“Shasar. My people. They’re dying.”*

*I shook my head. “I don’t understand. Why do you need my help? I have no power.”*

*“You have the power to hear and to speak. Do not underestimate them.”*

*Before I could answer him, there was a sharp tapping sound that nearly deafened me.*

I came out of the dream gasping for air like I had been the one drowning. My eyes focused to see the guard, Evans, tapping on the bars. It took some effort, but I managed to sit upright and rub my eyes.

“I’m up, I’m up. What is it? Do I get a shower break?”

“You’ve been summoned.”

“By whom?”

“Captain Hallstead.”

My eyebrows shot up so high that they almost vanished beneath my hairline.

“Um...why?”

“He didn’t specify.”

“...I can’t say no, can I?”

“Not really.”

I tossed the blanket down and stood as he opened the door. That was when I noticed the solemn expression on his face. His entire posture and demeanor changed. Something was wrong, very wrong.

He put the handcuffs on me and we walked to the stairs. “How many floors up?”

“We’re going to the fourteenth floor.”

“What’s up there?”

“Conference rooms.”

“Oh, good. I thought it was the dorms.”

He made a noise. "It's not *that* kind of summon."

"Hey, you never know. We are on a military vessel populated mostly by men."

As we walked, I tried to come up with a reason why he wanted to see me but couldn't theorize anything logical, especially since the lockdown was still enacted. I had only been asleep for roughly four hours. Something must have happened. For a second, I thought about Duke and then panic gripped me. What if he was hurt? What if he had gotten sick? What if I lost him?

I clenched my hands into fists and told myself to calm down. Duke could take care of himself. He had proven that time and time again.

We opened the door to the fourteenth floor and two more guards greeted us. They gave me suspicious looks until Evans explained that the Captain wanted to see me and then relaxed and let us by. The hallway was wide, unlike the interrogation and therapy wards, and there were closed doors everywhere. At the end of the hall was a set of double doors like the ones to an auditorium guarded by three armed men. Evans showed them his entry card and they let me in while he stayed outside.

The room was indeed an auditorium with stadium seating. The cushioned seats all faced a large console like the one on the deck of the ship. The huge holographic projector was lit up with security camera footage that Captain Hallstead was rifling through when I walked in. The eerie blue screen cast pale light over his face and I realized how gravely he seemed, as if he hadn't slept in a while. He probably hadn't.

"Scarlett," he said.

I walked over to him, cautious but civil. "Captain. I understand I've been summoned."

"Yes, you have," he replied, giving me nothing but that intense stare of his. I fought the urge to squirm under the weight his heavy grey eyes.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No. In fact, it seems like you've done something very useful. I don't know how you did it, either, which is the amazing part," he admitted.

I couldn't hide my confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Before I explain, I need you to understand something." He started touching panels on the holographic projector as he spoke.

"What you're about to see is completely classified. If you tell anyone about it, anyone at all, you will be put in solitary confinement for the rest of your life with no chance for release. Is that clear?"

I cleared my throat. "Crystal."

Hallstead took a deep breath. "Several hours ago, we received a message from a small craft of some sort pleading with us for help. At first, we thought it was an escape shuttle from Earth, but when it got closer we realized the ship was not from our world. It was alien."

My eyes widened. He continued. "We let the vessel dock with our cargo and went to apprehend what we thought would be one of the Bergleute. We assumed they were trying to set some sort of trap, but what we found inside was not one of them. It was a completely different type of alien altogether. We took it to the interrogation room to get some answers but it didn't understand what we wanted. The alien's English seems very limited and it could only say a few words. It kept asking us for help."

A cold feeling slithered up my spine as he went on. “General Bridgewater thought it was a trick of some kind to catch us off guard, but his tactics scared it so badly that it wouldn’t talk to him any longer. Instead, it asked for you.”

My mouth fell open. “Me? What the hell do you mean it asked for me?”

“He said your name, Scarlett. First and last.”

“That’s impossible, Captain.”

He touched one last panel and brought up a picture of the alien. I stumbled backwards.

It was the creature from my dream.

“Shit,” I whispered. “Holy *shit*. That wasn’t a dream. It was...contacting me.”

“I figured as much. You were tossing and turning in your sleep right when we think it made telepathic contact. A few hours ago, it retreated into some sort of catatonic state and we think that’s when it somehow connected with you in your dreams,” Hallstead explained.

I regained control of myself enough to ask a question. “What do you want me to do?”

“Talk to it. Find out what it wants.”

I shook my head. “You can’t be serious. I don’t know how to negotiate—I can’t even communicate properly with human beings! That’s why you put me in therapy!”

“You have to.”

“There’s got to be someone better. It’s a mistake. It probably didn’t mean to contact me. You can get my brother to do it, I’m sure he’d be better at this—” I babbled as he stepped towards me. He reached out and I flinched, half-expecting him to hit me, but instead he laid his hands on my shoulders.

“Scarlett, you’re the only one who can do this. It doesn’t matter if you’re ready or not. It chose you. Just you.”

“But what if I fail? You can’t put all your hopes on me, I’m not...I’m not...” I pressed my lips together, glancing away.

“You’re not what?” he snapped, forcing me to finish the sentence.

“Good enough. I’m not good enough. I never was. I was just lucky. That’s all I’ve ever been,” I whispered, staring at his chest because the eye contact was too much for me to handle in my current state.

He didn’t say anything for a handful of seconds. Then he lifted my chin and made me look at him. “There were 7.3 billion people on the Earth before it exploded. Seven billion. Now there are only one hundred million and two left. You are one of those fortunate few for a reason, Scarlett. What are the odds that you and your brother made it into a shuttle literally moments before everyone else dies? A million to one? Well, guess what? You’re the one. Literally.”

A choked laugh escaped my dry throat. “That’s pretty corny, Captain.”

A smirk tugged at the edge of his lips. “Maybe so. But I’m still right. You wouldn’t have survived if you weren’t enough. So suck it up, get in there, and do your job.”

I took a deep breath and straightened my shoulders. “Yes, sir.”

In a miraculous rare moment, Captain Hallstead actually smiled. Not a smirk but a smile. It was like seeing a solar eclipse—a once in a lifetime phenomenon. I caught myself wishing he’d always look at me like that before reality returned in the form of the

door opening and the guard telling us that General Bridgewater was waiting. Captain Hallstead quickly dropped his hands from where they had rested on my shoulders and I remembered how cold it was without them. Damn.

They led me out of the auditorium and to a conference room near the end of the hallway. Hallstead opened the door, revealing that there was a separate room with a one-way glass that looked into the main one. It had been cleared out except for an oak table and four chairs—three behind the table and one where the alien sat. My breath caught in my throat.

At first, it didn't even look like the alien until I stepped a little closer and peered through the mirror. What sat on the chair appeared to be a huge greenish brown pod shaped like a pistachio. My eyes traced the seams in the shell and then I put it together. It could apparently curl up almost like a turtle and pull its limbs to its body so that they fit like puzzle pieces. Interesting survival tactic. Still, I realized it was probably scared.

"Go on," Hallstead said. "I'll monitor from here. You'll be safe."

I nodded and took a deep breath, opening the door into the conference room.

The alien didn't stir when I walked, slow and steady, over to its chair. Tension sang up and down my arms, in my shoulders, in my spine, and I had to force myself to take even breaths. Each footstep felt absurdly loud, even for combat boots. When I was about a foot away, I bit my bottom lip and tried to think of what I should say.

"Hey there," I said softly. "It's Scarlett. The girl from the dream."

No response. "You contacted me a few hours ago. You asked for my help and so I came to talk to you."

Still nothing. I wiped my sweaty palms against my pants leg and pulled up a chair. The entire situation was surreal enough, but I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that I was talking to a gigantic nut-shaped alien.

"It's okay if you don't trust me. I don't blame you. The men who took you in aren't very nice. They probably tried to hurt you like they did me when I was brought here. I'm sorry you had to go through that. I know it doesn't mean much, but we're not all like that," I continued. There was no way to tell if he even understood me but once the words started they flowed out of me like water.

"In case you're wondering, we call ourselves 'human beings.' We're from Earth. Well...we *were* from Earth. The Bergleute destroyed it so we're homeless now. Is that what happened to you?"

Silence. I nodded. "Yeah. I figured as much. I guess we're both orphans."

"*What does orphan mean?*"

I jumped right out of my seat. A dreamy, child-like voice had spoken, but the alien hadn't moved. Stranger still, I hadn't exactly heard it with my ears but rather *in my head*.

"What did you say?"

"*Orphan. What does it mean?*" the alien spoke again. I reminded myself to calm down and lowered myself into the chair.

"It means someone who has lost their mother and father."

"*Those words mean 'parents' in your language, correct?*"

"Yes."

I paused. "How are you doing that?"

*“Our minds are linked. I am not speaking in your native tongue, but rather you are understanding what I say in your language through mental manipulation.”*

“That is really confusing.”

*“Shall I explain it further?”*

“Only if you want to. I’d just feel better if you did it out loud so the men watching us don’t think I’m talking to myself.”

*“I am frightened to show myself again. They will hurt me.”*

A wave of sympathy rolled over me. “They won’t hurt you again. That’s why they came and got me. They realized that they were wrong and shouldn’t have treated you that way.”

*“You promise they won’t hurt me?”*

“I promise.”

Slowly, the little cracks in its shell widened and it unfolded its body from its protective state. Its head slid upward and its limbs stretched until it sat mirroring me with its clawed hands on its knees, blinking at me with a curious expression.

*“Does this make you more comfortable?”*

“Yes, it does, thank you. I’m Scarlett. Scarlett Nam. Do you have a name?”

*“Yes. Hatwer.”*

“Nice to meet you, Hatwer.” The pronunciation of its name was interesting—the h had an underlying w-sound to it and the “wer” was pronounced like “where.” The way it talked made me wonder how old it was in their perception of age, but that could be discussed later. The voice also made me think it was male, which also explained the little boy I saw in my dream.

“So why did you come to us? Why do you need our help?”

Hatwer’s head tilted downward and he stared at the floor as if saddened. His beak did not move when he used his telepathy, but I assumed he could say a few words in English since Hallstead and the others had interrogated him earlier.

*“My people are dying. They cannot escape the ones you call the Bergleute. I hoped you would be able to free them.”*

“Where are they?”

*“Aboard the ship. The one that darkens the sky. The one that destroyed your home and mine.”*

“They’re prisoners?”

Hatwer shook his head. *“Worse. They are slaves. The Bergleute discovered our technology—the bright light that pierces the souls of planets. On our planet, we used it for digging new homes. We lived underground. The Bergleute invaded us and killed many to harvest the weapon for their own gain. But they could not use it well so they enslaved the rest of my people to make it work and to serve them always.”*

“God,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

Without thinking, I reached out and touched his right hand. His shell was moist and solid like a crab’s. He cocked his head slightly to the left, watching me.

“What are you doing?”

I withdrew my hand. “Sorry. I was trying to comfort you.”

*“I see. Is that what contact means in your culture?”*

“Sometimes, yes.”

*“Oh. Is there anything your people can do to help us?”*

I felt at a loss for words. The Bergleute had killed nearly our entire race, and this poor alien's as well. Realistically, we wouldn't be able to fight them and free his people, but I wasn't about to tell him that. Not if I had a choice.

"I hope we can, Hatwer. We are training people to fight them. Do you know anything about them that can help us? Their weaknesses? Their strengths? What they look like?"

*"I am afraid I do not know much, but perhaps I can share with you what they look like."*

He hesitated before speaking again. *"I must warn you. It will be...unpleasant."*

"Don't worry—I'm used to that feeling," I admitted with a sad smile.

*"Very well."* All four of his eyes closed and I felt something curl through me, like a feather along the edges of my brain. My eyes fell closed and in the darkness, I could feel Hatwer's mind connected with mine like links clicking into place.

At first, I saw and felt nothing. Then the images smashed into me like an eighteen-wheeler and my senses drowned in a sensation that could only be described as agony.

There were bright green electrical chains hanging from my neck and they were linked to the two aliens on either side of me. We were all connected together standing before a huge metal table, our claws buried in the entrails of a dead beast from light years away. The Bergleute considered its intestines to be a delicacy and the young aliens of my race had small enough hands to remove them without damaging them. We removed the guts and placed them in buckets on the floor, which other aliens picked up in pairs and brought to the washroom. Many of them were smaller and weaker than me, frail from lack of nutrition and having been beaten for not working fast enough. A large conveyor belt above us dropped a new animal every few moments and we had to salvage all the usable parts or we'd be electrocuted by our collars.

One of the smallest aliens standing across from me fainted after the next beast fell, exhausted from hours upon hours of labor. We all froze in horror as the ground beneath us trembled. It was approaching.

A looming shadow fell across our table. I huddled in my spot, not daring to look up and attract its attention. My eyes were downcast enough to see its four bent legs supporting a powerful frame. Two razor sharp claws lay at the end of each foot, tapering up to a huge muscular torso with two arms on each side. Its skin was a mixture of dark grey with black spots and it wore some sort of armor over its chest. A whip hung from its belt right next to a gun modified with our technology—one that could vaporize an enemy at over a hundred steps away.

The Bergleute reached forth a hand and picked up the youngling, which shivered and came awake all at once, screaming for his parents as the predator lifted it and turned off its collar. I could not resist looking up as well into its horrible face. There were six milky white eyes, as thin as slits, on its face and the mandibles housed four overgrown incisors for tearing apart any meat it wanted to devour. A forked tongue dangled out one side of its mouth and globs of spit rolled off. It was hungry.

*"Too tired to work, little one?"* The alien purred in our language. The young one cried and begged for mercy, but the Bergleute merely chuckled.

*"Don't be so modest. You need rest. Come. I will show you your eternal resting place."*

He bit clean through the young one's head. I covered my eyes, trying to block out the sight of its skull crushed into only meat and blood. The horrid crunching sound made me want to vomit and cry until there was nothing left in my glands.

The Bergleute marched away, continuing to feast on the remains of the worker and leaving us all to ferment in the misery and death it left behind.

All at once, my eyes opened and I fell to my knees, gasping for air. Tears streamed from my eyes. *God. God!*

The door burst open behind me and I could hear Hallstead calling my name. Hatwer went back into his shell as they came over, yelling for him not to move. Hallstead knelt beside me, touching my back and trying to make me look at him.

"Scarlett, are you okay? Say something! Can you hear me?"

My chest had constricted too tight for me to speak and all I could feel was Hatwer's fear. It suffocated me like an invisible hand over my nose and mouth.

Hallstead held my face between his hands, searching my eyes for answers. "Scarlett, answer me! What happened?"

I took several gulping breaths and managed to stammer out something. "Not his fault. He d-didn't hurt me. Showed me what the Bergleute did. Fucking horrible monsters."

Hallstead cursed under his breath and took off his suit jacket, draping it over my shoulders. "It's okay. Put your guns down. She needs a break. Leave the alien alone."

"Hatwer," I muttered, clutching the jacket around my shoulders. "His name is Hatwer."

The Captain cast a confused look over my face, but nodded anyway. "Hatwer, then. Let's go."

He helped me stand and led me out into the waiting room with the one-way mirror. I couldn't stop shaking even though the memories were already slipping back into the dark recesses of my mind. Out of courtesy, the guards stepped out, leaving the just two of us.

"Jesus, you're scaring me," Hallstead murmured, rubbing my shoulders. "What the hell did they do to him?"

"T-They're keeping his people as slaves to make the weapon work. God, one of them ate a child in front of him. He was so afraid. I can't even put it into words," I whispered in a hoarse voice.

Hallstead pulled me into his arms, stroking my back. "Take a deep breath. You're safe. It didn't happen to you. Keep repeating that to yourself."

After a while, the shaking subsided and I could breathe normally. Hallstead's warmth seeped into me and helped stave off the nightmarish visions I'd seen. Too soon, I remembered that he was a military officer and I was a dumb teenage ex-thief. We were not supposed to mix.

"Won't you get in trouble for being nice to me?" I mumbled against the cotton of his button up shirt. He made that almost-laugh noise again.

"I'm not all bad, you know."

I forced myself to move away, wiping my face clean. "Maybe you're trying to lure me into a false sense of security."

Hallstead smirked. "Maybe. Or maybe you're just afraid to admit you don't hate me as much as you wish you did."

I scowled, though it was hard because I wanted to smile. “You’re a very smug man.”

“Thanks. I know this is a little sudden, but do you think you could work with a sketch artist to get us a drawing of what the Bergleute look like? We only got small glimpses of them during the solar system assault.”

“Yeah. That shouldn’t be a problem. But what’s gonna happen to Hatwer in the meantime?”

“We’ll keep him here.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I promised him no more interrogations. I meant it.”

He nodded. “You have my word. We won’t lay a hand on him.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he started to move past me but I touched his arm and he stopped as he saw the expression on my face.

“I mean it. Thank you.”

His grey eyes met mine for a long moment and he nodded once, understanding what I meant. He opened the door and I walked out, still holding on to his jacket for warmth. Hallstead followed me, talking to one of the guards.

“Get me Toshida.”

\*

## CHAPTER NINE

## DUKE

*“Get your fucking hands off her!”*

*My muscles popped and strained and screamed louder than my voice. For a fleeting moment, I wished I could slip my skin like a poltergeist to get to her. Scarlett looked frail—like a doll—in the grip of the flunkies. Her bare legs glistened in the dim light, twisting and struggling against the hardwood floor. The side of my head was bleeding from a splinter that had jammed into my skin when they forced me to the floor. I could still see the knife underneath her chin, glinting, winking at me like a playful scoundrel.*

*“Tsk, tsk,” Andy clucked his tongue. His voice held enough arrogance to drown in.*

*“You shouldn’t be so rude. We haven’t even done anything to her.”*

*He let out an ugly snort. “Yet.”*

*“I’ll kill you,” I spat. “I’ll fucking kill you!”*

*“Aw, you don’t mean that. You’re just worried about your little sis. I can see why. She’s pretty hot.” He strolled over to her and the boys stretched her arms between them so he could touch her. He caught her face in one large hand, squeezing so that her lips pursed a bit. Tears leaked from her eyes, but they were angry orbs of brown fire.*

*“Get off me!” She shrieked, but he only squeezed harder.*

*“Why are you raisin’ such a fuss? You came on to my brother. You’re a tease. Admit it.”*

*He shook her a little and she winced. “Say it. Tell the boys what a slut you are.”*

*She spat in his face. He let go and wiped it away with his sleeve. “That’s not nice. You should be nice to people who are about to do you a favor.”*

*“What favor?”*

*“I’m not gonna carve you up like the skinny little chicken you are. Instead, I’m gonna be nice and let you stay as pretty as you want to be.”*

*Andy walked back over, pointing his knife at me. “But your Big Brother here? He’s gonna take one for the team.”*

*“No!” Scarlett screamed, thrashing to get loose. One of the guys behind me handed Andy a cleaver—the kind that usually hung in the window of a butcher’s shop. I felt my body start to shake all over from pure, unadulterated fear, but my mind was strong. I would not fail her like my father failed her. Scarlett was my blood, my flesh, my sacrifice.*

*Andy lifted my chin with the heavy blade, making me look him in his pitiless blue eyes.*

*“Are you okay with that, Big Bro? Taking the fall for Lil Sis?”*

*“No! Let him go! I did this, not him. I came on to Percy. I rejected him. Duke didn’t do anything wrong, please, take it out on me!” Scarlett sobbed. I stared at her, not the violent freak of nature before me, and spoke the word.*

*“Yes.”*

*“So be it.”*

*“No! Duke, please! Tell him it was my fault! TELL HIM!”*

*The boys grabbed my right hand and stretched it out on the floor. A huge foot stomped down on my wrist, keeping it in place as Andy knelt, selecting a finger. Scarlett kept screaming my name, screaming for help, screaming for anyone to save us. My mind went blank and a white space filled my insides. This was her price. Mine to pay. Mine to keep. Mine to save.*

*Out of the corner of my eye, the cleaver bit through the darkness.*

I came awake gasping for air in the cold darkness, the nub on my hand itchy and irritated. It took me a second to realize where I was because the dream had been so vivid. The borrowed blanket had tangled around my arms and neck, which probably tricked my body into believing I was back on Earth, back in the second worst moment of my life. I slowed my breaths and a fluid calm seeped through my veins. But I knew sleep wouldn't return for quite some time.

The trainees' room was populated by the snores of the exhausted boys. Sam in particular was pretty loud and sounded like an elephant inhaling honey through his trunk. A tiny sliver of light trickled in from the emergency entrance to the barracks and it was just enough for me to see so I could take the receiver out of my pocket. I checked to make sure there were no guards around and switched it on. Judging by my watch, I calculated I'd been asleep for four or five hours. For a while, the trainees had stayed up studying and talking, but then the guards insisted that we pipe down and get some sleep since we would be rising early to continue our studies. Whatever happened seemed to have tapered off at some level so they were going to let us into the computer lab, which I hadn't been to on account of my "cleaning duties."

I held the receiver close and adjusted the volume, listening in to hear the guard talking with one of his friends.

*"So where is it now?"*

*"Same room. They've got the girl nearby talking to Toshida."*

The other guy groaned. *"Anything but that kook. They'll be lucky if she's still sane by the time he gets through with her."*

*"You know him?"*

*"Yeah. Toshida's what you call a Jack-of-All-Trades in this business. He worked at MI-6 for a little while and they've been bouncing him around different agencies for being a troublemaker."*

*"He's a sketch artist?"*

*"Among other things. So what's this girl like?"*

*"Skinny thing. Barely legal."*

*"Hot?"*

*"Smokin' hot, but in that damaged sort of way, y'know? Like maybe she grew up in a rough part of a foreign country so she doesn't like men very much."*

*"How'd the Captain feel about that?"*

*"You know him. Stone-faced. But I can kind of tell he doesn't hate her. Especially not when you consider how she got here."*

*"How?"*

*"Word is that she and her brother snuck into the Rosewood mansion right before it launched into orbit."*

My blood ran cold. Scarlett was involved? How the hell had that happened? Even in outer space, the girl was still getting in over her head.

*“No shit! That was pretty lucky.”*

*“Yeah, almost too lucky. Bridgewater thinks it was some kind of set up, like maybe they’re spies, but Captain Hallstead seems to think they’re on the level. I dunno. Sounds too convenient to me too, y’know.”*

*“Yeah, ‘specially with this alien showing up outta nowhere. Where’s the brother?”*

*“He’s down in the dorm with the new meat. A real hard ass, or so Hallstead says. Sergeant Rosewood’s got his number, though. He took the break in pretty personal.”*

*“Wouldn’t you?”*

*“Good point. Ah, hell. Here comes Simmons, better shut up.”*

I shifted, listening with bated breath to faint footsteps. A muffled voice spoke, sounding like he had a cold or something else stuffed up his nose.

*“Fellas.”*

*“How ya holdin’ up, Simmons?”*

*“I’m fine,”* the guard grumbled, clearly irritated. I recognized his voice. He was one of guards who escorted Scarlett and I around the ship. By the sound of things, he was the one she knocked out during her escape attempt.

*“The psych ward is a pain in the ass. There’s nothing to do with everyone on lockdown. Can’t believe I let a ninety pound girl get the drop on me.”*

*“Hey, nobody’s perfect. I heard she got the drop on the Captain too.”*

Simmons snorted. *“Yeah, right. She probably just wants to fuck him, the little slut.”*

My blood boiled. Simmons was going to have another injury to worry about if I saw him again. That was a promise.

*“C’m on, man, you know the rules. No messing with the new recruits, no matter how tempting they are. Hallstead’s not gonna give in even if she does want a piece.”*

*“Yeah, yeah, I know the damn rulebook. Still, I’d like to see someone take her off that high horse. She isn’t any better than the rest of us. We’re all bums now, nowhere to live, nowhere to go.”*

*“You’re just a ray of fuckin’ sunshine, y’know that?”*

*“So I’m told. I’ve got to get back.”* I heard movement and then a brief pause.

*“That guy’s such a tool.”*

A snort escaped me. My experience with the guards had been limited and so I tended to forget that at the end of the day, they were just regular guys with military training. Still, my mind kept circulating around the new facts I had discovered. Why had Scarlett gotten involved? It sounded like they made contact with one of the Bergleute so why would they need her? Bait? Payback for her difficult behavior? No, that didn’t make sense. There had to be a logical explanation for what was happening and I needed to find it.

*“Hear something interesting?”*

I jumped, glancing upward to see Sam leaning part of his skinny torso over the bunk bed to whisper to me. No wonder I’d been able to hear the soldiers so well. He’d stopped snoring.

*“A bit,”* I said. *“We were right about the contact. They’ve got one of them on board. Probably questioning it as we speak.”*

“Good. I hope they give the bastard hell. Maybe we can figure out how to kill ‘em all.”

“Maybe,” I muttered. Of the many problems occupying my brain, the new one would be figuring out how Scarlett tied into this mess. I was nothing more than a scrub down here. Hallstead claimed he would keep me in the loop, but there was no way to contact him. Asking Rosewood for help was just as useful as stuffing a gun barrel down my throat. He wouldn’t help me. I’d have to do this on my own. No surprise there.

“You’d better get some sleep, dude. If they catch us, we’ll have to do push ups. And I’m already worn out,” Sam advised, yawning and rolling over. He had a point. I decided to give it another five minutes in case the guards had anything else useful to say, but they started talking about baseball and I eventually drifted off.

\*

A short, loud blast from a whistle jolted me out of sleep so hard that I thought I got whiplash. The lights came on, nearly blinding me as I sat up, kicking off the blanket tangled around me. When my eyes adjusted, I could see Sergeant Rosewood standing in front of the door with a silver whistle clutched between his lips. The trainees scrambled out of bed to line up, some of them falling from their bunk beds with heavy thuds.

“Morning, trainees! Did ya sleep well?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!” We chorused. He nodded as he started down the line, noting every bit of dishevelment certain soldiers were in and yelling at them to straighten up. I took the opportunity to smooth my hair down and brush off my uniform before he got to our side of the line.

Sergeant Rosewood stared me up and down, smirking. “Oh, I see you got your new threads, Mr. Nam. You must think you’re one of us now, huh?”

“I wouldn’t presume to think so, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!” I replied.

He adopted a mockingly impressed expression. “Eloquent scrub, aren’t you? Guess you have opened a few books in your time. Would you like to tell these gentleman what your favorite book is?”

“Native Speaker by Chang Rae-Lee, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Ooh, that sounds like a good one. How much of the Air Force Training Handbook have you read, trainee?”

“The first hundred pages as requested, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Is that right? So tell me what are the three things required for an effective soldier, if you don’t mind.”

I cleared my throat, which gave me a couple seconds to remember. I had speed-read through one of the trainees’ books when I had been assigned cleaning duties. My recall abilities were pretty good, but I would have loved to have a photographic memory.

“One: discipline. Two: perseverance. Three: obedience, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

He snorted. “Not bad. Maybe you’re not such a screw up after all.”

“Thank you, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

He turned on his heel and headed back down the line. I breathed normally for the first time in almost a minute.

“Alright, trainees, we are heading into the computer lab to get you reacquainted with your curriculum. You will be expected to remember every little detail you see and you will be tested frequently. Do not treat this like some public school class. If you fail the test more than three times, you will be a janitor for the rest of your lives. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir!”

“Good. Now march!”

We all pivoted and started filing out of the door. I snuck a glance at my watch. It had been roughly twelve hours since the lockdown. I guessed they had gotten some kind of handle on the situation if they were letting us get back to work, or that they wanted us to be prepared for a battle a little early. Even in space, time was still valuable.

Tempus fugit.

\*

## SCARLETT

“Can I ask you something?”

“*Hai?*”

“Is it really necessary for you to sit this close?”

Toshida glanced at me, deadpan. “Absolutely necessary.”

I arched an eyebrow. “How so?”

“I get a better idea of what you mean if I can feel the vibrations from your voice.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, unconvinced. Toshida was 5’0”, skinny, and chewing vigorously on the strawberry Bubblelicious the military vessel inexplicably possessed. He definitely wasn’t older than me. I guessed he was about sixteen years old. Thus, I wasn’t thrilled about him sitting to my right as pressed into me as possible in the small conference room. Still, I couldn’t deny that his skill with a sketchpad and pencil were otherworldly.

“And you’re sure these suckers didn’t have tails or extra heads or nothin’?” he asked, popping a large bubble with his teeth.

I resisted the urge to sigh. “Yeah. That’s pretty much what it looked like in a nutshell.”

He sat the pencil down, whistling. “Ugly bastards. Maybe they’re traipsing around the universe killing every species that looks better than them.”

“Interesting theory,” I replied with a flat voice.

He grinned at me then, coffee-stained teeth and all. “I’m annoying you, aren’t I?”

I held my thumb and first finger an inch apart. “A little bit, yeah.”

“Excellent.”

I stared. “Why is that excellent?”

“If I annoy you, you’ll be thinking about me when I leave. Then eventually you’ll start to dream about me and attach attributes to my personality that you think I possess since we’ve only know each other for—” He glanced at his watch.

“—thirty minutes and fifty seven seconds. After you have an unconscious connection to me, you’ll start to fall for me and it’s a done deal.”

I continued staring. “...you’ve done this before, huh?”

“Yup.”

“And it works?”

He shrugged, bumping my shoulder with his. “More or less.”

“You do realize it would be statutory, right?”

He winked at me. “Only if we get caught.”

The door opened and Hallstead appeared, clearing his throat. “Done?”

Toshida pouted. “You’re such a cockblock, Hallsy.”

I coughed hard into my hand, trying to mask laughter. Hallstead flashed Toshida an annoyed look. “I thought I told you to cut back on the nicknames, kid.”

“The military is the most humorless industry there is. Someone’s gotta lighten up the place, Hallsy,” Toshida replied, handing the older man his sketch.

Hallstead took a long look, examining the drawing. “Thanks. You’re dismissed.”

“No, I think I’m comfortable right where I am,” Toshida said, wiggling his narrow hips with emphasis so that he’d rub the left side of his body against the right side of mine.

Hallstead glared. “Out. Now.”

“Oh, I get it…” Toshida said with a nod. “You’re trying to steal my girl. Not gonna happen.”

Hallstead sighed. “You can either walk out of this door or I’m going to kick you through it.”

The Japanese boy groaned, standing. He made the “Call me” motion with his hand as he exited, prompting me to bite my bottom lip to hide another laugh.

“Weird kid,” I admitted once the door was shut again.

The Captain shook his head. “You have *no* idea. So this is what you saw?”

I winced as he flipped the sketch towards me. “Yeah. Not good news for us. From what I saw, it had to be at least seven feet tall. I don’t know how your boys’ll handle them.”

“We will,” he assured me. “Nothing’s indestructible, not even them.”

I folded my hands, growing serious. “So where do we go from here?”

“We need to keep talking to Hatwer about the ship itself. Vulnerabilities, how he escaped, the works. Anything and everything you can learn from him.”

I nodded. “And where are you going to keep him after we’ve gotten all the information? In a cell like mine?”

“Something a little more secure, but yes. And…” His expression lightened somewhat.

“I think your cooperation has earned you something other than a cell.”

“Really?”

“Really. You’ll still have a guard present, but you’ll be staying in one of the extra rooms with the employees until Dr. Warwick clears you from psych evaluation. Then you’ll be moved to the dorms with the other soldiers.”

I tried not to let that fact dampen my relief. “Thank you.”

“Careful,” he mused. “You almost sounded like a normal person just then.”

I flashed him a sarcastic smile. “Oh, forgive me. I retract my statement. Go to hell, Captain Hallstead.”

He chuckled and I let the sound fold over me before continuing. “How’s my brother doing?”

“I haven’t heard from Rosewood yet, but I’ll ask. He should be fine.”

My mouth dropped open. “Rosewood? You mean as in one of the Rosewoods’ whose mansion we broke into?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you think that’s a horrible idea? The guy’s got to be holding a grudge!” I protested, but Hallstead shook his head.

“It’ll be good motivation. If Sergeant Rosewood has a chip on his shoulder, he’ll work your brother harder than anybody else. The more work, the more likely your brother will become a great soldier and you won’t have to worry about him protecting himself.”

“I’ve never been worried about him protecting himself,” I said. “It’s others that I’m worried about.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“My brother has something of a hero complex. He would much rather take the blame for someone else’s mistake than let others get hurt. He’s been like that since we were kids.”

“Some people would consider that admirable.”

“He’s not your brother,” I replied a little softer than I intended. The subject matter made me uncomfortable so I started to play with the hem of the jacket sleeve. I’d had to roll them up a few times to use my hands as it was about three sizes too big. But at least I wasn’t cold any more.

Hallstead started to say something else, but there was a knock at the door. Evans appeared, glancing between the serious looks on our faces.

“...am I interrupting—”

“No,” Hallstead said. “What is it?”

“The General wants to speak with you. Now.”

“I’ll be right there.” Hallstead crooked a finger at me.

“Let’s go. I’ll walk you over. The guards’ll be watching in case anything happens. If it does, get out of there. Got it?”

“Got it.”

He opened the door for me and Evans and I went inside. There was another guard already waiting so I took a deep breath and walked back into the conference room.

“Hatwer?”

At the sound of my voice, the alien poked his head out of his protective pod state.

“*Scarlett?*”

“Hey,” I said in my kindest voice, pulling my chair closer. “Sorry about earlier.”

“*Am I in trouble?*”

“No. I explained what happened and they know it wasn’t your fault.”

“*I am sorry. I did not think you would respond so strongly to what happened.*”

“You warned me. I should have prepared myself better,” I admitted. “But now I need your help. What can you tell me about your escape?”

“*It was very difficult. I am lucky to be alive.*”

“I’ll bet. Start from the beginning.”

“*The Bergleute are assigned in pairs as the overseers where I was forced to work removing the organs of their food source. Once, I heard two of them talking. I had been imprisoned for a long time and so I learned enough of their language to understand conversations. They were talking about the next planet they wanted to harness—one that*

*had life on it. It had been a long time since they found a world with intelligent beings and so their commander was considering sending out a probe. Before the probe reached your planet, it found one of your satellites. This discovery informed the Bergleute that your race was more than simply sentient. They also saw your space station and figured you would most likely try to defend yourselves if attacked. They viewed you as a threat and I thought that maybe if someone told you what they were doing, you would fight back and set us free.”*

“So what did you do?”

*“There is a gland in the dead beasts we disassembled that causes instant death if swallowed. The Bergleute know what it looks like and so we could not use them to poison their food, but I saved one. Ingesting the entire gland will kill you in seconds. I had seen some of my people take them to escape our miserable life, but I calculated that if I took only a few drops, it would put me into a catatonic state instead of killing me. When we die, the Bergleute do one of two things: if the body is relatively healthy, they will eat us. If the body has been tainted, they throw us out with the rest of the garbage, which is emptied every so often. I chose one of the days where there was not much trash and took the poison. My body was taken to the trash chute and left there. When I regained consciousness, I climbed back up the chute and snuck onto one of their escape pods. The Bergleute’s attack vessels have security codes and clearance requirements, but the emergency pods do not. My limited understanding of their language allowed me to use their technology and I escaped just before the Earth was destroyed. The explosion damaged the ship and so I sent out a distress call to the nearest vessel. Yours is the one that found me.”*

“You’re very brave to have done that, Hatwer. I hope you know that,” I said in a soft voice.

His head tilted downward. *“I had no other choice. My parents are still aboard that ship working endlessly ...suffering. I must save them.”*

“I know how you feel. If I had a chance to save my parents like you, I would have done the same thing. My mother died when I was twelve and my father died in the Earth’s destruction.”

*“I am sorry. It is my people’s creation that has caused this destruction.”*

“No, Hatwer. You are not responsible for this. It’s the Bergleute. They took something harmless and turned into a weapon and you can’t blame yourself for that.”

An inky substance began to leak from the corners of his eyes. Tears. *“You are too kind.”*

I laughed, though the sound was hollow and bitter. “You say that only because you don’t know me very well. There are far better people out there than me.”

*“That is untrue,”* Hatwer insisted, wiping his eyes with the back of his wrist. *“I was only able to make contact with you because you are Huswan.”*

“Huswan?”

*“I believe the word in your language is an Empath. You are sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, though it is subconscious. That is the only reason why I was able to get through to you. The others cannot hear my thoughts.”*

“That can’t be right,” I insisted with a frown. “I’d have to be telepathic for that to be true.”

*“Telepathy among other human beings is impossible. Most do not possess the right genetic makeup, but you do. It is a very rare trait.”*

“How do you know so much about human beings?”

He tapped one claw against his skull. *“When I shared my memory with you, other information was exchanged on a subconscious level. Nothing private, but general things you know, I know as well.”*

“Wow,” I muttered to myself. “The one thing that makes me useful is something I have no control over. Fantastic.”

I raised my voice. “Is there anything else you remember about the Bergleute? Weaknesses? Vulnerabilities?”

*“I am afraid I do not know anything else about them,”* the alien answered, crestfallen.

“Don’t worry. You’ve done great so far. They can take it from here.”

*“Who is ‘they’?”*

“The people that built this ship to save us. They knew the Bergleute were coming and so they made hundreds of ships and put people on them to escape.”

*“I see. You were able to save many. I wish we had known about their arrival before they descended upon us.”*

“Did you fight them?”

*“We Shasar are a peaceful race. Outside of local enforcement, we had no training for war or battle. Our technology was advanced enough to make our lives comfortable, but nothing more. The Bergleute outmatched us in size and they were ruthless.”*

“I don’t get it. How did they even know about the weapon? I thought they just went from planet to planet gathering the core material.”

*“They sent out a probe first and they noticed the power and accuracy of our drilling equipment. That is when they descended and kidnapped hundreds of us to build them a weaponized version of it. Afterwards, they destroyed our world.”*

“Why didn’t they do the same thing with our planet? Don’t we have valuable technology as well?”

*“Perhaps it was not what they wanted. Perhaps they thought it would be too dangerous for them to take human slaves. I am not sure.”*

“Do you know what they do with the core material?”

*“The slaves speculate that they use it to make many things: armor, ships, weapons, and such. It is easier than taking over a planet and mining it.”*

“What can you tell me about the ship? How much of it did you see while you were escaping?”

*“Not much. The ship draws its power from an infinitely renewable energy source. I believe your people call it Sorbatium. However, I believe that the main supply is in one particular location.”*

I nodded. “I see. So if we were able to somehow board the ship and confiscate it, we would have a better chance of killing them and freeing your people.”

*“It will not be easy. There are sentries on all levels of the ship. I was only able to elude them because they were all busy preparing the weapon. It is the only time when they leave their posts.”*

“Where did they keep your people when you weren’t working?”

*“The lowest level of the ship. The children are kept in one large cell, separated from the adults. Our electrified chains never deactivate. We must be taken off of them, like I was when the Bergleute overseer thought I had died.”*

I sighed. “That won’t be easy. We’ll have to find out how they are controlling the collars. It could be hand-held devices or from a control panel. You told me that the children dissect the animals for food. What are your parents doing?”

*“I have heard that the adults maintain the weapon and work on upkeep of the energy source. If they refuse, they are killed immediately and replaced with others. Once, there was an escape attempt by a large group, but they were caught and executed to make an example. The last time I saw my parents was when we were abducted from our world.”*

I paused, continuing to shuffle through my thoughts for any other questions. “When you left...are you sure they didn’t follow you?”

*“Yes. They would have noticed that one of the pods was missing, but by then I had already gotten relatively close to leaving the solar system.”*

“Do you think it had some sort of tracking device?”

*“Perhaps.”*

I stood. “I’ll be right back.”

I hurried to the door and opened it, looking for the guards. Before I opened my mouth, Evans said it for me.

“We’re calling the team we’ve got examining the ship as we speak. Nice catch.”

“Not really,” I admitted. “It’s been hours. I hope your team already found it or the Bergleute definitely know where we are.”

“Relax. Even if they do, what reason would they have to come here?”

“They might not want us having access to their technology. Or they might want to silence Hatwer. They already consider us to be some sort of threat, even if it isn’t a large one,” I explained with growing concern.

Evans eyed for a moment and then nodded. “Point taken.”

He glanced at his partner, who had one hand up to the communication link in his ear.

“Anything yet?”

“Waiting for the report. They’ve been running diagnostics non-stop since it arrived and they’re still finding things.”

We waited a minute or two before getting a response. The guard glanced at Evans.

“He says he thinks they found some sort of tracking device in the ship’s console about four hours ago. It’s been disassembled.”

I let out a relieved breath. “Then let’s pray they lost the signal before they got anywhere near us. Where are we, anyway?”

“That’s classified.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, right. Forgot about that. Thanks anyway, boys.”

I started to open the door but Evans caught my arm. “I think that’s enough for now. Say goodbye and we’ll escort you to your room.”

“I’d feel a lot better if I could go with Hatwer to wherever you’re keeping him.”

“You’re not authorized to be in that part of the ship.”

“Technically, I’m not authorized for anything. Just give me a break, will you?”

They stared at me, uncooperative and silent. I sighed again. “C’mon, Evans. You’ve got a kid. Hatwer is just a child. You can’t even imagine what he’s been through and he needs to feel like he has someone he can trust.”

Eventually, Evans just heaved a sigh. “Fine. But don’t mention it to the Captain or he’ll get sore about it.”

“My lips are sealed.”

\*

## CHAPTER TEN

## DUKE

I had never spent more than two hours on a computer at a time—which I’m sure is shocking when one considers the Asian nerd stereotype—and so the intensive six hour training session we spent staring intently at our screens gave me a headache. The massive headphones canceled out any sounds around me and made my ears sweaty. Several times, I rubbed my eyelids to cajole them into producing more tears as my eyes dried out. Time slipped into oblivion as I watched video after video of instructions on how to be the perfect soldier, the perfect weapon, the perfect hero. Part of me wanted there to be an updated version of this fallaciously hopeful virtual manual—one that didn’t have as much emphasis on being a hero because our world was dead. We were no longer heroes. We were walking gravestones. Memorials with pulses.

After the videos ended, we were thankfully dismissed for lunch in the mess hall. We marched up three floors to the cafeteria—which looked like the one in my high school—and went through the line and sat down at the long, bolted-down tables to eat. Thankfully, we didn’t have to deal with dried astronaut food as the technology had advanced to the point where they no longer needed to vacuum seal everything. It was, however, rather simple. Meatloaf, peas and carrots, mashed potatoes, and your choice of water or vitamin water. The vegetarian trainees were given tofu meatloaf instead. I found that amusing.

“Y’know, there are some days when I think we’re in prison,” Sam mused, letting his runny mashed potatoes slop from his spoon onto his tray. “And there are some days when I *know* we’re in prison. This is one of them.”

I shrugged, taking a sip of my vitamin water. “No sacrifice, no victory.”

“Thanks, Mr. Witwicky, but I thought sacrificing women would be enough, I didn’t think I’d have to make my taste buds suffer as well.”

Beside me, Han let out a derisive laugh. “What women? In all the time I’ve known you, you haven’t talked about a single girlfriend.”

Sam became very interested in examining his peas. “I’ve had girlfriends. Plenty of ‘em.”

Han rolled his eyes. “Like?”

“Tina.”

“Tina who?”

“She’s from my hometown in Colorado. We went out for a year, but I dumped her when I got accepted into the Air Force. Couldn’t have her waiting around for me.”

“Uh-huh,” Han said, fixing him with a disbelieving stare as he ate. I shook my head, biting my lip to hide a smile. Sam seemed to notice and switched his attention to me.

“What about you? Any girls on your end?”

I shook my head. “Not really. A couple here and there, but no keepers.”

“Hm, that’s boring. You got a sister?” Sam added, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Younger. Her name’s Scarlett. With two t’s,” I added, smiling out of habit. She always insisted that people spell it the way our mother spelled it.

“Oh,” he faltered. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Did she...y’know...make it?”

I chose my words carefully. “Yeah, she’s in the women’s division here.”

“Is she anything like you?” Han asked.

I almost laughed. “Complete opposite in every way.”

“Those are sisters for you. Their entire existence is to get their brothers in trouble. Anya was like that,” Sam admitted, shaking his head. Earlier, I had noticed a picture clipped to the outside of his duffel bag in the dorm. A girl with dirty blonde hair and dark eyes like his. She looked a little older than him.

I swallowed another mouthful of my drink, lowering my voice. “Did she...?”

Sam’s face sobered. He shook his head once. I closed my eyes. “Sorry, man.”

“S’okay. At least I’ve got something to live for, y’know? Making sure I kill every goddamn one of the Bergleute,” he said, his voice filled with a quiet, ugly promise. A reverent silence fell. Before anyone could say anything else, two guards entered the cafeteria. I expected them to call us to attention, but instead they continued walking along the tables until they got to me.

“Mr. Nam, was it?”

“Sir?” I asked, confused.

“Come with us.”

My blood ran cold. I stepped away from my seat and they motioned for me to walk ahead of them. There weren’t many reasons why they would come for me, and none of them made me feel reassured. I’d left the receiver wrapped up in my borrowed blanket for safekeeping, but it wasn’t impossible to find. If that were the case, I’d be thrown back in my cell for stealing, which was exactly why I didn’t want to help Han and Sam in the first place. Nothing I could do about it now but accept my fate.

They took me to the interrogation rooms and one of the guards kindly opened the door. Captain Hallstead and Sergeant Rosewood were waiting for me—the former seated in front of a table and the latter leaning against the far wall with his arms crossed. I arranged my face into a placid expression, glancing between the two of them.

“Have a seat,” Captain Hallstead said. I pulled out the chair on my side and sat down, folding my hands in my lap. The rule in Sergeant Rosewood’s presence was not to talk until I had been addressed, but I wasn’t sure if the same went when there was someone else with him.

“Do you know why you’ve been brought here?” Rosewood asked in an unnervingly calm voice.

“No, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir.”

“Fancy a guess?”

I hesitated. “No, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir.”

“Don’t be so modest. You seem like a smart kid,” Rosewood continued with the utmost snark in his voice.

“Why do you think we brought you here?”

I cleared my throat. “My sister, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir?”

He shook his head. “Good guess, but no. Take it away, Captain.”

Hallstead reached into his pocket and dug something out. He placed a tiny black device on the table in front of me. My fears were confirmed, but I kept my face blank.

“Any idea what this is?”

“No.”

Hallstead's eyes narrowed the slightest bit, but he continued without acknowledging whether he thought I was full of shit or not. "It's a radio transmitter, built to listen in on conversations with minimal amounts of detection. One of our guards found it underneath his collar just a few minutes ago. We found the receiver in the trainees' bunk."

He folded his hands and laid them on the table beside the transmitter. "There are a lot of theories we could come up with right now so I won't bore you with details. I'm just going to ask you a few questions and you're free to go after that."

*Don't fidget. Don't blink. Just answer.* "Yes, sir."

"How much do you know about Han Blankenship?"

Shock rolled through me in waves, but I kept it under control. "Not much. He was in the same infantry as Sam before they left Earth. And he's got some sort of Russian background from the sound of his accent. That's all I know."

"That's a shame," Hallstead replied. "Because we found the transmitter in his blanket. We have reason to believe he might be some sort of mole."

I couldn't help looking surprised then. "A mole? For who?"

"We're not the only ones out here, Duke. The world's governments came together to invest in the Starlight Contingency, but there was also an opposition movement from a small faction. We have not confirmed that they died with the rest of Earth in the explosion so it's possible they're out there spying on us and plotting revenge. That's why we've got you here. We need answers. Is there anything about Han that would suggest he is untrustworthy or working for someone else?"

I couldn't answer him for a long moment. If I said no, they would keep digging. The problem is that they wanted to find the mole, not to find out if there was one at all. I held both of our lives in my hands. Keep one, drop the other. Han was guilty of being curious, and nothing more. But what if they figured out what we had done? All three of us would be thrown in a cell for the rest of our lives, or at the very least, punished within an inch of our lives. These people had already shown that they had no problem with getting their hands dirty. If I gave up Han, that would be the end of the issue. A practical choice.

*He is not your sister. You owe him nothing.* The little voice in the back of my head whispered in its silky persuasive tone. *It's easy. Just say the words.*

"I..."

"You what?"

"I would like to continue observing him for any signs of disloyalty," I said finally, unable to make the decision one way or another. At least this would give me time.

Hallstead stared me down and then nodded. "You have one week to come up with something concrete. If he's innocent, we'll continue investigating elsewhere. If he's guilty, then he'll be interrogated. You already know what that's like so don't screw this up or you'll be subjecting an innocent man to torture."

"Yes, sir."

He stood and the Sergeant pushed off from the wall, heading towards the door. I stopped Hallstead with another question.

"How is Scarlett?"

The Captain paused, giving me an interested look. "Fine, from what I hear."

"I would be grateful if you'd allow me to see her."

He cleared his throat. “Well, she’s still deep in session for her anger problems but I think I may be able to arrange something for you in the near future. In the meantime, stay focused. You’ve got quite a task ahead of you.”

The Captain exited and the guards beckoned me to go in front of them. Lunch had concluded by the time we rode the elevator down so I was taken back to the computer lab where the trainees had already begun the introduction to the next section we’d be learning. Just before we put our headphones back on, Han leaned across his desk, his face serious.

“What was that all about?”

I opened my program and slid the sound-canceling headphones on.

“Nothing.”

\*

## SCARLETT

“Welcome back, Scarlett.”

“Doc.” My hostility levels were much lower than they had been before, but I couldn’t help my tense posture consisting of crossed arms and a blank expression as I stared back at the russet eyes of Dr. Warwick. They had finally announced an end to the Lockdown and so I was booted right back to our formerly interrupted therapy session, much to my dismay.

Before they escorted me to the psych ward, I had seen Hatwer’s lodging for the time being. They put him in one of the cells, which I didn’t like, but I could live with it because I knew the alternative would have been leaving him in that room all alone with not even a bed. That is, if he slept at all. They didn’t know much about his physiology and I suspected that as soon as I left, they would take him to the x-ray machine as they had done to me. I only hoped he was being treated well. I hadn’t been so lucky.

“I understand that you’ve been cooperating with your superiors in the last few hours,” she continued in that endlessly patient voice.

“Is there a reason for that?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

“I see.” Her eyes slid from my face to my upper body.

“And...if I’m not mistaken, that is Captain Hallstead’s jacket, is it not?”

I self-consciously tugged at the hem, resisting the urge to scowl. “I was cold. He offered, I didn’t ask for it.”

“I didn’t say you did.” Was that a smile? Damn this woman. She knew exactly how to make me uncomfortable.

“How would you describe your relationship with Captain Hallstead as of late?”

“Have you ever seen the old Tom and Jerry cartoons?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Tom and he’s the dog, Spike.”

Dr. Warwick smiled then. “I see. Is this common in your relationships with men?”

I snorted. “What relationships with men? The only male I’ve come in frequent contact with is my brother.”

She raised her pen, glancing down at her clipboard. “So you’ve never had a boyfriend or a significant other of some sort?”

I thought about it. “Not really. Unless you count the guy I lost my virginity to.”

Dr. Warwick jumped a bit, blinking at me. “Pardon?”

“What? Am I going too fast?”

She pushed up her glasses, clearing her throat. “No, it’s just...you mentioned that you had a near-rape experience. Did it happen with—”

“No. God, no. Wally happened about a year and a half ago. He lived in an apartment complex next door. Friends with my brother.” I stopped, unsure of where this conversation was going.

Dr. Warwick tilted her head as she watched my growing discomfort. “Forgive me, but I find this a very odd occurrence. Most women with sexual trauma tend to avoid situations that could lead to sex. Were you in love with him?”

I choked on a laugh. “Hell no.”

She frowned at my reaction. “Then why?”

“Why do we teenagers do anything stupid? Because they don’t know any better. I didn’t. He seemed nice, and he was. He never said out loud that he wanted to take the next step with me, but it was always there, under every conversation. Finally, I just gave in. I rationalized it, actually. I figured that being with Wally would erase my mistake with Percy. I needed a new memory. I needed someone else to fill the hole, no pun intended.”

“And did he?”

Memories crashed against the surf of my mind. Lumpy pillow. Salty tears. Whisker burns on my thighs, right above the fresh tattoo. Aching birthmark. Flat beer.

“No.”

She hesitated for a moment before speaking. “I’ll be honest with you, Scarlett. I think this decision has a lot to do with why you have self-confidence issues. Many girls experience low self-esteem if they think they let go of their virginity too soon. Except you try to hide it by seeming arrogant and rash.”

“Oh, is that what I’m doing?” I let my voice come out harsh and sarcastic. I didn’t like that she was digging up my faults and dissecting them one by one.

“Hostility is not going to work against me, Scarlett. I’m not going to get angry with you and you know that. I know that you’re trying to stall me so you don’t have to join the Air Force and we’re going to have to address it at some point.”

“Awesome.”

Dr. Warwick narrowed her eyes at me. Ha. Maybe I was getting under her skin. For a moment, I wondered if she would say something rude and prove that she was actually human, but instead, I got:

“Tell me about your mother.”

A hurricane of thoughts and feelings rose to the surface of my skin for the first few seconds after she asked the question, and then the storm quieted as I continued taking slow breaths.

“What about her?”

Dr. Warwick shrugged. “Anything.”

“She was a seamstress. Worked from home. Best in the city. Had her own office.”

“Did you like that she was a stay-at-home mom?”

“Didn’t have much of an opinion on it, really.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said. “You seem fiercely independent. Being a seamstress is often considered a domestic job. You must have thought so at a young age.”

*“Well, what do you want me to do? Just stay home all day like you? Why is it so bad that I want to do something else, Mom? Do you even have a reason?”*

*“A direction would be nice, Scarlett. You’re all over the place. Your grades are slipping and you’ve been in three fights this year. Why should I even trust you to go out by yourself when I can’t even trust you to behave at school?”*

*“I didn’t ask for your trust!”*

“Not really.”

The therapist fixed me with a probing stare. I did the same. Eventually, her expression softened somewhat.

“I’m sorry about your mother, Scarlett.”

“Everyone’s sorry. Doesn’t change anything.”

“You must have asked yourself a thousand times why your father did it. Do you blame yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I should have killed him first.”

\*

I could tell that the employee room I had been put in had been altered once they decided to put me in it. It felt too empty and there were little holes in the floor indicating that they had unscrewed something—maybe a dresser or a table. Still, I couldn’t complain because instead of a thin cot, I had a mattress complete with a bed frame, a tiny closet, and an even tinier bathroom with a toilet instead of a hole that opened up in floor whenever you got close to it. Naturally, the door wouldn’t lock because there was no knob on my side. It ran on electricity and swooshed open and closed like the doors in the old Star Trek films. There was a handprint console to the left but had been disabled.

They had also been kind enough to return my sweatshirt that they took when they found Duke and I in the mansion and it lay over my lap at the moment, warming my legs. I considered taking off Captain Hallstead’s jacket, but it had started to conform to my curves and warmed me up enough that I left it on.

Time slid off its axis as I stared up at the ceiling, my thoughts runny like the way my mother used to make scrambled eggs. Where was Duke right now? Was he okay? Was Rosewood tormenting him at every turn?

The movies always had the stereotype of siblings with telepathy or siblings that shared pain, and for the first time in my life, I wished I had those silly powers. Before this little adventure, the longest time Duke and I were ever apart was at birth. A year. My mother used to call him “jikineun-gae”, the Watchdog, after I was born. He would always crawl over to wherever I was sleeping and stay there, making sure I was breathing. The air always felt a little thinner when he wasn’t around me.

I had nodded off at some point when I heard someone knock and then the unmistakable swoosh of the door opening. Groaning, I rolled over onto my stomach, barely conscious as someone flicked on the overhead light.

“Five more minutes...” I mumbled. “Having a good dream.”

“About what?”

I sighed, recognizing the voice. “Annoying Captains who don’t let me sleep.”

I tilted my head to the side and raked a handful of hair out of my face.

“Don’t you have minions who can run your errands for you?”

The edge of Hallstead’s lips twitched upward. “Yes, but the General instructed me to keep the gossip to a minimum. If we keep sending guards, there’s a chance that word will get around about Hatwer, and we don’t want a panic on our hands.”

“Uh-huh. Why don’t you just admit that you’re attracted to my magnetic personality and be done with it?” I challenged in my most mocking voice.

He started to say something but then shook his head, shoving his hands into the pockets of his black slacks. “You’re the one who’s still wearing my jacket.”

Damn him. “There is a completely logical explanation for that.”

“And that would be...?”

I scowled. “Black is my color.”

Hallstead smirked. “Right.”

I pushed up into a sitting position and stifled a yawn with my hand. “Other than the verbal sparring, what can I do for you, Captain?”

In an instant, the amusement on his face vanished. “Roughly an hour ago, we launched a probe to find out where the Bergleute are heading in case they were tipped off by the tracer in Hatwer’s pod. It was destroyed when it entered the space where Jupiter used to be.”

“Shit,” I murmured. “What do you want from me, then?”

“We need you to talk to Hatwer and ask him if he happens to know where they were headed last. Hopefully, away from us. Our instruments can only detect them from a certain distance and we need to see them coming.”

“Got it.” I stood up and as I did, he took a step back and cleared his throat.

“What?”

“You seem to be having a wardrobe malfunction.”

Frowning, I glanced down and discovered that in my fitful napping, the hem of my tank top had gotten caught beneath one of the cups of my bra. Hot blood filled my face and I quickly adjusted the shirt to its proper position.

“How long ago did you notice that?”

The Captain stared at me. Then, he gave me a very slow and secretive smile before he walked to the door, saying nothing. Not that he needed to.

He didn’t take me to the interrogation room this time, but rather the cell where Hatwer now resided. He looked small and unnatural against the sterile white walls, especially in his pod form. Hallstead opened the door and said he’d go for a walk, which was code for “I’ll be in earshot but out of sight.” Very polite for a covert pervert.

“Hatwer?”

He emerged from his pod state, blinking up at me. “*Scarlett? What are you doing here?*”

I knelt in front of him. “Sorry, were you sleeping?”

“*I was meditating. It keeps me calm.*”

“Oh. I’m sorry to bother you again, but I need you to do something important for me.”

“What?”

“While you were escaping, did you happen to catch a glimpse of where the Bergleute were going? Directions, coordinates, anything you heard or saw that might tell us where they were headed?”

He lowered his gaze. It was hard to read Hatwer’s face because of his hard skin and lack of facial movements, but his eyes always gave him away. They were cat-like ovals that changed with his mood—widening when he was upset or curious and narrowing when he was pensive or confused.

*“The ship’s console had coordinates in its database that I had to disable. The Bergleute seem to keep the escape pods synchronized with the main battle cruiser. Do you think that might be the information you need?”*

“Yes, that’s perfect.”

He hesitated. *“I feel uncomfortable with sharing my memories with you again because you had such a strong reaction to my emotional state. Perhaps I can illustrate these coordinates for you instead?”*

I nodded. “That could work.”

I stood and called for Hallstead, asking him for paper and a writing utensil. He disappeared down the hallway for a couple minutes and then returned with the items, slipping them to me through the bars. Hatwer unfolded his body and sat on the floor, taking the pen between his clawed fingers rather delicately. I watched with fascination as he started to draw in careful, almost practiced movements.

*“This is your solar system. They were just outside of the Earth’s orbit when I escaped. I believe they were working their way from the outer planets to the inner planets.”*

“Do they harvest stars?”

*“No. The weapon is powerful, but to attempt to collapse a star would result in the death of everything in the solar system. Theoretically, your sun’s explosion would cause a supernova, which would destroy everything in the vicinity and then the remains would be absorbed into a black hole. I believe that once they have finished with the rest of the planets in this solar system, they will simply move to another.”*

He finished the drawing, which depicted the ship’s position outside of the Earth and a woven path leading to Venus, Mercury, and then past the Sun to another part of the solar system. It made me wonder if they tested a planet for the core material before they blew it up since there were many theories about Venus’ inner core—that it may have been completely liquid or that it had hardened and contained no liquid at all, at least according to my astronomy teacher back in middle school.

“But that was before you escaped. We’re worried that the Bergleute might seek us out in order to…” I stopped, restructuring my sentence.

“…keep you from talking to us about them.”

He stared up at me. *“You mean kill me.”*

I didn’t respond. *“It is alright. I knew there was a chance that they would come for me, but I hoped that they would think you weren’t much of a threat now that your home planet is gone. I was wrong.”*

“You did what you thought was right, Hatwer. You can’t blame yourself for that,” I said. He pushed the paper towards me after writing several coordinates in shaky but legible English. It looked as though he had a photographic memory. I’d kill for one of those.

“Thank you, Hatwer. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

*“You are welcome, Scarlett.”*

Hallstead opened the door and I left, waving at the alien. He mirrored me and then stared at his raised hand with that curious look in his eyes. It almost made me smile.

The Captain led me down the hall to talk, inquiring about the map Hatwer had drawn. I stuffed my hands in the pockets of the borrowed jacket.

“What do you think? Would they change directions to come get us?”

“I doubt it, but that’s not we were worried about.”

“What do you mean?”

“The main ship would take too much time to turn around. They would deploy their smaller defenders like they did when we launched an assault on them as they entered our solar system.”

My eyes widened. “Evans told me it was a massacre. What happened?”

“Their weapons are too advanced. We couldn’t fire shots quickly enough to keep up with them so they slaughtered all of our infantry in only minutes. We were never able to recover one of their vessels to study and find the weaknesses.”

“But what about Hatwer’s escape pod? What if we trained someone to fly it back to the mother ship and board it?”

He gave me a surprised look, but it disappeared behind his normal stoicism.

“That’s a suicide mission, Scarlett. General Bridgewater would never authorize something like that.”

“What if they do send a smaller defender to destroy the Titan and we capture it instead of blowing it up and make it seem like it was escorting the escape pod back to the mother ship?”

“Too risky. Orders are to destroy any enemy aircraft on sight if it comes within range of our instruments. Doing otherwise would endanger the passengers and we can’t afford that.”

“But think about the alternative: what if we did sneak aboard their ship? We could plant an explosive and nuke all of those bastards,” I argued, starting to get frustrated.

“But you’re forgetting about Hatwer’s family. We wouldn’t have the means of getting them out.”

I bit my bottom lip, thinking. “What if they used the escape pods as well? We could lead them out.”

“Scarlett, stop. There are too many factors that could go wrong with that plan.”

I stepped back, falling silent for a moment. “What are you saying, Hallstead? That you don’t intend to rescue those innocent aliens who have been slaves to the Bergleute for years and had their home world blown up just like ours?”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“What’s complicated about doing the right thing?”

“I’m not talking about this with you here,” he said, grabbing my upper arm and pulling me out of the hallway and into the elevator. We rode up in a stagnant silence and neither of us spoke until we returned to my borrowed room.

“The kind of jailbreak you’re talking about would be impossible without an extensive knowledge of the ship’s interior,” Hallstead explained. “Our survival is the number one priority right now and what you’re suggesting would put them in jeopardy.”

“I can’t believe this. Do you know what he’s sacrificed coming to us for help? Do you even care? Or are you just a thick-headed soldier who can do nothing more than follow orders?” I spat.

He shook his head. “Scarlett, we don’t have the resources to save Hatwer’s people. I’m sorry, but we don’t. I know that the two of you share a connection, but this is the way it has to be. You can’t let yourself be emotionally compromised by him.”

“How can you say that? I told you what those bastards did to him and you expect me not to be emotionally compromised?”

Hallstead stepped close, lowering his voice and the anger in it nearly scalded my skin.

“Several hours ago, you didn’t even know he existed. Now you’re willing to sacrifice your own people to help him. If our roles were reversed, how would that sound to you?”

I ran my hands through my hair, trying to stay calm. “I’m not saying it makes sense, Captain. I’m saying that it needs to be done. It won’t be easy or pretty, but we still need to do it because it’s possible. It’s not probable, but it’s possible. I couldn’t live with myself knowing that we had a chance to help someone in need and didn’t take it because it wouldn’t be the safe option.”

“You’re asking me to put my men on the line for a bunch of aliens who may not even exist,” he hissed. “For all we know, Hatwer projected false information into your mind in order to lure us into a trap.”

“Fine.”

He stopped in the middle of ranting at me, growing suspicious. “What do you mean ‘fine’?”

I brandished my hands at myself. “Send me. I’m expendable. I should have died when the Earth exploded, but I didn’t. If I die trying to save them, it won’t affect things on this ship.”

“You don’t have the proper training. You’re eighteen years old, for Christ’s sake.”

“Then train me. Teach me to be a good little soldier like you and I’ll go on the mission. You’ll still have your hundred million people safe and sound and I can have a clear conscience.”

He let out a harsh snort. “Wow. I figured you were irrational, but this an entirely different level of illogical.”

“Why? Would my death make you feel guilty, Captain? Would you mourn me?” I said, lacing every word with the utmost sarcasm.

He glared at me. “I don’t call the shots on this ship. General Bridgewater does, and I am telling you now that he won’t approve a kamikaze plan like yours. I do want to help Hatwer, but what happens to him is beyond the both of us.”

He turned his back on me, walking towards the door, but my words stopped him.

“Then what am I going to tell him?”

His shoulders tensed, and the black cotton shifted over the muscles, the only physical sign of an emotion other than anger that I had drawn from him during this argument. He tilted his head until I could see the profile of his face.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean ‘nothing’? He’s going to ask the next time I see him. He’s a telepath, he’ll know that I’m lying.”

Hallstead didn’t reply. He just kept standing there, as if rooted in the spot by my words. My anger grew and I felt another onslaught of words bubbling inside my chest, but then, slowly, it hit me. His husky whisper held more importance than anything else he had said to me in the last five minutes. Nothing. He didn’t mean that I would lie to the alien. He meant that I wasn’t going to see Hatwer again.

“You’re gonna kill him, aren’t you?”

Hallstead didn’t speak, but as I stared at him, his hands balled into fists.

“You son of a bitch,” I whispered. “Why?”

He turned around, and it seemed as if the movement were painful for him. He wouldn’t meet my eyes as he explained in a detached voice.

“General Bridgewater gave the order a few hours ago. In order to understand more about alien anatomy, he wants to do an autopsy on Hatwer and to make sure that he isn’t a mole sent by the aliens to trick us. It’s been scheduled for early tomorrow.”

Silence buzzed in my ears. Autopsy. Like he was just a frog in a science lab, not a young child, not a soon-to-be-orphan, not a son, not a brother.

“Say something,” Hallstead murmured, sounding so out of character that I almost thought he hadn’t said it at all. I couldn’t recall how long I had been standing there, staring at the floor, trying to remember to breathe.

I punched him in the jaw. He stumbled backwards a couple of steps, touching the back of his wrist to his mouth as a trickle of blood appeared. I slumped down on my bed, my arms loosely hanging in my lap.

“Get out.”

The command was no more than a whisper because my throat had tightened to nearly the choking point. He didn’t yell at me, didn’t hit me back, didn’t say anything. He just walked out and left me empty and cold. It was at least a minute before I realized that there were tears on my face, and that he could have easily dodged my punch but he didn’t because he wanted me to hurt him. He hated himself as much as I did right now.

I threw his jacket on the floor and pulled my knees up to my chest, wishing my brother were here.

\*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## DUKE

After the four-hour block of computer-based learning, we were dismissed for a short break before starting the next cram session. As we exited, one of the guards pulled me aside and told me I had somewhere else to go. My first thought was that Hallstead wanted something, but that seemed strange since he would know that nothing could have happened while we were stuck in the computer lab. Still, I didn't complain because he didn't put handcuffs on me—meaning that I had earned some level of trust to walk through the Titan without being restrained.

He took me to one of the upper levels of the ship, and it was nothing like what I had seen before. When the elevator doors opened, I saw a hallway with dozens of doors with numbers on them. It took me a moment to realize that these were apartment-style rooms where the employees stayed. I hadn't gotten a good look at the entire vessel, but I predicted that there were thousands of occupants considering how many floors there were.

The guard led me to a room and slid his keycard through the slot, giving me a serious look as he spoke. "Fifteen minutes."

The door slid open and I walked inside, confused. As I entered, a light overhead flickered on and I could see that I stood in a small bedroom with a dresser, bathroom, and closet. There was a bed pushed against the wall to my left and on it lay a dark-haired girl, curled up on her side in the fetal position. The willowy limbs and jet-black hair were a dead giveaway.

I walked over to my sister, peering over into her face. She was asleep. I touched her shoulder, whispering, "Lettie, wake up."

Her brows furrowed and she rolled over, blinking up at me. It took her a couple of seconds to recognize me and her sleep-muddled voice made memories rush through me. Time couldn't change the childish look on her face whenever she woke up.

"*Oppa?*"

I smiled. "Yeah."

She sat up and threw herself at me, almost knocking us off the bed as she hugged me. I wrapped my arms around her back, squeezing her.

"I was scared I'd never see you again," she whispered against my neck, her voice thick with emotion.

I rubbed her back in slow circles. "Me too."

After a moment, she let go and wiped her eyes. "You look stupid in that jumpsuit."

I grinned. "I know. But it makes my ass look awesome."

She laughed. "Same old Duke."

Our smiles started to fade around the edges as we stared at each other, happy to be together but unsure of how to proceed. She broke the momentary awkward silence first.

"I don't understand. Why'd they let you see me?"

"I made a deal with Captain Hallstead to come check on you. Don't worry, I'm as shocked as you are that he held up his end of the bargain."

At the mention of his name, a hard look slipped across her face. Her eyes were red at the corners as if she had been crying and I got the sinking sensation that he was the reason why.

I tilted my head slightly, starting to frown. “What’s that look for? Are you and he still butting heads?”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” she muttered, pulling her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. It was a classic Scarlett pose: small, protected, and unreadable.

I paused, trying to figure out how to proceed. “Look, I don’t know what’s been happening with you in the past couple of days, but he seems to be the only decent person on this ship. Maybe you should give him a chance. He might actually want to help you.”

She shook her head. “You don’t get it.”

“No, I don’t. So explain it to me.”

“I can’t. I’m not supposed to talk about it with anyone or they’ll throw me right back in my cell.”

I scooted closer, dropping my voice and switching from English to Korean. For all I knew, there may have been security cameras or listening devices, but I had to risk it.

“I know you’re involved with the alien on board.”

Surprise flooded her features. “How...?”

“Long story. I need you to tell me what’s going on. They keep the trainees in the dark, but we managed to spy on them enough to get some details. They caught one of the Bergleute, right?”

She too glanced around the room and lowered her voice. “It’s not one of the Bergleute. It’s another alien whose race has been enslaved by them. He escaped their battle cruiser and came looking for help. For some reason, he contacted me telepathically asking me to tell the General what was going on. He wants us to free his people and kill the Bergleute.”

“How did they know it wasn’t a trap?”

“He showed me what happened while he was a slave. It was very...convincing,” she glanced away, seeming to hide a reaction to whatever had happened.

“What do you mean ‘showed’ you?”

“We shared memories.”

My eyes widened. “Scarlett, don’t you think that’s a little dangerous? What if he tried to take you over and make you his slave?”

“No, you...” she sighed. “If you met him, you would understand. He’s just a child. I know it sounds suspicious, but I trust him and I believe what he showed me.”

“Why did he pick you? Why not someone else?”

“He said I was an Empath of sorts. No one else can hear his thoughts and he speaks very little English out loud.”

“Is that why you’re upset? They’ve decided not to help him?”

“No. I’m upset because they’re gonna kill him.”

I grimaced. “Shit. I got the feeling that they would in order to make sure he’s not a threat. I’m so sorry, Scarlett.”

“Don’t be. I’m not going to let them murder an innocent creature.”

A wave of worry rolled over me. “Lettie, what the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m going to get out of here and I’m going to set him free,” she said with absolute resolve, as if what she was talking about wasn’t completely insane.

“That’s impossible,” I replied in my most patient voice. “And even if it was, they would imprison you for the rest of your life.”

She let out a dry chuckle. “Duke, we’re already prisoners. You know that. We can never leave, we can never make another decision on our own, and we can never go home. If they lock me up or kill me, at least I can accept it knowing that I did the right thing.”

“But you *don’t* know that it’s the right thing!” I snapped in frustration. “The alien could be lying, trying to lure us out to help the Bergleute. You’d be risking your life for no reason, or you could doom everyone on this ship. You’ve got to think this through or you’ll end up dead.”

“Duke, I know how it sounds. I really do. And you’re right, I could be completely wrong.”

She bit her bottom lip and then took a deep breath. “But what if I’m right? What if we launch a bomb and kill the Bergleute and an entire race of completely innocent aliens? They’re not that different from us. They’re orphans too, and we’d be condemning them to die alone and helpless. I would never forgive myself, just like I don’t forgive myself for not spending every waking second of my life looking for Dad.”

I stopped breathing for a couple of seconds. She never talked about what happened to our parents. “Is that what this is about? This reminds you of Mom and Dad?”

She wouldn’t meet my eyes. I sighed. “Lettie, it’s not the same. There was nothing you could have done to stop him. Me neither. Helping this alien isn’t going to change what happened.”

“I know it won’t but this is the only chance I’ve got to make up for every shitty thing I’ve done in my life. To Mom, to me, to you...” Her eyes wandered to my right hand and I could see that she was resisting the urge to cry.

I touched the side of her face, making her meet my eyes. “Scarlett...I can’t let you do this.”

She closed her eyes and the tears streaked down her cheeks. “...alone.”

My sister looked up at me, a question embedded in her face. “What?”

“I’d be a horrible older brother if I let you do this by yourself. Besides...I fuckin’ hate this jumpsuit anyway.”

Scarlett wrapped her arms around me, crying and laughing as I held her. Same blood, same heart.

Some things never change.

\*

## HALLSTEAD

“Hungry?”

I shook my head. Truth be told, I was starving, but the smell of the seared ribeye in front of me made my stomach churn. Few military men were vegetarian. They liked their protein. I took supplements and got along fine.

He sliced the steak into neat little pieces and dipped them in a small puddle of sauce, eating a couple mouthfuls before addressing me.

“Do you know why I’ve called you in?”

“No, sir.”

Bridgewater wiped his mouth with a napkin and then sat his dining utensils on his massive oak desk. He laced his fingers together and regarded me seriously with his pale blue eyes.

“I’m worried about you.”

I couldn’t stop the look of surprise from overtaking my face. “Worried?”

“You’re extremely competent, Hallstead. That’s why I recommended you to be in charge of the Titan and to keep things running smoothly. However, there’s another reason that I picked you: your rationality. It’s practically unmatched.”

He took a sip of the wine. Red, not white. The dim lighting made it look like blood. *General Vampire*, my mind mused before I could stop it.

“However, I can tell that this business with the alien is getting to you.”

“Sir,” I began. “I assure you that there’s nothing wrong with me. I agree with every decision we’ve come to regarding the alien. I’ve followed every order to the letter.”

“Yes, you have. But I don’t believe that you want this alien dead like the rest of us.”

I started to protest but he held up his hand. “Captain, you can be honest with me. It won’t leave this room. Speak your mind.”

I stared at him. He stared at me. A little itching feeling started to develop between my shoulder blades. Discomfort. I didn’t want to tell him the truth but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Sighing, I shoved my hands into my pockets and spoke the truth. “I just think that he would be more valuable to us alive. We need to have a longer period of time with him in order to determine if he’s really innocent or if he’s a threat. Besides, he might know more about the universe. That’s information that could give us a huge advantage in the long run.”

He nodded. “Good. Those are all perfectly logical reasons.”

Somehow, I didn’t like the way he said that. “But you’re still not going to consider letting him live.”

General Bridgewater sipped his wine again. “You’re well aware of our ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ policy.”

“I am. But sometimes we don’t need to always use it. It was my suggestion to let the Nam siblings live and they turned out to be more useful than either of us ever imagined.”

Something went through his eyes at the mention of the Nam siblings. That too made me suspicious. He stood up, stepping around the desk to face me.

“Excellent point. Without the Nam girl, we wouldn’t have been able to make effective contact with the alien. She’s quite valuable, wouldn’t you say?”

I eyed him. “Sir?”

“Oh, you and I both know we wouldn’t have had the breaks we’ve had without…Scarlett, was it? Quite an influential girl, isn’t she?”

“I’m not following, General.” Yes, I was. But I wanted to hear him say the words. Out loud. No more bullshit implications.

“Captain, every decision you have made under my command has been beneficial to this vessel. But there’s a bit of an asterisk next to that statement. That asterisk is Scarlett Nam.”

I cleared my throat. “You think she’s a threat, sir?”

“No. I think she’s a distraction.”

I took a deep breath through my nose. “General Bridgewater, that girl is impulsive, rude, emotionally unbalanced, and stubborn. She is not distracting me.”

He crossed his arms, “How long have you been working for me, son?”

“Two years.”

“And in that time, how many women have you been involved with?”

I gritted my teeth. “None, sir.”

“So you don’t think that the time you’ve spent around this girl is unusual?”

“She’s the only method of communication we have with the alien. How is it unusual that I directly interact with her?”

“It’s unusual when she’s starting to influence how you think,” he said, his voice switching from conversational to cold so fast that I thought I’d get brain freeze.

“It’s not a person, Captain. It’s a thing. A species. Not a ‘him’. It’s given us everything we need to eliminate a threat. Think of it as ammunition. When the clip’s empty, you throw it away. The bullet’s already hit. You just haven’t noticed yet.”

He walked back over to his desk and sat down, resuming his meal. “Trust me, Captain. Less contact with the girl will make you see things in a whole new light. She’ll be just another pretty face in the ranks soon enough, so get her out of your system as soon as possible. Understood?”

It physically hurt to answer without growling. “Yes, sir.”

I turned and exited the office. My hands were balled into fists inside my pockets. I had been taught as a child to channel my anger, to control it and not let it control me, but somehow my teachings leaked out of my head in that one moment. I began to forget that he was my superior and instead thought of him as a pompous asshole. Though I didn’t know what pissed me off more: that he acknowledged my argument and then completely ignored it, or that he implied that I was lusting after an eighteen-year-old.

I had two hours before I would have to resume my duties on deck so I headed to the gym to vent my frustrations on inanimate objects. The other people gave me a wide berth when I stalked in from the locker room, heading straight to the mat to stretch. We were allowed a few luxuries and one of them happened to be music. I plugged the wireless headphones into my ears and let the music flood across my neck, over my shoulders, down my arms, my chest, my legs, helping me breathe out my irritation.

General Bridgewater had always thought of me as the perfect soldier. Loyal. Obedient. Competent. But his words bothered me, especially the bit about ammunition. Did he see everyone as disposable? If I crossed him, if I disagreed, if I defied him, would he throw me away as well? How could we trust someone so callous to lead us?

*Hypocrite, the little voice in the back of my head snorted. Isn’t that callousness what saved humanity? If we had alerted the general public to the Bergleute, there would have been mass panic and hysteria. It was better for them to die ignorant than to know that their doom was coming.*

Which was true. It was a mercy kill of sorts. But...was it our right to make that decision for them? If I had a choice to face my death or remain ignorant, which would I choose?

The practice dummy was made of rubber and bounced against my knuckles with every punch: placid, emotionless, just like I was supposed to be. I wished that every blow took a little more of the anger away, but it didn't. It festered inside me like a disease. Doubt. A soldier couldn't afford to have doubts. Doubt made you sloppy. Unsure. Weak. Maybe he had been right. The alien was affecting my judgment, and so was Scarlett, despite my previous unwillingness to admit it.

Earlier, I had read the initial analysis that Dr. Warwick had kindly made a copy of for me. She inferred that Scarlett's traumatic experience of her mother's death was what motivated her to be so aggressive. The anger acted as a cover for deeper feelings of inadequacy. Though I didn't really need a report to tell me that. It was in her eyes—the rawness that came with seeing death firsthand, being close enough to touch it. She seemed to not give a shit about how her actions affected others but in actuality she controlled every little bit of how people saw her. Every word that came out of her mouth was calculated, precise, to convey a headstrong teenager and cloak the intelligence and vulnerability underneath. Like the others, I thought she was just a brat when I first met her, but after the alien shared its memories, I could see the layer beneath her bravado. She was a girl scared of her own potential. Scared of her self-worth. Scared of both failing and succeeding.

Like me at twelve years old, holding my father's gun, pointing it at the man who had broken into our home. Defiled it. Smearred the walls with sin.

I stopped and breathed deeply, calming my thoughts. By now, I had worked up a sweat and would need to cool off soon. I glanced at my watch. My timing appeared to be working. When Bridgewater called for me, I sent Duke to his sister. She needed comfort. Someone to get through that thick skull of hers. Only her brother could do that. It wasn't my job to care. I had my orders. Another mercy kill.

*Click, click, boom.*

The muffled sound of the gunshot still didn't knock me out of my thoughts. There were far more advanced weapons on the Titan—automatics, laser rifles, even Toshida's prototype for a light saber—but the only thing that felt reliable to me was a handgun. Something about the weight in my hand, the metal resting so perfectly in my palm, was something the other weapons couldn't capture. The precision involved with shooting always calmed me down better than physical combat, better than alcohol, better than sex. Well, maybe not better than sex. Though I hadn't had it in quite a while. Sometimes I worried I'd forgotten the act entirely, as some military men do.

I lowered the gun and pressed the button on the console. The paper fluttered as the conveyer belt reeled it in and I could see the neat little holes my bullets had made in the ten ring. I took it down and put up a new one, sending it back out onto the range. Just as I raised the gun again, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I took out my earplugs and turned to find one of the guards saluting me, Evans, I think was his name. "What can I do for you?"

"Just thought you'd like to know that the package has been delivered," he said. A generic code as there were other people in here practicing and none of them needed to know our business. I nodded and shoved the gun back in its holster at my waist,

following him out into the hallway. After making sure it was empty, I continued with a question.

“Did he make any mention of Han to her? Anything suggestion that he knows more than he’s letting on?”

“No. For the most part, they just started catching up.”

“Well, that’s disappointing.”

“I said for the most part.” He held up a small compact disc. “The rest is in Korean. I don’t speak Korean. But I believe you do.”

I slipped the disc into my pocket, checking once again to make sure no one saw us. “No one needs to know about this.”

“Yes, sir. Happy to help.”

“And he’s back in the ranks?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good man. Keep an eye out for both of ‘em, will you?”

He smiled. “Not that they need any more help.”

He saluted and walked off before I could ask him what that meant. Figures. Half the people in this place never said what they meant anyway.

I heard a short beep and touched the link in my ear. “Hallstead.”

General Bridgewater’s voice came out sharp and brief. “Get up to the deck. We’ve got something.”

I hurried to the elevator and rode it up to the main deck. When the doors opened, I went to the primary console where General Bridgewater was already waiting for me.

“Sir?”

He touched the console and brought up a map of our current position. We had been cruising at a good pace through the Milky Way Galaxy and had just reached an unmapped quadrant.

“We’ve got a hit on one of the probes.”

“What kind of hit?”

For the first time in a long while, General Bridgewater smiled. “The good kind. It’s showing signs of a planet that may support human life.”

For a moment, I couldn’t speak. I had to clear my throat twice before I could.

“Sir, that’s...amazing. Where is it?”

He expanded the map with his fingertips, pointing to a planet with three moons, hovering towards the middle of a small solar system.

“Our computer calculates it would take about 48 hours at our current speed to reach it. I’m thinking we should send a team down there to gather information about it before the rest of the vessels converge on that same place.”

He lowered his arm and the smile faded. “However, this would mean that we would have to move up our assault on the Bergleute. We can’t occupy this planet until they have been eliminated because if they do decide to follow us as a result of the alien we found, they would destroy this new place as well.”

“Do we have any indication that they’ve changed course?”

General Bridgewater brought up an image of a security camera feed from one of the probes. “This is the Titan Probe 4X51. We left it stationary at a checkpoint outside of the forty-seventh quadrant. Take a look.”

I watched the camera, expecting a looming shadow like the one that had appeared over the Earth before it was destroyed, but I didn't see anything like that. Instead, I caught a flash of movement and then the feed cut to static.

"What was that?"

He slowed down the footage to a mere crawl and made it a little bigger. This time, I could see an angular shape with an odd blue tint to it fly past the probe just before the footage stopped.

"Our analysts seem to think that this is something the Bergleute sent after us. The probe clocked it at a speed I don't think any of our vessels can approach while under the speed of light. It emitted some sort of electromagnetic pulse as it passed, which killed the feed."

"So she was right," I muttered. Louder, I asked, "Is it just the one?"

"Appears to be."

"I'm guessing it's a search-and-destroy, then. If they wanted to kill all of us, they would have sent more than one. It's going to take out Hatwer so he won't give us any more help. We've got to get him off this ship, sir. Now."

"I thought we already discussed this, Captain."

I had to bite my tongue to avoid saying something I'd regret. "I understand that, sir, but maybe this would be how we could draw them away from the Titan. We're too close to finding a home to risk it now."

"How would you suppose we do that? We don't know if they're tracking the alien or tracking the ship itself."

"But what is the alternative? Wait for it to get close and hope we can obliterate it? That didn't work with over one hundred of our best battle ships, why would it work with the Titan?"

He narrowed his eyes at me and I saw a nerve in his jaw twitch. "What would you suggest then, Captain?"

"Lead it away. Find their vulnerability. If we mount an assault now with these untrained soldiers, all we would be doing is wasting their lives. We can't afford to do that."

He massaged the bridge of his nose. "Or we can just kill the damn alien and jettison his body into space for the Bergleute to find. Problem solved."

I felt my hands starting to form fists and breathed deep to calm my nerves.

"There's no guarantee that the ship they sent won't continue tracking our movements. The Bergleute aren't stupid. They might figure it's easy to just follow us to the new planet and blow that up too. Things have changed, General. We can't think short term. We need a plan, not another massacre."

He stared me down for a long moment. "One hour. That's all you get. You take off and you come up with a plan that makes sense. And if I'm not impressed, we're sending the corpse out there and that'll be the end of it."

"Thank you, sir." The words were bitter in my mouth, but I swallowed my pride and left the main deck. When the elevator doors closed, I exhaled and ran a hand through my hair. Things were spinning out of control, minute by minute, second by second. We wouldn't last much longer like this. I knew that for sure.

My bedroom looked like a hotel or a hospital, to be honest. Other employees had stashed posters in their luggage to decorate, but my walls were bare, sterile. The bed was

pushed against the far wall so I could face the door, a compulsive need I had ever since I was a kid, and the white was broken up by two bookshelves and a computer desk. Books were crammed into every available inch of the shelves and populated about 70% of my computer desk, and the laptop took up the remaining space. I tossed my jacket on the bed and flipped the computer open, digging the disk out of my pocket. Evans' words had me spooked. The fact that Scarlett and Duke had started conversing in Korean meant they were trying to hide something. I got the feeling that maybe even Duke wouldn't be able to talk Scarlett out of her protectiveness of Hatwer.

I drummed my fingers on the desk as I waited for the disc to load. A pencil and paper lay beneath them to help me remember every detail of what was said. My Korean was just below fluency—courtesy of my traveling days in the military—and there was no guarantee that I would even be able to hear every word. They may have been criminals and impulsive ones at that, but I found myself admiring the level of intelligence each of them possessed. Sure, Duke was the mastermind, but Scarlett wasn't that far behind him. The fact that they had both learned Morse code proved that they were smart and knew that it could come in handy someday.

Finally, the footage started. I watched them hug and listened to their conversation in English, making a few notes on my paper about exactly what was said while I could gather it with ease. Then they switched to Korean and I had to increase the volume and pause every so often to write out a sentence I didn't understand and translate it so that it made sense to me. I spoke six languages, but it had been while since I had spoken or listened to any Korean.

Scarlett had taken a huge risk telling her brother about Hatwer. The security cameras were an insurance policy against mutiny or other problems the employees might try to hide, but the bug had been my idea. If General Bridgewater found out about this, both of them would be tossed right back in their cells until further notice. Normally, I would weigh the decision to turn them in against letting it slide, but Bridgewater had pissed me off and so it was going to stay a secret unless they revealed something dangerous.

Towards the end of the conversation, Duke surprised me. His decision to help her instead of trying to stop her struck me as odd because of his calculating nature and the fact that it would be a nigh impossible feat to accomplish. Then again, I underestimated the bond between family members. I was an only child raised by my stepfather. I didn't know what it meant to share blood and to put myself in danger just because of that fact.

After he agreed to help her, a new problem arose. The two of them sat Indian-style on the bed facing each other and effectively blocking my view since the hidden camera was mounted in the wall. They appeared to just be staring at each other, but I zoomed in a little more when I saw Duke's shoulder moving just slightly. I leaned in, peering at the screen, trying to figure out what was going on. With a shock, I realized that he had taken her hand and started using Morse code on her palm so that anyone watching wouldn't be able to see what he was telling her. Shit!

I pushed my chair back, plunging a hand into my hair in sheer frustration. What the hell was I going to do about this? Bridgewater would know something was wrong if I brought one of them in for questioning. As much trouble as the two of them were causing, I didn't want them tortured again. It hadn't been my decision to do it the first

time. It wasn't probable that they came up with a plan that would work and free Hatwer, but it was possible. A one in a million chance. Make that two in a million.

Duke wouldn't break. Not unless I threatened Scarlett again, and I got the feeling he would know I was bluffing. She was a chronic pain my ass, but I didn't want to hurt her. I would get better results if I tried to get an answer out of her instead, but Bridgewater didn't want me anywhere near her because of his "concerns" about our interactions. It wouldn't be easy, but there was no other choice.

I pulled out my personal phone and dialed. It rang about four times and then an authoritative yet clinical female voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Dr. Warwick, I need a favor."

\*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

## SCARLETT

“So...why am I being taken to the infirmary?”

“Just a routine check up. Nothing major,” Evans replied.

“...it doesn't involve needles, does it?”

He chuckled. “Not that I know of, no. Shouldn't take long.”

I sighed. “Good. It's hard to be a tough guy when you're in the fetal position.”

He snorted and swiped his keycard. “I'll be right outside. Behave yourself.”

I fluttered my eyelashes at him. “Don't I always?”

The door swooshed open and I stepped inside, finding a tiny patient room with the green curtain drawn around the bed and an empty desk against the adjacent wall. I suspected a computer used to be there, but it had been taken out for whatever reason. Maybe the doctor would bring the equipment with him.

I noticed a shadow beyond the curtain and sighed, pulling it aside.

“What's this all about, Doc?”

I jumped when I saw who was sitting on the bed, moving back a couple of steps in alarm. Hallstead met my eyes with a steady gaze and didn't bother answering my question.

“I'll make this simple. Tell me what you and your brother are planning and I won't throw you in jail for the rest of your life.”

I took a deep breath, trying to remember those anger exercises that Dr. Warwick had taught me. None really came to mind. Great.

“What plan? What are you talking about?”

He held up a small disc. “You used Morse code for exactly four minutes and fifteen seconds. I guessing you weren't trading secret cooking recipes.”

I crossed my arms and arranged my face to be completely blank. “What we talked about has nothing to do with Hatwer or you or the Starlight Contingency.”

He stood up, stepping close enough to invade my personal space. “Then tell me what he told you.”

“How to make the best chicken dumplings,” I replied with the utmost sarcasm possible.

Hallstead shook his head. “One way or another, you're going to tell me, Scarlett. You can do this the easy way and that'll be the end of the issue. Stop being difficult for once in your life.”

I smiled. “Why be difficult when you can be impossible?”

Anger darkened his face. “You really don't want to do this with me.”

“Oh, trust me, I really do,” I sneered, not backing away like I was sure he wanted me to.

“So what are you gonna do? Water-board me until I spill the beans? Threaten my brother? Staring contest? Mud wrestling? I can go get my swim suit in a jiffy.”

“No,” he answered. “I'm just going to tell you the truth.”

“What truth?”

“The truth about who you are. Dr. Warwick says you've been evasive about whatever it is that makes you hate yourself.”

I gritted my teeth. “And you think that’s going to make me give up our plan?” He ignored the comment and instead brushed past me. He put his hands in his pockets, speaking in a casual tone.

“You did something that caused your brother to get hurt.”

I froze. How could he possibly have figured that out? I hadn’t told anyone, not even Dr. Warwick. Still, I pressed my lips together to stop the question “How did you know that?” from spilling out and confirming his accusation.

“You don’t have to admit it. It’s in your eyes. It’s on your face every time you’re around your brother. It’s guilt. The way he treats you is like he’s your bodyguard, like you can’t get along without him because of what happened. You let him take on this role because you feel like he earned the right to be in charge of you. You need him, but you don’t need him that much, and your guilt makes you stay silent and obey his every command.”

I closed my eyes, taking slow breaths. *He’s trying to provoke you. Don’t react. That’s what he wants. Stay calm.*

“The missing pinky on Duke’s hand isn’t a birth defect. The scarring suggests that it was severed, not burnt or smashed. It’s still fresh so I know it didn’t happen too long ago. I bet you know the exact date and time of when it happened too. He lost a little piece of himself that day and you lost a little piece of you as well.”

My breathing started to pick up and my hands curled into fists. He was unraveling my past one thread at a time, picking at me like a bug in a Petri dish, laughing as my wings were plucked off and nailed to a wall in his office.

“That’s why everything you do isn’t good enough. You pretend not to care about what people think of you, but deep down you just want to cover up your mistake—the mistake that your brother paid in blood. He took your place and you feel like he took your identity when he made that decision for you.”

“Shut up.”

“That’s probably what led you to stealing. It gave you a false sense of superiority over others. Made you feel special, strong, clever. On some subconscious level, you know it’s not going to make your problem go away but it affords you a different identity. You can be someone else instead of the Scarlett who made the mistake.”

“Shut up.”

“I’ll bet if we dug deeper in your past, we’d find something wrong between you and your Dad. That’s why you hate men of authority. They remind you of him, and what he did to your mother. The ultimate dominance. Murder.”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” I threw a punch, sloppy, unfocused, filled to the brim with sorrow and rage and other stupid emotions that had no business being there. He knew I was coming and sidestepped, grabbing my wrist as my fist went past him. I tried to hit him with my other one but he caught that one too and kicked my legs out from under me. I thought I would hit the floor but the mattress was right behind us. He pinned me beneath him and I struggled uselessly against his iron grip. He hovered there, staring into my eyes and never once raising his voice.

“I can do this all day, Scarlett. Unearth every single one of your insecurities and make you face them. You can’t stop me and you know you can’t, so why don’t you just give me what I want and we don’t have to do this.”

My breath came in ragged pants that just barely hid the sobs growing in my throat. I had tried so hard to bury my past, to keep the dirt from clogging my nose and suffocating me, but it was always there, ready to swallow me up like quicksand. The anger burned through my gut but it was only a front for the agony of realizing that he was right about me. Every goddamn word.

“Just kill me. Just fucking kill me,” I whispered hoarsely, shaking my head. “I’m not giving you what you want, you bastard. I’m won’t give you that satisfaction.”

He squeezed my wrists, narrowing his eyes at me. “You think I like doing this? You think I get some sick kick out of treating you like this? I don’t, Scarlett. But I’m a soldier. I do what I need to do to get the job done.”

“How is that any different from me? Maybe I do hide from who I really am. Maybe I do let my brother run things because I screwed up and he had to pay for it. But that’s the only thing that keeps me from slitting my goddamn wrists. I do what I have to do to survive. So let me have it, Captain. Tell me more about what a piece of shit I am. I don’t care. I’m not telling you a damn thing no matter what you say.”

He leaned in closer, dropping his voice to a dangerous hiss. “I don’t believe you.”

“Tough shit.”

I waited for him to continue ripping me to metaphorical shreds, but he didn’t say anything. He just kept glaring down at me and that was when I felt it. An odd electric buzz that started in my feet and crawled up my legs to my thighs and over my stomach. Our breathing had unconsciously synchronized and I could feel every hot burst of air across my neck. Something changed in that millisecond. An invisible force tugged at my core and whispered the impossible in my ear. No. Couldn’t be.

The next second didn’t quite feel real. One moment my eyes were wet and I wanted to scream at him to let me go and tell him what a fucked up person he was and then my lips were sucking his bottom lip between them. He made a sound against me, like the echo of a groan, and I swallowed it, sliding my tongue past his teeth. He tasted of mint. I lifted my knee and ran it down the inside of his thigh. He shuddered, kissing me harder, using his teeth.

Then, he pulled away and snapped: “What the fuck are you doing?”

For a second, I wasn’t sure he had been the one to say it because I found myself wondering the same thing. “I…”

“You what?”

I licked my bottom lip, trying to wipe away the taste of him but it clung. “I don’t know. I just…felt something.”

He jerked against me when I rubbed my knee closer to his crotch and I lifted an eyebrow.

“And apparently, so did you.”

He glared at me but I could see that the kiss had affected him as much as it had affected me, maybe even moreso. “Nice try, but this isn’t going to work either.”

“Then it looks like we’re at a stalemate. Sort of.”

My knee went upward another inch and he made a strangled sound, pushing my leg aside. Before I could move, he nudged my thighs apart and knelt between them, planting his large hands on either side of my hips without touching me, but the implication was clear. He dropped his voice to a tone between irritation and arousal, which was quite devastating from so close.

“You have a knack for getting in over your head,” he growled.

I smiled again, but it was a little unsteady for reasons I didn’t want to admit to myself.

“So do you. You can see right through me but you fail to realize that I’ve seen who you really are underneath the soldier persona.”

His grey eyes searched mine and he didn’t deny it so I kept going, my confidence growing as I went. “The reason why you want to know our plan so desperately is that deep down...you want to help us. Maybe because it’s the right thing to do or maybe because you just want to defy your boss. You’re a better man than this and you know it, but you can’t be because of your duty. And that’s also why you can’t admit that you want me.”

“I’m an entire decade older than you. Did you ever stop to think that had something to do with it?”

“Not really. It bothers you, but not that much. You hate that we’re attracted to each other because it makes you look like you’re taking advantage of me, though we both know that if it ever happened, it would be the other way around.”

A dangerous look went through his eyes then. It was so animalistic that I couldn’t help but shiver a little. “Is that right?”

I let my smirk widen. Part of me knew better than to provoke him, but I couldn’t help myself. This was not the typical socially appropriate Hallstead. The man before me had shed his skin to reveal his instinctual side. No more suit and tie, no more protocol. Just sex and violence.

I looped my arms around his neck, continuing in a low murmur. “It’s a shame it’ll never happen. I wonder what would happen if that guard wasn’t outside. Who would be making the other person scream first?”

“Careful, little girl,” he whispered, a guttural sound. “You might not like the answer to that question.”

“I don’t recall you complaining a minute ago.”

He frowned harder. “Did you have a point somewhere in this speech?”

I quelled my desire to tease him more and pushed up to a sitting position. He mirrored me, staying just out of touching range but only by inches. “I think we can help each other. You don’t want Hatwer dead any more than I do.”

“I—”

“Save it. I’m hardheaded, not blind. I’ll make it simple—my brother and I can work outside of the military regulations because we weren’t one of you to begin with. There’s no need to risk your own men. They don’t owe Hatwer anything and they wouldn’t understand even if I tried to explain it to them.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m asking you to give us one chance to save his people. Just one. If we fail, then that’s the end of it and you can do whatever you want. You and I both know that the Bergleute will send an executioner for him and we’ll use it to return to their mother ship. Once we’re inside, we can shut it down and get his people out of there. Then you send your boys to take them out.”

“How would you even know how to pilot that thing? We’re talking about advanced alien technology. You’re an ex-thief. How are you anywhere near qualified?”

“I shared memories with Hatwer. I know how to pilot the escape pod and I’m guessing he can help us figure out how to pilot the ship the Bergleute send. He’ll be our guide.”

“And what if you get compromised while on the mother ship? We can’t send someone to get you out. They’ll see us coming.”

I took a deep breath. “That’s why you’re going to send a bomb with us. If we can’t get them out, at least we can damage the damn thing.”

He stared at me. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m not going to die alone, Captain. If I die, I’m taking as many of those bastards as I can with me.”

Hallstead shook his head, seeming to want to argue more but then just letting it go. “How could we communicate with you once you’re on the ship? The one they sent to kill Hatwer can disable our signals.”

I tapped my watch. “Time. Duke calculated how long it would take to reach them and you have to follow it to the very second. If your men don’t see us leaving the mother ship, they can still get out of there without getting killed.”

“This is insane. We don’t have enough room on our ships to support the Shasar. We don’t know what they eat or even how to talk to them.”

“We’ll find them a nearby planet that can support them.”

He glanced away and I paused, growing suspicious. “You know somewhere they can go, don’t you?”

“That’s classified,” he grunted at me.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t be a dick. If you’ve found a hospitable planet, there’s no reason we can’t share. I don’t think there’ll be that many of them left anyway.”

“Fair enough, but there’s no way that General Bridgewater is going to agree to this.”

“Exactly.”

He gave me a confused look. “What?”

“What the General doesn’t know can’t hurt him. That’s where you come in. You’re going to pretend that you didn’t know about any of this and work behind the scenes. That way you won’t have to risk getting fired or locked up if you pitch the idea to him. I’m sure he’s scheduling Hatwer’s autopsy pretty soon so we’ll ambush the guards and take him and the ship.”

He shook his head. “You’ll never be able to hold off all the guards between the morgue and where they’re keeping the escape pod.”

“True, but if you pull some strings, I’m sure we can make it happen. We’ll make a big show of leaving and Bridgewater will send someone after us whose ship will conveniently break down while chasing us.”

Hallstead arched an eyebrow. “You’ve had a long time to think about this, huh?”

“Yeah, I feel very Lex Luthor right now, thank you for noticing.”

“This isn’t going to work, Scarlett. There are too many things that can go wrong.”

“But what’s the alternative? Let them die, let Hatwer die, and hope that the Bergleute don’t decide to come after all of us? You know we have a chance. That’s all I’m asking for. I have to make this right. You said yourself that Hatwer chose me. There’s got to be a reason for that.”

The silence stretched a mile wide. I wanted to shake him, to make his answer fall out so I wouldn't have to keep waiting.

Finally, he sighed. "If you don't pull this off, it's my ass."

"Don't worry, Captain," I replied in a deadpan voice. "Your ass is in our hands."

Hallstead rolled his eyes at me and I couldn't help but smile. He stood and checked his watch, adopting a more serious look.

"We've got three hours before Hatwer's autopsy. How is your brother planning on getting out of the dorm?"

"He said he was going to give the guard a message saying that he had important information on one of the trainees, some Russian guy. You'll have the guard escort him to the interrogation level and that's when he'll make the escape."

"What about you?"

I shrugged. "I've always been good at picking locks."

He snorted. "Figures. Here."

He tossed something at me and I caught it on reflex, glancing down to find a phone resting in my palm. "That's my personal phone. It's got the coordinates to the new inhabitable planet we're heading towards. Arrival is set less than 48 hours from now."

"What if they ask you how I got it?"

"I'll tell them you lifted it off me after the last time we interrogated Hatwer together. You were a thief, after all. I'll slip three space suits into the escape pod in case of emergencies. They've got roughly five hours worth of air so you'd better hope there aren't any."

Another awkward silence started to descend but I quickly filled it.

"Guess this is goodbye." I bit my lower lip, not sure of what to say at first.

"Thank you."

A bit of surprise crept into his features. "For what?"

"This. For not being as much of a bastard as you could have been. For not taking advantage of me." A small laugh escaped me.

"Come to think of it, you're probably the closest thing to a nice guy that I've ever known. Isn't that sad?"

He allowed a smile to touch his lips for a brief moment. "Incredibly. It's been a pleasure, Miss Nam."

"Goodbye, Captain Hallstead."

"Travis," he said softly.

"Goodbye, Travis."

He turned and walked out. Some part of me left with him. I'd have time to deal with that later, God-willing.

I checked my watch. Three hours.

Tempus fugit.

\*

DUKE

"Need a spot?"

I craned my neck to see Han behind me with both of his enormous hands resting on the barbell I had loaded with 35 lbs on each side. Time dripped off the clock on the far

wall and it was hard to think about anything else. Every other scheme we had concocted was usually only possible because I could control all the factors involved. Not the case here. I'd always thought that Scarlett had unbelievable luck, but this was the first time I hoped that it was actually true.

"Uh, sure," I said once I realized I'd been sitting there for a couple seconds, distracted by my thoughts. Sergeant Rosewood had set up a rotation system for the trainees in the gym. We would spend twenty minutes rotating from spot to spot using different kinds of equipment. My partner had gone off to the bathroom and we weren't allowed to lift weights on our own.

I lay back and wrapped my fingers around the bar. It was cold, much like the floors, and walls, and everything else on the Titan. Before all of this, I had belonged to a gym so I could stay limber and healthy. Scarlett preferred doing her workout at home but I liked the public setting.

I did five reps before Han said anything. "So you gonna keep lying to me or what?"

I adopted a confused look, pausing with the bar held high but parallel to the floor. It always took some effort to keep one end from tilting.

"What are you talking about?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Sam might not notice everything, but I do. Why did they call you out of training?"

"It was my sister," I lied through several deep breaths. "She's sick. They just wanted to let me know."

"Still lying. I've seen the way you look when you talk about her. You'd be more worried if it was about her. So that leads me to believe that they asked you about the bug."

I risked a glance up at him and his frown was deep and bitter. No point in denying that since he had proof. They had taken it with them before they came to collect me.

"What happened? Did they ask you about it?"

I shook my head. "You're being ridiculous. If they thought you were involved, they would have questioned you by now. It has nothing to do with the bug."

"Not true. Sergeant Rosewood has been watching me more closely ever since they took you. It can't be a coincidence."

"Sergeant Rosewood hates everyone," I said with a snort. "That's not unusual, that's just the way he is."

I finished my last rep and sat up, mopping the sweat off my forehead and the back of my neck while Han replaced the barbell.

"I am not stupid, Duke. You know more than what you're saying and I'm going to find out what's going on one way or another. This is your last chance to come clean while we are still friends."

I turned around and left my face blank. "I already told you, Han. This is not about you."

He nodded. "Very well. But remember that I gave you a choice."

Han walked away just as my partner returned, staring between the two of us with a confused look, as if the air held a certain amount of static that he could feel. Maybe it did, maybe it didn't. I hadn't wanted things to go this way, but it was still my fault. I could have told them it was my idea and taken the heat, but then I wouldn't have been

able to see Scarlett and come up with a plan to save Hatwer. Then again, letting Han take the blame didn't feel right because he was a good soldier and a decent person in general. Damned if I do, damned if I don't. The story of my life.

Eventually, Sergeant Rosewood called us to attention and dismissed us to the cafeteria for lunch. I maneuvered myself to the back of the line and stopped in front of him before leaving the room, clearing my throat.

"Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood sir, may I have a word with you?"

"Oh? About what, Mr. Nam?"

"I have information about Han that I think should be reported to Captain Hallstead, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir."

"The Captain's indisposed. You can tell me what's so important, though. I'm all ears."

Panic gripped me. I hadn't realized until now that my entire plan hinged on the fact that they were going to escort me out of here. If he didn't take me to see Hallstead, Scarlett would be on her own.

I tried again. "I would rather not discuss it here. We don't know who might be listening, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir."

He crossed his arms, fixing me with a hard, suspicious glare. "Are you saying you don't trust me, trainee?"

"No, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir."

"Then you can tell me now and I'll take the message back to Captain Hallstead."

*Shit.* "Forgive me, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir, but I am under direct orders not to talk about anything I find without the audience of the both of you. According to the Air Force regulations 7560 column B, subsection 15, I am not authorized to disobey a direct order from a commanding officer above Staff Sergeant."

He glared at me for a long moment. It took all of my will power not to glance at the clock, knowing that my precious minutes were ticking off of it one by one. Finally, he nodded.

"Very good, Mr. Nam. Glad to see you've memorized your manual. Maybe you're not such a screw up after all."

He motioned to the guards to follow us and touched the link in his ear, calling Captain Hallstead. I trailed behind him, waiting to overhear the response. Scarlett had told me she would try to convince Captain Hallstead to help us—a pipe dream at best, but I had faith in my sister. A moment later, he got the go ahead for the meeting and the plan was set.

We went up several flights of stairs to a floor with the elevator and boarded it. I began to map out my assault in my head. Sergeant Rosewood would not be an easy takedown. He was much stronger and taller than me, but I did have the element of surprise.

Then, the elevator stopped and I opened my eyes, not realizing that I had closed them as I visualized my escape route. Sergeant Rosewood stepped off, glancing at me over his shoulder.

"I've got a quick stop to make. Don't start without me."

"Yes, Staff Sergeant Alexander Rosewood, sir," I replied, trying not to frown. Where the hell was he going? And why? Then again, he had just eliminated my most

prominent problem in the escape route so there was no reason to worry about where he was going.

The elevator continues upward for several floors until we reached the interrogation level. Two guards flanked me as I walked, checking the rooms to make sure they were all empty. The hallway was also empty, but my new problem was the alarm button positioned at the end of the hall. If one of them got to it, the jig was up. I'd have to take them down quickly and quietly. No second chances.

I glanced upward at the ceiling and frowned, stopping dead in my tracks. "What the hell is that?"

Both guards looked up. I thrust both elbows into their throats simultaneously, momentarily paralyzing their vocal cords. I turned to the man on my right and punched him as hard as I could in the solar plexus, winding him, and when he bent over to wheeze, I slammed my knee into his forehead. He dropped like a sack of hammers.

The man on my right grabbed his gun and I caught his wrist, twisting his arm so the gun wasn't pointed at me, and kicking his legs out from under him. He went down and I fell on top of him, leaning my forearm on his throat so that he couldn't breathe. He started to squeeze down on the trigger of the gun so I broke his wrist and threw the gun away. He punched my kidney with his free hand and I grimaced, pressing harder on his throat as gurgled screams escaped. Seconds later, he couldn't lift his arm to hit me any more and his eyelids fluttered shut. I immediately let go and crawled off of him, panting from exertion and the aching pain in my side.

After I caught my breath, I took both of their guns and stuffed them in the loose pockets of my jumpsuit. I used one key card to open an interrogation room at the end of the hall and dragged both of them inside, laying them flat on the floor directly in front of the window so that no one would see them until they literally walked in the room. I took a moment to strip them of any useful equipment and then checked their pulses. Both were still alive.

I took one of the guns out of my pockets and checked if it was loaded and the safety had been turned off before cracking the door and seeing if anyone had heard the commotion. The gun felt foreign in my hands as I closed the door behind me and crept down the hall to the elevator. I hit the button and waited with the gun aimed for it to arrive. The bell sounded and the doors slid open, revealing only one man who was already pointing a gun at me.

"Hello, Mr. Nam."

"Hello, Sergeant Rosewood."

He stepped out of the elevator and I backed up, keeping my arm steady as I aimed the gun at his forehead.

"How'd you figure it out?"

Rosewood snorted. "You must think I'm a fuckin' moron, huh?"

I smirked. "You're an asshole, but you're not a moron. I just want to know exactly what tipped you off, is all."

"You're a pretty good liar, Mr. Nam, but you're not perfect. You pushed so hard to see the Captain that I could tell something was wrong."

A creeping sense of dread crawled up my stomach. "That was about five minutes ago. I'm assuming you've called the Captain and General Bridgewater to let them know I'm a traitor."

“Nope.” Shock rolled through me.

He flashed me a nasty smile. “Went to get my good gun instead. You broke into my house. You could’ve hurt my family. I’m gonna take your ass down myself and see the look on your face as I throw you and your rotten little sister in jail for the rest of your lives.”

The surprise abated, leaving my face cold with anger. “Why not just kill me? Don’t want to get your hands dirty?”

“That’d be too easy, son. I want you to be alive to remember that I did this to you.”

“Guess I was right. You are an asshole.”

He smirked. “And don’t you forget it.”

“I don’t want to kill you, Sergeant, but you’re standing between me and my sister. I’ll ask you only once to get out of my way.”

“I’ll have to decline that offer. You want me to move? Shoot me.”

We were at a stalemate. He and I both knew it. But we couldn’t stand here all night comparing cup sizes because the autopsy was approaching and Scarlett needed me. I’d have to do something or all three of us would be dead. But could I do it? Could I shoot this man in the head and never look back?

“You got the balls to kill me, son? I don’t think so. You’re gonna put that gun down and accept your fate like any other man would do. You can’t help your sister if you’re dead.”

A long silence spilled between us. I stared at the cold chunk of metal in my hands. Then, slowly, I lowered the gun.

“You’re right, Rosewood. I can’t kill you.”

He kept the gun on me and reached for the handcuffs in his pocket. As he reached for me, I took out the small taser I had palmed from one of the guards and shot it at him.

“But I have no problem tazing your sorry ass.”

He screamed and the gun went off. The bullet went straight through my right shoulder, the impact shoving me back several feet. It felt like someone had taken a red-hot poker and plunged it into my skin—a horrible pain that spread from the wound to the tips of my fingers.

I managed to push myself off the bloodstained wall behind me to look down at the paralyzed, twitching man on the floor, his eyes wide as plates and bloodshot. I kicked the gun across the linoleum, mustering one last comment before I got onto the elevator.

“*Now* I think you’re a fuckin’ moron.”

The elevator doors slammed shut and I rode up floor by floor to the level where they had taken Hatwer to be killed. Blood dripped down my arm in thick rivulets. I tore off one sleeve of my jumpsuit and tied it over the wound, slowing the blood flow. A puddle formed under my feet like morbid graffiti. I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. The pain flickered through my upper body with every beat of my heart. It felt like life itself was oozing out of me. *No, don’t think about it. She needs you. They need you. Be strong.*

The bell rang again and I lifted the gun in my left hand, trying to steady my breathing so that the barrel wouldn’t shake as I aimed. The doors slid open and I tensed. The hallway was empty. It made sense because no one knew about the autopsy except the higher ups, but I didn’t like it. Something felt wrong. Very wrong.

My boots made tiny echoes as I walked towards the only laboratory with light peeking out from beneath the double doors. I used one of the guards' key cards for entry and kicked them open.

Inside, I found a team of four doctors crowded around the alien, who had been strapped very thoroughly to an examination table. Their heads all whipped around to look at me when I entered and I could see the surprise on their faces even through their hazard mat face masks.

"Hands in the air! Now!" I commanded in a harsh voice, pointing the gun at each of them in turn. One had been lowering a mask attached to a tank of what I assumed to be some sort of poisonous gas onto the alien's beak and he let it go. The alien blinked at me with four black eyes and there was a thick goo oozing from each of them. Jesus. It was...crying. I felt my heart crumple up inside my chest like a piece of paper.

"Do not move unless I tell you to. If you try to run or set off an alarm, I'll shoot your kneecaps off. Nod if you understand."

They all nodded. I pointed the gun at the two doctors closest to me and then gestured at the alien. "Untie him."

They shuffled forward and starting undoing the straps keeping the alien hostage, which allowed me a moment to take a good look at him. His body seemed encased by a shell much like a crab, but his make up still held a sort of humanoid fashion to it. He was very small, about 4'0" flat, and had insect-like qualities. It was hard to find him as endearing as Scarlett did but she had always been able to see greatness in the seemingly ugly.

After the doctors got him loose, I reached out a hand to help him down. Hatwer stumbled a little as he got off the gurney but his legs held. I pushed him behind me and then took two pairs of handcuffs from where they hung on my belt like heavy jewelry. I tossed it to the nearest doctor.

"Sit down and cuff yourselves around the table in a circle."

Again, they obeyed me without question. I still didn't like how easy this felt, but I let it go as they finished and stared at me for further instruction. Though I felt a little bad for them. They were just following orders.

"Someone will come get you as soon as I'm gone. Don't try anything funny or I'll be back. Come on, Hatwer."

I pulled the doors shut and ran for the elevator. Hatwer followed me on his odd bent legs, a little shaky but mostly stable. I had arrived just it time, it seemed. Big damn hero.

I hit the elevator button several times, even though I knew it wouldn't make it go any faster, and tried to ignore the pain lancing through my right arm.

"Thank."

I jumped, glancing to my right at the alien. He blinked all four eyes at me, wiping the dark liquid away from them.

"What did you say?"

"Thank," Hatwer croaked again from his beak-like mouth. He sounded like an old man with a breathing disorder, but the meaning was clear.

I offered him a kind smile. "You're welcome, Hatwer."

He lowered his gaze from my face to my arm. "Hurt."

“It’s okay. We’ll be alright. We just have to make it to your escape pod and we’ll be fine.”

He tilted his head at me and I realized he probably hadn’t understood me. I thought about what to say that would be familiar to him.

“Scarlett. We’re going to see Scarlett.”

At the mention of her name, his eyes widened and he seemed to regain some of his strength. I figured it would have that effect on him.

The elevator doors open and we rushed inside. I hit the button for the right level and took a deep breath. Almost home free.

The cargo bay was on the lowest level of the vessel and that was where Scarlett was supposed to meet us with the supplies we needed for the mission. Anticipation rode high in my throat as I watched the digital numbers drop lower and lower until we hit the very last floor. The doors opened for the last time.

And all hell broke loose.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## SCARLETT

Fifteen minutes.

That was how long I had to get to the escape pod before it launched. Too bad I was still stuck in my room trying to undo the locking mechanism on the door.

I had taken one of the legs off the bed and jammed it into the dry wall until I could see the circuits. Being a thief, I was well versed in electronics but this circuitry was unbelievable. Now I understood what they meant when they told me that our technology was far more advanced than they let the general public know about. Everything had a back up system. Every wire I cut had one to replace it and I was running out of time and burnt fingertips.

Earlier, I had tried the sick patient routine but no one responded: meaning that either the guards had gone on break or they were simply ignoring me. I believed the former rather than the latter because no one came to look in on me after I cracked a hole in the wall.

“Shit!” I grimaced as another tiny shock went through my hand, and pressed my head against my forearms, breathing slowly. *Calm down*. No one said this would be easy, or sane, for that matter. I’d gotten myself into this mess and I had to fix it somehow.

As I lifted my head, a couple strands of hair got trapped in my watch and I accidentally ripped them out, wincing. I started to growl curses at them but that when was the idea hit me. I had been so busy trying to disable certain systems that I hadn’t considered merely redirecting them. One of these combinations would yield the automatic open system if I did it carefully enough.

Rejuvenated, I put down the makeshift blade I had fashioned from part of the bed frame and examined the wiring I had already snipped. Pretty soon, I could see the patterns emerging and went to work reconnecting them in the right sequence until at last, I heard something click and the door slid open. Joyous, I straightened up and started to walk through the entrance only to bump into a guard.

“Guess I’m a bit late,” Evans mused. I mouthed uselessly for a moment, not sure of what to say but then he interrupted.

“It’s okay, I’m in on your plan. Captain sent me to get you clear as soon as possible. You’re under a pretty big time crunch, after all.”

“Understatement of the century,” I said as we hurried towards the elevator. Luckily, it was in the later hours aboard the ship so most people were asleep, leaving the hallway empty. The doors opened and the two of us stepped inside. Evans pulled his back up gun out of its holster and handed it to me.

“If we’re gonna make this look realistic, you’re gonna have to pop me one. Big bruise’ll convince the guys above us that you got the drop on me.”

“I figured I’d have to do that,” I admitted, a little crestfallen. “Where do you want it? Left or right temple? Forehead? Cheek?”

“Temple looks more dramatic. I’d aim for the left one.”

“Got it.” I paused, glancing at him with a sheepish look.

“I’m sorry I have to hit you. I like you.”

He grinned. “Don’t worry about it. I’m always happy to help. And one more thing...”

Evans reached into one of his pockets and withdrew a device about the size of a Pez dispenser. It had a silver handle and cap but the rest of it was black.

“This is the bomb you requested.”

I swallowed, trying to keep the anxiety out of my voice. “Oh.”

“It’s pretty simple.” He flicked his thumb against the cap, revealing a red button.

“Squeeze the handle and press the button. You’ll have five minutes to get clear if you set it off this way. There’s also a back up instant detonation switch if things get...”

He paused, choosing his words. “...hectic. It’s on the bottom. It detonates in ten seconds. The bomb creates a very large explosion but based on the size and dimension of the Bergleute’s ship, you would have to be in the main engine room to destroy the entire vessel. Otherwise, it’ll cripple the ship, but not obliterate it.”

“Got it. Thank you.” He handed it to me and I carefully closed the cap and put it in my pocket. Evans glanced at the elevator’s dropping numbers, sparing me a small smile.

“Good luck.”

I returned it. “Thanks.”

Our moment was disrupted as the elevator stopped on the wrong floor. The doors slid open and revealed the second-to-last person I wanted to see right now.

The guard I’d knocked out.

Evans quickly hid his surprise and cleared his throat, nodding to the guard as he stepped onto the elevator. “Simmons.”

He glanced between us, his brown eyes narrowing when he looked at me. “What are you two doing?”

“Taking her to see Bridgewater,” Evans answered nonchalantly. I had stepped towards the rear of the elevator when he came in and started to ease the gun into the small of my back. The heavy cotton sweatshirt could conceal the lumpy shape of the weapon, but not if we got off before he did.

“What floor?” Evans asked, his gloved finger hovering over the buttons. We hadn’t chosen our level yet since we had been discussing how to fake my escape. Things could go sour very quickly if we indicated that we were going to the cargo hold where the escape pod was kept.

“Interrogation. Just got on shift.” He sent me a nasty look.

“That’s where I work now because of you.”

I kept my mouth shut, merely looking away. Simmons frowned.

“What? You don’t have anything to say to my face now, is that it?”

Evans tried to intervene. “C’mon, don’t do that. She’s just some hardheaded punk. Not worth your time.”

Simmons snorted. “Not worth anyone’s time. ‘Cept maybe Hallstead’s.”

We both froze. I knew I shouldn’t have said anything, but the words slipped out before I could stop them.

“You wanna run that by me again?”

“Like you don’t know. Why else do you get all the special treatment? The nice room, not rotting in jail for the rest of your life? Don’t pretend like you’re not fuckin’ him.”

“You son of a bitch!” I launched myself towards him but Evans caught my arm, holding me back. I heard a brush of cloth and then a click and Simmons’ gun was drawn, pointed at my chest.

Evans drew his just as quickly, his voice level. “What the hell are you doing, Simmons?”

“No, I think that’s what I should be asking you, Evans,” he sneered. “Why are you helping this bitch escape?”

“Escape? What are you talking about?”

He let out a bitter laugh. “I got the call five minutes ago. She and her brother are taking the alien off the ship. Rosewood figured I’d enjoy the payback so he sent me to intercept you. Would have come for you himself but apparently he’s indisposed on account of your brother tazing him.”

The elevator stopped at the interrogation level but Simmons hit the Closing Doors button before the doors could open. He then pressed the prison cell level, keeping his rifle aimed at me and not Evans. If anything went sour, I’d be the first to die. No way around it.

“So this is what’s gonna happen: you’re gonna get off this elevator and walk back to you nice little cell, and you’re gonna spend the rest of your life remembering that I put you there. Maybe if you’re nice to me, I’ll let the two of you share one.”

“We’re not going to do that, Simmons. You know that,” Evans growled.

Simmons smiled, but it was more like a baring of teeth than a smile. Like a lion with its jaws wrapped around an antelope’s throat.

“Yep. I do.”

His rifle went off, nearly deafening me. I expected an explosion of blood and a symphony of agony going through my body, but then I realized *he hadn’t shot me*.

Evans lay in a heap against the wall of the elevator. The acrid smell of gunpowder and blood burnt my nostrils as I knelt next to him, shouting his name. The bullet had hit him in the upper body, just below where the collarbone connected to his right arm. He moaned, clutching the wound with his good hand, his own gun forgotten on the floor. Simmons aimed his gun at me again, catching my attention.

“What did you shoot him for, you shit?!” I screamed.

He shrugged. “Collateral damage. They’ll believe me if I tell them he struggled.”

“If he dies, I swear to God, I’ll kill you,” I said, my voice thick and hoarse with anger.

“Tall talk, sweetheart. But you touch that gun on the floor and I’ll shoot you too.”

“I’ll risk it,” I snarled through my teeth, reaching for the gun. Just as I did, the lights went out in the elevator, swallowing us in darkness except for three sparks of light when three shots were fired. Silence.

The elevator had stopped moving. Someone cut the power. I stood motionless, straining my ears to hear something other than Evans’ labored breathing. There was at least another three feet around me that Simmons could occupy, but it was too dark to see if my bullets had hit him. Only one thing to do. I had to get the lights back on.

I carefully sidled over to the panel where the buttons were and felt for the hatch that would open the manual controls. I managed to pry it open and closed my eyes, concentrating on the texture and length of each wire, feeling the weight and letting it tell me what I needed to know. Luckily, this thing had a temporary emergency power back up

and I switched it on, filling the elevator with dim light and the lurching sound of it moving down towards the prison floor.

Simmons lay on the opposite side of the elevator with a bullet in his gut, wheezing and shaking as he stared at the wound. I walked over to him, raising the gun so that it was level with his forehead. He glowered up at me and spat in my general direction. I smiled the same cold way that he had only moments earlier.

“You should learn to respect your betters, Simmons.”

“Fuck you,” he strained to say. “Shoot me.”

“Oh, don’t tempt me. I would love to shoot you...but I think I’ll let you live with the knowledge that I beat you and got away, making this your second failure. You’ll probably be assigned to cleaning toilets after this. You’re pretty qualified for it, being that you’re full of shit.”

With that, I kicked his rifle away and hit the floor for the cargo bay before I went back over to Evans to help him dress the gunshot wound.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. He shook his head, looking pale but not near death. The medical personnel would probably find him soon and he’d be okay. Except for getting in trouble with Bridgewater. I tried not to think about it.

“S’okay. Just get out of here alive and this new scar won’t be in vain.”

“I will. I promise.”

The elevator doors slid open. I kissed him on the cheek and lifted the borrowed gun as I walked out only to find my worst nightmare.

“Hello, Miss Nam.”

The enormous escape pod rested in front of a hatch with huge metal doors with windows, displaying the endless blackness of space, but that wasn’t what caught my attention. In front of the pod stood General Bridgewater holding a gun against my brother’s head. But that still wasn’t what caught my attention.

Captain Hallstead held a gun against Hatwer’s temple.

I felt sick. Nauseous. Scared. Helpless. It took a couple of tries for me to speak, but I somehow managed it.

“What are you doing?”

General Bridgewater arched a grey eyebrow. “Stopping you from making the biggest mistake of your life.”

I glared at him. “I’m not talking to you.”

Surprise stole across his face. I looked at Hallstead, tightening my grip on the gun.

“What...are...you doing?”

He spoke only two words. “My job.”

“I trusted you,” I whispered. “I don’t trust anyone but my brother.”

“Well, Hallstead always was the perfect soldier. Not even you could change that,” Bridgewater interrupted, lifting his other hand. He snapped his fingers and I heard the collective sound of several rifles being cocked. I lifted my eyes to the floor above me where there were at least ten soldiers with their guns trained on me. There were ships lined up beside the launch pad where the escape pod stood but metal crates populated the remaining space, probably filled with food and supplies. Good cover if there weren’t almost a dozen guns pointing at me.

“It was a nice effort, really, but you’re outmatched and outwitted. Put the gun down or your brother and your little alien friend die,” Bridgewater said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “If either of you even twitch, I’m going to shoot you in the face. If they die, you die.”

“I’ve got ten rifles that say you won’t make your mark. Are you willing to risk your brother’s life to save some alien?”

My gaze wandered to Duke. He had a black eye and a gunshot wound in his shoulder. The very sight made my heart shudder inside my chest. My fault. Always my fault.

I took a deep breath, trying to remain steady. “We made the decision to do this, come Hell or high water. I’m willing to die for this and so is he. Do your worst, General.”

To my horror, he actually smiled. “Then I shall. Captain Hallstead?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Shoot her brother in the head.”

Bridgewater lowered his gun and stepped aside, gesturing towards Duke. I aimed the gun at Hallstead just as he lifted the barrel off of Hatwer. Everything in me screamed at once for him not to do it because if he did, I was going to kill him and I didn’t want to because he was the only goddamn person I had ever met who seemed to understand me.

“Don’t do it,” I whispered, not sure if I were talking to him or myself. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Silence stretched into eternity as he stood there with the gun pointed at the only family I had left, staring at the back of my brother’s head with those dark grey eyes.

“You’re wrong.”

I started to answer, but then he turned around and aimed his gun at General Bridgewater’s head.

“I’m not the perfect soldier any more.”

All of the guns in the room shifted to point at him. General Bridgewater’s face turned red with anger.

“Captain, have you lost your mind?”

Hallstead smiled. “Not even a little bit.”

“You are about to sacrifice your life and your entire career on a half-cocked idea from a worthless orphan brat,” Bridgewater spat.

“And I’d do it again. No offense, Scarlett.”

I almost smiled. “None taken.”

“So here’s what gonna happen—you’re gonna let them on the ship and they’re gonna try to save Hatwer’s people. If you move a muscle out of line, I pull this trigger. I can handle life in prison. It’s better than having to work for you any more.”

“He’s bluffing. Shoot him.”

“Am I? I think we both know at this range you’d be dead before any of them fire.”

Bridgewater stared at him, then glanced at me, then at the soldiers, and then back at Hallstead. I could see the gears turning in his head as he calculated the outcome of our current predicament, and so could Hallstead.

“Drop the gun.”

Bridgewater’s weapon clattered to the floor. “Now step away the launch pad.”

He walked backwards with his hands up. I kept the gun pointed at him and hurried over to my brother, helping him to his feet.

“Oh God, *Oppa*, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” I murmured, hugging him with one arm.

He shook his head. “It’s okay. We need to get going. We don’t have much time.”

I looked at Hatwer, who seemed confused and anxious about what was going on.

“Are you okay?”

*“Yes. I am glad you are here. We were ambushed. I am sorry that I could not defend your brother.”*

“It’s okay. Open the ship, we have to leave right now.”

Hatwer went over to the ship. It was oblong and black with strange dark blue markings on the hull. The little alien reached beneath it and dug his claws in. Then, like magic, a hatch opened on the top of the vessel, sliding backward. Hatwer climbed inside first and I helped lift my brother in next. The interior was deceptively large, but it made sense, as the Bergleute were at least seven feet tall. Just before I went in, my eyes found Hallstead’s and he gave me the barest nod. I crouched behind the massive chair and told Hatwer to get us out of here.

The console of the escape pod was unlike anything I had ever seen. Instead of buttons or controls, there was a smooth, liquid-like substance that Hatwer stuck both of his hands inside. The gel conformed to his claws all the way up to his forearms. The inside of the cabin lit up and I felt a humming beneath my feet, indicating that the propulsion system came online. I pointed to the enormous metal doors across from us that let to the vast outer space and Hatwer eased the ship towards them.

Outside, Hallstead went over to the controls and opened the doors. We floated through them and into the launch room. The doors shut behind us, sealing the room, and then the other set of doors opened. Hatwer steered us through the exit and into outer space.

The escape pod dropped like a stone into water, giving me the brief, terrifying sensation of falling until the propulsion kicked in. The pod glided forward in an amazingly smooth path away from the Titan. I turned my head and looked out of the window as we flew, my jaw going slack as I realized just how enormous the vessel was. The Titan was shaped like a cruise ship but the number of levels on it was nearly impossible to count. We looked like a tiny teardrop in comparison to it.

“We’d better punch it,” my brother said, casting a concerned look at the Titan. “I don’t know how long Hallstead can hold them off. They’ll come after us as soon as they’ve captured him.”

He glanced at me from over the alien’s head. “He had us fooled for a while. I take it that wasn’t part of the plan?”

I sighed. “Hell no. Something must have gone wrong on his end and he had to improvise. I hope he’ll be alright.”

Duke lifted an eyebrow. “I’m the one with the gunshot wound. Your priorities kind of suck, Lettie.”

“Drama queen.”

He chuckled, though it wasn’t very steady. Both of us were trying desperately to hide how scared we were about what we were doing. Humor served as a deflection method, a distraction from the horror of the reality that we were flying towards death itself.

I leaned and placed my hand on Hatwer's shoulder, getting his attention. "Can you let me know when the Bergleute ship comes within range?"

*"Yes. What are we going to do?"*

"You're going to go into your pod form and remain completely still like you're dead so that it thinks we jettisoned your body into space. He'll either come on board or just scoop up the vessel and take it back to the mother ship. We'll get on, rescue your family, and take them all to New Earth."

*"You are certain they will not simply destroy this vessel instead?"*

I winced. "Relatively certain. A vessel is vessel. You said yourself that the Bergleute considered us to be a threat so they would want to know what we did with their ship and if they can learn anything else by taking it back."

*"Very well."*

\*

## HALLSTEAD

The cot beneath me was absurdly uncomfortable. No matter which way I tried to sit on it, my weight felt unevenly distributed. Then again, they had been chosen for their low costs. The worlds' governments were always in agreement about pinching pennies.

"Why'd you do it, Hallstead?"

General Bridgewater's voice was so cold it could give a polar bear the flu. I smirked, glancing at him through the prison bars.

"I thought I made that clear."

Anger darkened his weathered features. "This is not the time to be a smart ass. Treason is life in prison. Do you want that? Because I can damn sure give it to you."

"Whatever makes you happy."

"Goddamn you!" he snarled. "We had a system that worked, Hallstead. Rules. Orders. What were you thinking when you let them go with the alien?"

"I was thinking that maybe the best way to serve others was doing something besides following orders."

"You're supposed to serve your *own* people, not a bunch of aliens you've never even seen," he shot back.

I shook my head. "That's your problem, General. You're too short sighted. Protect and serve. That's my job. No one ever said it was exclusive to human beings."

He let out an ugly growl and massaged the bridge of his nose. "What's the plan, Hallstead? Just tell me what the Nam siblings are up to and we can end this right now."

"What makes you think I know?"

"Good authority. Sergeant Rosewood's in the infirmary being treated for a nasty taser shock, but he was well enough to tell me that Duke Nam was looking for you. That leads me to believe you're in on everything, not just letting them go. So what's the plan? Break out the Shasar and take them to New Earth?"

"You're the great strategist, sir. You figure it out."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Don't think that because you served under me for two years that I will hesitate to bring someone down here to get the answers out the hard way."

“I’d never think that, sir. Because after two years of loyal service, you still don’t trust, respect, or listen to me. Think of me as ammunition. When the clip’s empty, you throw it away.”

I stood then, walking towards the bars and stopping when we were only inches apart.

“The bullet’s already hit. You just haven’t noticed yet.”

His blue eyes burned into mine. “Then we both know where we stand. No mercy.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, sir.”

He turned and walked away, snapping his fingers as he went. The guards unlocked the door and put me in handcuffs. I didn’t resist. We all had a price to pay, and now it was my turn.

\*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## DUKE

“It’s here.”

Scarlett and I bent over either side of Hatwer. He had spoken in her mind and told her that the ship was approaching. I still wasn’t used to the whole telepathy thing.

On the console, a bright yellow bubble formed beneath the gel and drifted towards the blue bubble that represented us.

“How far out is it?” Scarlett asked the alien. His black eyes darted to hers and a couple seconds passed and then she looked at me.

“We should be getting a visual in a couple of minutes. Let’s go ahead and hide.”

The entrance to the vessel was a hatch in the floor activated by touch like the controls. It would be our only advantage over the alien based on how Scarlett described them. If it came aboard, we would have act fast and vicious. I had moral qualms about killing human beings, but I didn’t think I would feel bad slitting the throat of the creature that helped make me an endangered species.

“What the hell are these things?” Scarlett asked, brushing her fingertips across something hanging on the wall behind her. I stepped over the hatch, peering at what looked like two armored gauntlet gloves.

“Dunno. Maybe they’re some kind of weapons?”

She glanced at me, a bit nervous. “Think it’s worth a shot?”

“I don’t see why not.” I pulled one down from the peg and found a sticky note attached to the other side that read, “Thought you might need these. –H”

I showed it to Scarlett, unable to keep from smirking. “Gifts from your boyfriend.”

She crumbled the note in her fist, rolling her eyes. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

Chuckling, I gave the weapon a careful examination. The Bergleute had three fingers on each hand so I had to double up my first and middle and ring and pinky stub in order for it to fit. The gauntlet went all the way up to my elbow and conformed to my skin like it was alive. Above my knuckles lay a small round spout that I assumed was the barrel for the weapon.

After determining it was safe, Scarlett slipped the other one on her right arm. If Hallstead had recommended them, we were probably in good hands. No pun intended.

“They’re here,” Scarlett murmured, motioning for me to squat behind Hatwer’s chair. The alien withdrew his arms from the controls and shifted into his pod state. Silence permeated the vessel. I tried to breathe as quietly as possible, my eyes glued on the hatch. Sweat beaded on my forehead as the first minute passed by and we could hear nothing. Then, I caught sight of an eerie white light above our heads. It looked like some sort of scanner. They were scanning Hatwer’s body for signs of life. I knew nothing about his anatomy, but I hoped it didn’t give off any vital signs in that state.

After a couple of seconds, the light vanished and we were left in darkness once again. I felt Scarlett touch my hand and tap out a question: “Should we look yet?”

I tapped back, “No, wait until we start moving again” and we kept still, scarcely breathing, eyes locked on the hatch.

Then, I felt the ship shift forward and start gliding again, though much slower than we had been going earlier. The Bergleute was bringing us in. I let out a long breath. So did Scarlett. Part One of our suicidal plan was over. Hurray.

“Where are we headed when we get on board?” I asked her.

She closed her eyes for a moment, concentrating on her memories. “Hatwer told me the parents and children are kept in separate cells, but he’s pretty sure it’s in the same location—on a bottom deck below the engines. It’s much harder to reach the escape pods from that level so that’s where the prisoners are kept. But I guess that’s good news for us with this bomb and all.”

She patted her pocket, which made me nervous for a second. Trust Scarlett to be casual about carrying an incendiary device.

“I’m thinking I should take the lead on the way out.”

I started to frown but she gave me a pointed look. “You have a hole in your shoulder, Duke. Don’t be a stubborn ass.”

“No, that’s your job,” I grumbled, but I knew she was right. As much as I wanted to protect her, I knew I had become more of a liability than anything else due to my shoulder wound. It still sent a crippling pain down my arm and across my ribs every time I breathed. The blood had finally dried, making my skin itchy and one side of my clothing dark red.

“What do you know about the Bergleute’s biology?”

“A few things. Carbon based life forms, thick skin, five senses, about seven feet tall.”

“What kind of vulnerabilities should we be looking for?”

She paused. “According to Hatwer’s memories, they seem to keep the ship rather dark. Plus, the Shasar runs the engine room and primary weapon. The Bergs are probably vulnerable to light. I’d aim that thing—”

Scarlett pointed to the weapon on my arm. “—at their eyes. The key to this operation is moving fast and not letting them catch up with us. We don’t have a lot of advantages, but the element surprise is the biggest one. If we lose that, we’re screwed.”

“Agreed. I suggest we keep Hatwer between us when we go. He’ll be able to lead us around. How much air to the suits have in them?” I asked, nodding to the space suits hanging on a peg near the rear of the pod.

“Hallstead said five hours. It’s definitely a last resort. Hatwer’s memories suggest the atmosphere inside the ship should allow us to breathe, but not well. They’re oxygen based life forms, but there are a lot of other gases that they breathe in. We’ll probably be short of breath while we’re on board.”

“More good news,” I said with a grimace. “I don’t suppose you know what kind of trouble we’ll be facing if we make it out of this mess alive?”

She flashed me a dangerous smile. “Nope. Maybe the death sentence, if we’re lucky.”

“Excellent. I’m glad to have you for a sister.”

Scarlett chuckled. “I know. I’m just the best, aren’t I?”

I touched her hand, letting my voice grow serious. “I mean that, Lettie.”

The smile slid away from her lips. She held my hand. “*Oppa*...don’t start.”

I shook my head. "I know, I know, we're not supposed to get mushy on each other but...if we don't make it out of here, I don't want my last words to you to be some stupid cliché or a joke. I love you."

"I love you too. Thanks for always being there to save me."

"Thanks for letting me save you." I kissed the back of her hand and she smiled again. In the darkness, I could have sworn I saw a tear at the edge of her eye but I let it go because there was an eerie blue light filling the cabin of the pod. We were approaching the mother ship. It wouldn't be long now before we docked.

The light poured in around us where we sat and I could see faint shadows here and there that told me we had entered their airspace. I wanted to stick my head around Hatwer's seat, but it would give us away so I didn't. Even with thousands of vicious aliens around me, my curiosity still ate at me like a parasite. Silly, but true.

After some time, I felt the vessel slowing down and the blue light switched to white. Scarlett and I met eyes and I nodded. She crept towards the far end of the hatch while I stayed where I crouched, lifting my gauntlet. My heart thudded in my chest like a trapped animal against the bars of its cage. This was it.

The pod settled on the ground and its propulsion automatically shut off, swallowing us in darkness. We waited for a handful of seconds and nothing happened. I mouthed to Scarlett that we'd jump out on the count of three and she held her breath, watching my lips.

On three, I leapt out of pod, weapon ready, steeled with determination, ready to face the threat in front of me with my sister at my back. We were Dante and Virgil at the first circle of Hell. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Acknowledgments:

To my parents, Elgin and Judy, who stuffed down their fears and encouraged me to pursue the tempestuous field of creative writing. You inspire me every day to work my ass off and become someone great.

To my brother, who remained brutally honest while reading my work. Thank you for verbally abusing my characters and forcing me to write better.

To Sharon, who pushed me to do the best I could with this story and remained a voracious reader throughout the trials and tribulations of the Nam siblings.

To Erica, who patiently thumbed through these pages and told me what needed to stay and what needed to go.

To the brilliant folks at [www.nanowrimo.org](http://www.nanowrimo.org), who started me on this psychotic journey of finishing a novel in one month and challenged me to finish no matter what.

Thank you all. I am forever in your debt.