



Two wounded girls, Jack and Kyra, crossed paths and ran away together.
One disappeared, and the other stepped into her place. How and why
that happened may transform the fate of humanity.

The Changeling Game

Book 1 of *Many 'Verses*



By **Ardath Rekha**

Set in the Universe of *Pitch Black* (2000), *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004),
and *The Chronicles of Riddick: Dark Fury* (2004)

The Changeling Game

By Ardath Rekha

Synopsis: A young woman who successfully escaped her past for five years discovers that time has run out for her. Now it's back with a vengeance, dragging her back to a period of her life she's tried to forget.

Riddick has spent a year trying to locate the girl he once knew as Jack B. Badd, and learn why a woman named Kyra had claimed to be her. Now that he's found his Jack, however, the mystery has only deepened.

Two girls, Jack and Kyra, from completely different worlds and lives, crossed paths and ran away together. One disappeared and the other stepped into her place. How and why that happened may be tangled up with the secret of how to finally take control of the Necromongers... or it may open a door to an even darker mystery.

Formerly titled *Identity Theft*

Category: Fan Fiction

Fandoms: *Pitch Black* (2000); *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004); *The Chronicles of Riddick: Dark Fury* (2004)

Series: Many 'Verses (1)

Challenges: None

Rating: M

Orientation: Gen

Pairings: None

Warnings: Adult Situations, Controversial Subject Matter (Suicide, Self-Harm, Sexual Abuse, Mental Illness, Human Experimentation), Harsh Language, Graphic Violence / Gore, Death, and Murder

Number of Chapters: 77

Net Word Count: 310,925

Total Word Count: 314,293

Story Length: Epic

First Posted: September 5, 2004

Last Updated: October 26, 2024

Status: Incomplete

The characters and events of *The Chronicles of Riddick* are © 2004 Universal Pictures, Radar Pictures, and One Race Films; Written and Directed by [David Twohy](#); Based on characters by [Ken and Jim Wheat](#); Produced by [Scott Kroopf](#) and [Vin Diesel](#). The characters and events of *The Chronicles of Riddick: Dark Fury* are © 2004 Universal Cartoon Studios; Directed by [Peter Chung](#); Written by [Brett Matthews](#); Story by David Twohy; Produced by [John Kafka](#) and [Jae Y. Moh](#). The characters and events of *Pitch Black* are © 2000 USA Films, Gramercy Pictures, and Interscope Communications; Directed by David Twohy; Screenplay by Ken and Jim Wheat and David Twohy; Story by Ken and Jim Wheat; Produced by [Tom Engelman](#). This work of fan fiction is a transformative work for non-commercial entertainment purposes only, with no claims on, nor intent to infringe upon, the rights of the parties listed above. All additional characters and situations are the creation of, and remain the property of, Ardath Rekha. eBook design and cover art by [LaraRebooted](#), incorporating a publicity still of [Rhiana Griffith](#)'s performance in the short film "Julia" (© 2008 Luca De Simone; Written and Directed by Luca De Simone, International Film School Sydney); a publicity still of [Alexa Davalos](#) from *The Chronicles of Riddick*; an eclipse photo by [AstroGraphix Visuals](#), a cube graphic created by [MajikSolo](#), and nature photography by [Cosmin Nedelcu](#), all licensed via [Pixabay](#); a hand photo by [Cottonbro Studio](#), licensed via [Pexels](#); the *Medusa* font from [FFonts](#) and the *Times New Normal* font from [Font Meme](#); and background graphics © 1998 Noel Mollon, adapted and licensed via Teri Williams Carnright from the now-retired Fantasyland Graphics site (c. 2003). This eBook may not be sold or advertised for sale. Additional works of fan fiction and fan art by Ardath Rekha can be found on [Ardath Rekha's website](#). If you are a copyright holder of any of the referenced works, and believe that part or all of this eBook exceeds fair use practices under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, please contact legal@ardath-rekha.com.

Rev. 2024.10.26

Table of Contents

1. [A Short-Lived Flight to Freedom](#)
A young woman who successfully escaped her past for five years discovers that time has run out for her. Now it's back with a vengeance, dragging her back to a period of her life she's tried to forget.
2. [Object of Desire](#)
The Lord Marshal of the Necromongers has been searching relentlessly for something very special. Now, at last, he's found it.
3. [Echoes of an Unwanted Time](#)
Audrey's past has caught up with her with a vengeance. But she doesn't want to admit to being the girl Riddick once knew... which is a hard thing to do when you're facing down the most dangerous ghost of your past.
4. [The Girl Who Wasn't There](#)
After a year of searching for Jack, and agonizing over her fate, Riddick has found her. But she's not the person he expected to find, at all... has she been transformed into his dream or his nightmare? And how did she become this?
5. [Breathing, But Not Living](#)
Five years earlier, Jack wakes up to discover that her suicide attempt has failed.
6. [Back in the Little Leagues?](#)
Jack settles in at the psychiatric ward...
7. [You Meet the Strangest People...](#)
Jack meets the other girls in her psychiatric ward... including her new roommate... Kyra.
8. [Queen of the Killer's Club](#)
Jack learns Kyra's story.
9. [Never Been to Stockholm](#)
Jack's Big Bad Secret comes out in the worst way.
10. [Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing](#)
False dreams, ploys, illusions, and false claims... has everything in Jack's life become a lie?
11. [No Escaping Life Alive](#)
Sometimes there's just no hiding from tragedy.
12. [Darkness With a Heart](#)
Jack copes with the aftermath of another loved one's death... with help from an unexpected friend.

13. [A Lot Like Me, a Lot Like You](#)
Kyra and Jack have a long and interesting heart-to-heart.
14. [The Dark Side of the Soul](#)
Everybody has a dark side. But Jack's might be more than she can cope with.
15. [What Hides Beneath the Skin](#)
Jack learns just how much she *doesn't* want to be part of the Killer's Club... and acquires a new *problem*.
16. [Spinning the Tangled Web](#)
The line between what you know and what you want to believe can blur very easily, as Jack discovers. Today is a day full of lies and fabrications. But the hazard is that, sometimes, what you want to believe can become real... at least, in your own mind.
17. [The Player and the Game](#)
The lies have been told. Jack's staff account has been bought, with Riddick's reputation. Now Jack scrambles to tie off the loose threads she left hanging, and makes a disturbing discovery that forces her to accelerate the time-table for her escape with Kyra.
18. [The Game, Afoot](#)
Richard B. Riddick may be known for his spectacular escapes, but another escape artist is about to make a mark that will puzzle authorities for years. It's time for Jack and Kyra to break out of the hospital. But has Jack accounted for every possible variable?
19. [Forgive Me, Gina](#)
Before they can make it off-planet, Jack and Kyra have one more hurdle to clear: a pair of very persistent mercenaries. It's time to get a little bit crazy.
20. [Level Five](#)
Maybe Jack should just avoid space travel altogether. It really never seems to work out all that well for her. The best laid plans...
21. [Matador Falling](#)
At the best of times, the most dangerous part of space travel is atmospheric re-entry. These are not the best of times...
22. [The Phantom Tides of New Marrakesh](#)
It's bad enough trying to get around a new town at the best of times. Add in only being halfway in its universe, and having to deal with a very frisky shoreline on the other side of the threshold, and Jack and Kyra have a *lot* to deal with.
23. [The Ocean of Elsewhere](#)
It might take a miracle for Kyra and Jack to survive Tangiers Prime's killer King Tide, or maybe just the craziest idea Jack has ever had in her life.

24. [Mad Dogs and Englishmen](#)
Learning how to predict the phantom tide cycle of their new, temporary, home leads Jack and Kyra to a disturbing discovery. With many other lives at stake, the two roll the dice and reach out to a stranger for help.
25. [Roses by Other Names](#)
The difference between intentions and outcomes may just be catching up with Jack. What do you do when trying to do good does harm?
26. [A Momentary Lapse from Madness](#)
For a brief span of time, Jack and Kyra settle into a kind of normal existence. For a very relative definition of normal, anyway.
27. [Paving the Way with Good Intentions](#)
The last thing either Jack or Kyra ever expected was for someone to recruit them into a rescue mission, but for some reason, they just can't say no to El Krim.
28. [The Claws of the Black Fox](#)
Thrown suddenly into a battle zone, Kyra finds her purpose while Jack discovers the great cost of great power.
29. [The Voices of the Void](#)
A dream dies; a nightmare rises.
30. [As the Ashes Fall from the Sky](#)
After the explosion at the New Marrakesh spaceport, a whole world clamors for answers. Aside from the perpetrators of the heinous crime, only Jack and Kyra know how and why it happened.
31. [Paint It White](#)
As Jack and Kyra prepare to join the Rif in saying good-bye to its favorite son, they try to confront the possibility of a future without the help he offered them.
32. [A Lake Full of Tears](#)
An encounter with the Quintessa Corporation's envoy reveals a disturbing clue about the mystery that the Corporation is willing to kill to keep unsolved.
33. [Child Soldiers at War](#)
Backed into a corner, Jack tries her craziest and most dangerous Hail Mary yet.
34. [An Inward-Facing Fortress](#)
Jack and Kyra are offered sanctuary... but is it truly safe, given the forces pursuing them?
35. [A Box with Infinite Chambers](#)
The beings in the darkness are unusually interested in Jack's past, even as a new hurdle threatens her plans for her future.
36. [Pathways to Pandemonium](#)
Jack shares more of the crash story with Kyra but can't manage to be completely

honest about what happened, even as she tries to figure out where she will go now.

37. [Folding a Dali Cross](#)

Even the most carefully planned heist will have something unexpected happen.

38. [The Bell That Must Not Ring](#)

Actions have consequences. The consequences of Jack's actions are bigger and more profound than she knows how to deal with.

39. [Unquantified, Unseen, Unmasked](#)

Even as Jack finds herself concealing ugly truths about the eclipse from Kyra, new and terrible truths are looming that may threaten both girls' futures.

40. [Out of the Field of Fire](#)

Jack's plans for her future had already crashed and burned; now Kyra's have, too. They must now make a difficult choice and begin plotting a new way forward, when an unusual and dangerous opportunity appears... for one of them.

41. [Monde à Deux](#)

Even as Jack and Kyra solidify their plans to leave New Marrakesh, and the *ait Meziane* tribe, on journeys that may separate them from each other for years, the bond between them deepens unexpectedly and the tribe begins making moves to welcome them into its inner circles...

42. [A Growing Stack of Felonies](#)

Hunting the hunters, Jack follows Toombs and Logan and learns of an imminent threat to the Meziane family. Taking care of that threat, however, opens up a new can of worms.

43. [What Cannot Be Unlearned](#)

Knowledge is power. Some knowledge comes at a terrible price.

44. [Any Box Could Be Pandora's](#)

Avoiding a nauseating task, Jack goes on a solo mission. It doesn't go as planned.

45. [Infinity Minus One](#)

Jack's impromptu mission has been a success... but there may be repercussions that no one could possibly anticipate... or even imagine.

46. [Heirs to the Caldera](#)

Something has been removed from Jack's memories, but she has no idea what. Meanwhile, an afternoon with General Toal leads her to some surprising new information about Riddick, Kyra... and herself.

47. [Princess With a Thousand Enemies](#)

As the reality of their impending separation begins to hit home, Kyra is drawn into a dark and terrible place. The way Jack pulls her out of it could have serious repercussions of its own.

48. [Tizzy the Terrible](#)
With their departure creeping closer, Jack and Kyra try to find ways to gift something meaningful to those they must leave behind.
49. [Sacrifice Play](#)
Jack's interpretation of part of the eclipse story, as she tells it, becomes a bone of contention and spurs a long-overdue intervention... but will it help *enough*?
50. [A Trickster God for a Call Sign](#)
As Jack and Kyra seek out parting gifts for the *ait Meziane* tribe, Jack learns just how much of a kindred spirit one member of the family, in particular, is.
51. [Who We Become in the Darkness](#)
Jack finishes telling the story of the eclipse, making—and receiving—a few surprising revelations in the process. But a bigger concern may be just how strongly *Kyra* is engaging with the tale...
52. [Without Saying Good-Night](#)
Good-byes are always hard, but this is the hardest one Jack has ever had to face. One final moment alone can reshape a life.
53. [Save a Last Sebbly Dance](#)
Just as Jack and Kyra must prepare to part ways with Sebbly, their more-than-a-pet crustacean begins *talking* to them...
54. [Mommy Ree](#)
Jack, Kyra, and the Meziane family have an opportunity to make First Contact with a brand new species. The opportunity—and risk—that arises forces Jack to make a decision that may affect a whole planet's future.
55. [Forever Your Mermaid](#)
Jack bestows some final parting gifts on members of the Meziane family, and encounters a surprising secret about one of them in the process.
56. [Always Her Sister, Never His](#)
It's time to go. As final farewells are shared, Jack is warned to stay away from Ewan for the next several years... and becomes uneasy about Kyra's path through the 'verse.
57. [The Last Stand of Jack B. Badd](#)
Confronted with the deadliest monster she's ever found, Jack tries to engineer his destruction... and learns a bitter lesson about her limits in the process.
58. [No Name but What They Call Her](#)
Failure, especially spectacular failure, can rob someone not merely of their confidence but their very sense of *self*. In the wake of disaster, the girl who was once Jack B. Badd struggles to put the pieces back together.

59. [Acting Captain Marianne](#)
As she sheds the names she wore in the past and prepares to take back the name she was born with, the changeling once known as Jack B. Badd takes on a new name and role, and discovers that it's a good place to hide from *herself*.
60. [Schrödinger's Tablecloth](#)
Even something as simple as a path home might be forked... and even an innocent query may have unexpected repercussions.
61. [We Do This So You Will Live](#)
Another hole in "Marianne's" memory appears, under circumstances that threaten to dismantle her masquerade altogether.
62. [En Garde à Vue MilitAire](#)
Her identity compromised and nowhere to run, Audrey MacNamera faces down a new potential threat.
63. [When a Lie Becomes the Truth](#)
Audrey, and Toal's unexpected proxy, begin to go over exactly what happened on "Jack B. Badd's" run and when, in preparation for obscuring that information from almost everyone.
64. [The Camouflage of Ordinary Things](#)
As her return to her home world draws ever closer, Audrey prepares to adopt the role of an ordinary child who never left her world at all, and struggles to cut ties with a persona that still haunts her.
65. [Twenty-Seven 'Verses Wide](#)
Marianne Tepper cedes the stage to Audrey MacNamera as she returns to the world of her birth... and meets her WitSec handler.
66. [In From the Cold, Into the Cold](#)
The final preparations for Audrey MacNamera's return to the life she left behind are underway... but who, really, is going home?
67. [Suspended in the Tangled Web](#)
Even as the official story of where Audrey has been for almost two years begins to spread, she must confront the real reasons behind her disappearance.
68. [Cuckoo, Cowbird, Soldier, Spy](#)
While Audrey works to sell the idea that she's the same girl who left Deckard's World almost two years before, General Toal changes up the game...
69. [Black Fox, Gone to Ground](#)
Just as Audrey starts to get a somewhat normal rhythm going in her life, disturbing news about Kyra arrives.
70. [Straight On 'Til Morning](#)
A little over two years after her reappearance on Deckard's World, two unexpected

tests—and two risky missions—loom in Audrey’s path.

71. [Just So Fuckin’ High School](#)

In the wake of one of the most melodramatic periods of her life, Audrey struggles with the inherent loneliness and isolation of her circumstances.

72. [The Planet-Killer’s Hit List](#)

Audrey tries to cope with a dark and foreboding future as she forecasts a deadly path of destruction, while struggling to keep her own plans from collapsing.

73. [Hiding the Mermaid](#)

A mysterious message from Kyra heralds terrible news from the Helion System... and an existential threat to Audrey that forces her protectors to take desperate measures.

74. [Run, Audrey, Run](#)

A young woman who successfully escaped her past for five years discovers that time has run out for her—hey, does that sound somehow familiar? Now *Toombs* is back with a vengeance...

75. [Full Circle and Into the Fire](#)

Her memories back but in a chaotic jumble, Audrey lures Toombs away from her family... and ends up on a collision course with Riddick himself.

76. [Wholly Half-Dead](#)

Riddick confronts the god of the Necromongers and strikes a dangerous bargain... learning, along the way, how small the galaxy can be sometimes.

77. [Sleeping Beauty, Sleeper Agent](#)

Dame Vaako is eager to learn the truth about Riddick’s young “captive.” Audrey, meanwhile, has awakened, and wants to learn a few things herself.

1.

A Short-Lived Flight To Freedom

The first time Audrey MacNamera had gone on the run, she'd done it in style, sneaking aboard a commercial vessel and waiting until the crew had gone into cryo before programming a vacant tube for herself. This time, however, she didn't dare go into cryo. The risks, as she was well aware, were far too high for that. Passenger ships with actual bunks were increasingly rare and ridiculously expensive, but she'd had to shell out the money. At least until she'd put enough distance between herself and Toombs to breathe a little more easily.

Lying on the cramped little bunk she'd been assigned, listening to her roommates snore and wheeze, she shook her head and tried not to think about the comfortable dorm room and one roommate she'd been forced to leave behind. She'd sworn to herself, four years earlier, that she'd never leave Deckard's World again, but here she was, in headlong flight to God-only-knew where. Thanks to a piece of her past that just wouldn't stay dead and buried.

How the hell had Toombs found her? Nobody had managed to track her down, not in almost five years, to the point where she'd finally relaxed and told herself that the past was truly behind her. Had it been waiting, patiently, for her to begin building a life she would regret losing, before it came out to get her? She'd actually gone two whole months without thinking *his* name even *once*, and then this Toombs guy had to show up and spoil everything.

Anger was good, she decided, clenching her fists in the too-soft pillow. Anything was better than the cold, gnawing fear she'd been feeling. She closed her eyes and tried to will herself to sleep, but neither fear nor anger were sleep-inducing emotions.

Maybe when I finally get tired enough, she told herself. *Maybe when I'm a little more relaxed*. It had only been half a day since she'd transferred onto this ship and watched the spaceport recede, terrified that at any second they'd be ordered back into port and she'd be escorted off.

She wasn't fool enough to think that just because she'd gotten off the station, she'd gotten away clean. Toombs would be following. She'd made sure of it; she'd had to. Getting away had been secondary to getting *him* as far away from her family as possible. The bonus round would be shaking him off her trail.

I can do it, she thought. It wasn't like she had no experience at running and hiding. She'd been damn good at it once. But she didn't remember ever having knots like this in her belly... outside of *that* time.

The memories stirred, and Audrey curled up into a fetal ball trying to fight them back. Even the faintest brush of them on her mind made her feel ill, made her wonder if she could ever make amends for what she'd briefly become, and all the havoc she'd wreaked...

Made her wonder if perhaps she deserved what was happening to her now... or worse.

I'm not gonna get any sleep tonight. Wonder if the galley's open.

Uncurling, Audrey swung her legs over the side of the bunk and lowered herself down onto the floor, careful not to make any noise. She hadn't actually undressed for bed—still too tense to risk changing out of street clothes—and her money belt was still on under her shirt. As she slipped quietly out of the sleeping quarters, she marveled at how quickly and efficiently she'd made her escape. Had *that* part of her been expecting it all along, and been prepared?

The threat to her family—and especially to her younger sister—had paralyzed her almost to the point of catatonia. It had been blind luck that had saved her. Toombs had actually had Audrey in his car, and they were halfway to the spaceport, when a speeder had veered around them and broadsided another car right in front of them. In the ensuing confusion, she'd managed to get clear of Toombs' car and had run for it. As luck would have it, she was within three blocks of her bank.

She'd pulled all of her money out of her accounts—taking the penalties on her savings, cleaning out her student loans, grabbing *everything*—within minutes, and had warily made her way to the port, the plan forming in her mind. Waiting until the absolute last moment, she'd bought a ticket to the space station, deliberately buying it in her own name so that Toombs would know she'd gone off-planet. Anything to get him as far from her family as fast as possible.

Now she quietly moved down the ship's darkened halls, contemplating that headlong rush. She'd had just enough time at the station to buy a duffel bag and a few changes of clothing before boarding this flight. Unless Toombs still had the *Kublai Khan* at his disposal, and caught up with her, she had four weeks and fourteen Star Jumps before she hit New Queensland and found another ship to transfer onto. If she could just stay ahead of Toombs long enough, she'd begin to lay a false trail.

That wasn't her immediate concern, though. At the moment, she was going to try to eat something.

At the thought of food, her stomach promptly rumbled to life and registered a formal complaint. She hadn't eaten since breakfast, several hours before... when that slimy son of a bitch had accosted her on the way out of the campus dining hall. Food was definitely in order.

The galley was closed, but there were vending machines. It was hardly a nutritious dinner, but Audrey ended up on a ratty lounge couch by one of the starboard viewports, quietly eating peanut butter cups and cheese chips, watching the way the stars swirled past the window. Star Jumping was eerie, and frightened a lot of people who couldn't deal with the dreamy, directionless feeling it gave them. Most went into cryo if they could help it, making ships like the *Santa Clara* rare. Audrey had never minded the sensation, and especially now it was a relief when compared to the terror of earlier in the day.

She wondered if Toombs would go into cryo as he pursued her.

Unbidden, the image floated into her mind. Statues. Living statues, dozens upon dozens of them, men and women locked in tormented poses. She'd only been in the room for a moment but she'd felt how alive they all were, how desperate and pained and lonely each one was, trapped in a private hell—

Audrey shuddered and forced the memory back. *No. I'm not going to think about that. It happened to someone else, not me. Not me.*

Not me.

She took a deep breath, and another bite of a peanut butter cup, and watched as the swirling stars slowed and solidified. The Star Jump was ending, having carried the ship several dozen light years along its route. They would be nearing the outer sectors, she thought, an area of space she'd sworn she would never see again. It was a dark area of space, one that strange and disturbing stories frequently emanated from. She knew from experience that many of the stories were entirely too true, despite sounding like the kinds of tales people would tell around a campfire.

Never thought I'd pass this way again.

A small red flicker caught her eye. She leaned forward, almost pressing her forehead to the viewport, to get a closer look. Something, to the aft of the ship... closing on them...

*Fuck! **Fuck!***

Audrey threw herself back away from the window and scrambled for the intercom, her hand grabbing for the alarm panel. Sirens began to blare as she wrenched it open, a mere second before they were overwhelmed by the roar of impact and the whole ship shuddered. More alarms followed.

He found me. Fuck, he found me! She'd heard other stories, of pirates out in this part of space, and a worse darkness some called "the Hood of the Devil," but she had no illusions. Toombs would hurt anyone who stood between him and what he wanted.

She scrambled for the door to the hallway. If she was lucky, she could get to one of the escape pods and get clear. Luck, though, obviously wasn't with her.

Gotta try, though... gotta try...

Another blast knocked her off of her feet and plunged her into darkness. She shook herself and began crawling along the corridor, trying to reach the emergency door she'd seen. People were screaming, she noticed. They were distant, but getting louder. Probably others who had thought of the escape pods.

Gotta get out of here...

Light speared through the corridor, and she heard the sound of heavy boots. Funny. Soldiers? Where'd Toombs get soldiers? Her hand touched the frame of the emergency door and she began fumbling for the handle.

"Here's one." The voice was hard, cold, and unfamiliar.

Rough hands grabbed her and hauled her to her feet. As the emergency lights flickered to life, she found herself face-to-mask with an armored man. His body armor was bizarre, almost medieval. Like the drawings that had circulated a few months ago at an Amnesty Interplanetary meeting—

*Fuck. They're **real**. Oh **fuck!***

Audrey realized she was looking at a Necromonger.

She shrank back but he wouldn't let her loose. Instead, he pushed her down the corridor, his hand clamped hard on the back of her neck. She stumbled, hands out to balance herself, as he marched her into a smoky hallway. An irregular tear was along one wall, more light pouring through it. Her captor forced her to climb through. The short hallway beyond was somehow alien, unlike anything on board the *Santa Clara*, and when she glanced back, she saw that it was clamped onto the ship's wounded outer hull.

They didn't even bother with the airlocks, they just blasted in wherever they wanted...

The strange corridor opened out into a yawning hangar, full of twisted and disturbing shapes. The *Santa Clara*'s other passengers were there, milling about like terrified sheep. Audrey's captor pushed her roughly toward them.

"That's the last. She'd almost reached the escape pods."

"Not an impressive catch," a new voice commented.

"These ships rarely are."

Audrey looked around her and spotted the new speaker. He was an imposing man even without armor, and more frightening in it. Dark red hair covered the top of his head, in a style that normally she would have found rather laughable, but there was no laughter in her now. He stalked over to the passengers, starting on the far end from her.

"Convert. Breeder. Convert. Breeder. Breeder. Useless. Convert..." As he spoke, the soldiers began to separate the passengers.

Audrey took a deep breath and wracked her brain for the little bit of information she'd heard about these people. She'd thought they were just a space legend, but obviously they weren't. Converts? Breeders? What was this?

"They move from planet to planet," Jayven had said, "like locusts. When they show up, they just kill at random for a while until the fight goes out of the population. Then they'll round up all the survivors. They give 'em a choice. Convert to their religion and live, or die then and there. Some they won't even give the choice to if they think they're useless..."

She couldn't remember if he'd said anything about "breeders."

The man was approaching. She swallowed and tried not to shrink before him. No matter what, she was positive that "useless" would be an automatic death sentence, and she was *not* going to let that label be put on her for *anything*.

He stopped, studying her and not speaking. She swallowed again, feeling a chill move along her back. He'd barely looked at many of the others, but now the weight of his stare was beating down on her.

"This one goes to the Lord Marshal. She fits the profile."

The who?

A hand clamped around her arm and pulled her away from the other captives, away from all three groupings of them. She struggled, trying to make a break for the other ship, but it was useless. Panic filled her, the threat of Toombs completely forgotten by this new, incomprehensible menace. She struggled, screaming, her feet and fists flailing wildly. One foot connected hard with the leg of the man restraining her and for a moment she was free. She began to run for the other ship again. She'd get to the escape pods and she'd be safe. All she had to do was—

The floor rushed up to meet her.

Lord Vaako gazed down at the unconscious young woman and shook his head. She'd turned out to be a bit of a wildcat... which fit the profile as well. He gestured for the guards to gather her up and carry her back to the cryo units. She'd probably be another disappointment for the Lord Marshal, like all of the others that had been brought to him, but he intended to serve his new Lord well. The girl fit the profile. Green eyes, slender build,

high forehead, pointed chin... all the characteristics the new Master of the Necromongers had specified.

Vaako had no idea what it was that his Lord was searching for, exactly, nor why it was such an obsession with him, but he would obey. The girl would be taken to the Basilica and her fate would be decided by Riddick himself.

2.

Object of Desire

What did you give to the man who had everything? It was a question that had plagued the loyal subjects of tyrants for millennia.

For the crafty courtier, the answer was easy enough. You found out his heart's desire and brought it to him. Of course, it never truly was that easy, because anything that could elude the master of an Empire would be very difficult to acquire. That didn't stop his more ambitious sycophants from trying, though.

Among the Necromongers' elite court, it was no exception.

In the year that had followed Riddick's ascension to the throne, his courtiers had studied and speculated relentlessly about him. It took a rare and dangerous man to rule them, and they found the few who succeeded at it utterly fascinating... and this new Lord Marshal was no exception. He was the first, in a very long time, who didn't actually follow their religion and had no interest in converting to it, which added to his allure. Young, single women of the court groomed themselves, vying for his attention, each dreaming that she would be the one to transfix him with love and show him the value of their beliefs.

And ambitious schemers, like Dame Vaako, dreamed of the day Riddick could be deposed and replaced by a strong True Believer, like her husband.

In the year that he'd ruled, only one of his rare edicts had been particularly memorable. It related to the fate of unbelievers, and failure to obey it was punishable by death. All young women in their late teens and early twenties, who fit a specific physical description, were to be brought, unharmed, to him. All of the Necromongers had been required to memorize those attributes and recite them back before every raid. The woman he apparently sought was Caucasian, of medium height or taller with a slender build, green eyes, a high forehead, and a pointed chin. The rules regarding her treatment were iron-clad and more than one Necromonger, who had inadvertently broken them, had died horribly for doing so.

When pressed for an explanation, however, the Lord Marshal had refused to elaborate. He'd examined every young woman brought before him, as though searching for something—or, Dame Vaako supposed, *someone*—and then dismissing them with the same look of disappointed longing every time. Whatever he sought remained elusive.

Dame Vaako wondered what the reward might be, for the one who brought him his heart's desire at last.

He could feel her eyes on him.

Riddick knew everybody in the damn Basilica was watching him, *always* watched him, but for some reason he was especially aware of Dame Vaako's eyes. When she watched him, he felt like she was measuring him for a coffin, and he knew he wasn't wrong.

He'd seen a lame-ass movie one time, long ago, in which some idiot had screamed "I'm king of the world!" from the prow of an ancient ship, only to have it sink out from under him a few days later. The sucker had ended up as fish food. He thought of that often, now, reminding himself again and again that the power was an illusion. The control was an illusion. He was the Lord Marshal of the Necromongers, practically the ruler of the universe for all intents and purposes, and that put him squarely in *everybody's* bulls-eye. He'd already dodged half a dozen assassination attempts in the last year, and only one of those had come from outside of the Court.

It made him think longingly of the icy caverns he'd left behind on Planet UV. In comparison to this new life of his, that world was warm and gentle and hazard-free. It wasn't even as lonely as this place. His brief attempts to connect with these people, to try to understand their ways, had only left him craving solitude more than ever.

He glanced over at Dame Vaako and gave her his best mocking smile, the one that implied he'd be perfectly happy to take her for a test-ride while her husband was away. Her expression chilled and she turned away from him, engaging some of the other Ladies of the court in conversation. Pose, pose, pose. He could tell just from watching them that none of the women liked each other. Sometimes he thought he could hear the sound of cats howling and spitting when they did their little "civilized" dance.

He knew, even if she didn't yet, that her husband was almost back at the Basilica now. In fact, his ship, and the other two groups of marauders he'd sent out, should be on their final approaches. In fact, all three of them were bringing him "candidates" to review.

He would have to steel himself for another round of disappointments. In the last year, dozens of young women had been brought before him, one or two of them with faces heartbreakingly similar to the one he sought, but his true quarry—the girl he had once known as "Jack"—had never appeared.

Perhaps Kyra had spoken the truth, he thought with a hint of despair. Perhaps the real Jack *was* dead.

A year of reflection hadn't helped him figure out why Kyra had tried to pretend to be the girl from his past. He'd played along with her masquerade, but she hadn't fooled him for a second. She hadn't looked at *all* like the Jack he remembered, for one thing. Her hair had been too dark, her nose too snub, her chin too small and the wrong shape, and her eyes had belonged to a stranger. And above all else, her *scent* had been wrong. Her attempt to pretend to be Jack would have been laughable, were it not for the fact that she seemed to *truly believe she was*.

She'd known things that only Jack could know, though, which told him that, at the very least, she'd crossed paths with the girl he sought. He'd decided to play along with her charade, hoping that in time she would lead him to his real quarry. But whatever she knew about the real Jack's whereabouts had died with her... in this very room.

The entire time, she hadn't faltered once from her assertions. To the very end, she'd continued insisting that *she* was the girl from the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash, and it had left him at a loss as to how to proceed. He couldn't backtrack to New Mecca and trace Jack's movements from there; it had been reduced to a smoldering cinder, and Abu al-Walid—who seemingly had been truly fooled into believing Kyra was Jack—was a pile of charred bones somewhere in its ruins. The trail was cold.

And that wispy bitch Aereon, for all her grandiose claims to prophetic abilities, didn't know *shit*. Apparently her clairvoyance was completely inadequate for telling him where one teenage girl had gone.

At times he feared that Jack really *was* dead, and the thought made him shudder a little. The games he'd tried to play, when he'd first "ascended" to leadership of the Necromongers, had marked him indelibly. He tried not to think about it, but he knew *exactly* why he had begun waking up in the night, his sheets soaked with sweat, Jack's pleading eyes floating before him in the darkness. It happened every night now.

For five years he'd been spared those dreams, believing her safe and happy on New Mecca, until he'd learned otherwise and the nightmares had begun. Sometimes, in his dreams, she *was* the angry, vengeful, homicidal creature he'd found on Crematoria, and those were the worst dreams of all. He had *them* any time he thought of rescinding his orders and ceasing the parade of lookalike prisoners who filed past him.

The orders stood. He couldn't stop, until he either found Jack or learned her fate. His obsession, his dreams, would tear at him and drive him mad if he tried.

Riddick was jarred from his reverie by the sound of a woman's wail. Lifting his head, he watched as his wayfaring soldiers entered the throne room and approached. They were dragging three women into the room with them, and as always he had to quell the surge of hope that tried to move through him. In all likelihood, this would prove as fruitless as every other review had... but he had to know.

He waited patiently, not really looking at the women yet, as they were brought before the dais and made to kneel. After a moment he rose from his throne and stepped down, moving to stand beside one of the trio. The woman had sunk to the floor, sobbing. She had been the source of the wail he'd first heard, and he wanted to get her over with fast. She wouldn't be Jack. *She* hadn't been a hysteric, and the only time he'd ever seen her cry, she'd done so silently. Lifting the woman's head, he only needed the barest glance before he shook his head and gestured for her to be taken away.

He moved to the second candidate, the first forgotten, and lifted her face to meet his.

This one was extremely beautiful, reminding him a little of Carolyn Fry. The soldiers would fight over her, he knew, but he was no longer interested. Again he shook his head and moved on to the third, certain that disappointment awaited him there, as well.

Lord Vaako himself was making her kneel, her head lowered. He studied the crown of light, straight hair on top of her head for a moment, trying to decide if it was dark blonde or light brown. Reaching down, he grasped her chin, feeling how it curved into an elfin point in his palm. Would Jack's feel like this? He'd never really had much physical contact with her during their sojourn together. Steeling himself for the inevitable disappointment, he made her lift her face, pushing back the sweat-drenched bangs that almost obscured her eyes.

He saw her high forehead first, with a slightly irregular hairline that stirred an eerie sense of recognition within him. Dark brows, fine and slightly arched, twitched, and then...

My God.

He knew that elegant nose, those high cheekbones, the curve of those lips... he knew this face as well as he knew his own. Dark-fringed eyes slowly lifted to meet his, green irises fixing on him... and the eyes widened in *recognition*.

He knew her... and more importantly, *she* knew *him*!

Drawing the trembling girl to her feet, he looked over at Lord Vaako, and felt a smile curl over his lips.

“Looks like you found her for me. Good work.”

Silence fell in the room as everyone digested his announcement. Riddick turned his gaze back on Jack, who seemed completely stunned. Her lips worked but no sound emerged.

He wanted to ask her a thousand questions about where she’d gone, but his duties as Lord Marshal were not yet done for the day. There was still a great deal of work left for him to do before he could turn his attention to her. His eyes found Lord Vaako again.

“Take her to my quarters. I’ll deal with her after we’re done here.”

Jack seemed to come out of her stupor as Vaako began to lead her away, but her struggles were half-hearted, as though she didn’t even know where she wanted to go if she managed to get free. Riddick found that he was smiling as he returned to his throne. One courtier met his eyes and shrank back, blanching.

Feeling triumphant, Riddick got down to business.

Hours passed before Riddick could adjourn the court and reach his quarters, and he found himself wondering just how much of the rooms Jack would have explored and pried her way through by then. The moment he opened his door, though, he had his answer.

None. She hadn’t touched a thing.

She was in the corner of his sitting room, rocking on the floor. Her legs were pulled tight against her body, arms wrapped around them, her head resting on her knees. He’d seen her do that once before, when they’d hidden in the cargo container and made plans after Hassan’s death, six years earlier.

Why was she afraid? Didn’t she realize that she was safe at last?

Her head jerked up as he closed the door and locked it, and she watched him approach her. She didn’t struggle or protest when he helped her to her feet, but he could feel the tremor in her limbs.

Why is she afraid? It is her, isn’t it?

He suddenly wasn’t sure.

She stayed still as he moved to stand behind her and leaned in, lifting her hair from her throat so he could put his nose to her skin. Her scent came to him, filled his awareness. It wasn’t quite the same as he remembered. There were hints of perfumed soap and shampoo, and none of the grime that had clung to her on a distant, desolate world. But beneath that, the scent of Jack herself was there... it was her.

And she smelled of fear. Powerful fear. Fear that had not abated—but instead had increased—since their encounter in the throne room.

Moving around in front of her again, Riddick felt a heavy, cold knot form in his stomach. He realized, suddenly, what Jack was afraid of. He could see it in her eyes, in the tremor of her lip... and he could smell it all over her.

Him. Jack was terrified... of *him*!

3.

Echoes of an Unwanted Time

This can't be happening to me.

Audrey stayed as still as she could, eyes on the imposing figure before her. Of all the people to run into, in the whole galaxy, she'd had to come face to face with Richard B. Riddick.

Worse yet, he was the ruler of the Necromongers, making him the Ultimate Bogey-Man. And worst of all, not only had he recognized her... he'd been *looking* for her.

Now here she was, in his opulent private quarters, waiting to find out what he wanted and trying not to let the horror she felt show through. She couldn't believe that it had been less than twenty-four hours since she'd stepped out of her university dining hall, an ordinary college student whose worst problem was whether she could wheedle her academic advisor into approving her course load. She'd been completely normal, the sort of person that things like this did *not* happen to... and that was the way she'd wanted it. She'd loved that life with a passion... and now it was gone.

Now the nightmare was back. The darkness had swept her up and swallowed her whole.

This can't be happening. This can't be happening!

Paris had babbled those very words, she suddenly realized, as he'd crawled across the desert floor seconds before being torn to pieces. She shuddered with the memory. His death had been her fault. It was one of the memories she'd tried to scour out of her brain and put behind her forever, but now it was back. Now *all* of it was back.

"I've been looking for you, Jack." The voice was a low purr. Once it had haunted her dreams.

Jack.

"I'm not—" She stopped, wondering exactly what she was trying to deny.

"Not what?"

She swallowed and took the plunge. "My name is Audrey. Audrey MacNamera. I'm not Jack. Jack is—"

"Do *not* say that Jack is dead!" His vehement snarl startled her. The sudden grip of his hands on her shoulders was painfully tight. "Don't you *fuckin'* dare!"

Audrey closed her eyes and took another deep breath, shaking her head. If he wanted Jack, she was in terrible trouble, because those days were long past for her. She'd driven that darkness out of herself and she'd die before letting it back in.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, trying to draw back from his tight grasp. "I'm not who you're looking for."

"You know me," he growled. "Don't fuck with me."

She made her eyes open and meet his. The anger on his face was expected, but the hurt and confusion took her by surprise. It speared through her, reminding her of the fictional Riddick

that she'd idolized and pined after. But that man couldn't truly exist—couldn't ever have existed—not in the leader of the darkest, most soulless army to ever cross the stars.

"I'm not," she answered him.

"Not what?" He released her arms but stepped closer, invading the little bit of space she had left. She forced herself to stand her ground and not crumble before him.

"I'm not fucking with you. But I'm not her. She's gone."

A muscle jumped in Riddick's cheek and he clenched his jaw tight for a moment. He looked ready to do violence, suddenly. *This is it. Now he'll show me.* Now at last she'd see him without his masks.

"She's right in front of me," he hissed, not touching her.

Audrey shook her head again, trying not to feel his pull, struggling not to give in to it. She'd forgotten how magnetic he could be, how much charisma he had. How long had he led the Necromonger army, she wondered. Had he come here straight from dropping her and Imam off on New Mecca? If Jayven's stories were to be believed, these people had been committing genocide for decades. How long had he been in on it?

When she'd first seen him, his violent nature had been alluring. She'd known he was a killer, and dangerous, but it had seemed... so vague and distant and unreal. Killing was like movie deaths, she'd thought at the time. The corpses that littered his backtrail hadn't *really* been real. Even the first few deaths on that desolate planet hadn't struck at her too hard... one man's name she hadn't even known.

It had helped that, with the possible exception of Johns, none of the deaths on the planet had been Riddick's doing. He'd seemed almost like a *tame* beast... more ferocious *looking* than he really *was*. She still hadn't understood what it meant to take a life.

Learning it, firsthand, had changed everything for her.

The man before her was *not* heroic. He was *not* a romantic figure. Anyone who could kill over and over, as easily as he did, was a monster. He'd tried to make her over in his image and she'd almost succumbed to the seduction, but she'd learned the truth. She'd almost learned it too late.

Her silence must have infuriated Riddick, because his voice was even more heated and passionate when he spoke again. "I already got fed that line of shit by Kyra, so don't you start up with the same—"

Kyra?

"Kyra?" How the hell had she *found* him?

Riddick nodded, the anger in his face receding to reveal... *confusion*. He clenched his jaw again and took a deep breath. When he finally spoke, his voice was gentler, subdued. "I want to know what happened to you, Jack."

Pain moved through her chest at the sound of *that* voice saying *that* name. He'd rarely ever said it at all, the entire time they'd traveled together, at least where she could hear. "Please don't call me that."

"Kyra wanted me to call her Kyra, and I went along with her because she wasn't really you anyway. But you *are* Jack and I *will* call you that. Unless you want to give me a good reason not to."

Audrey held up her hand in confusion of her own. What he'd just said made no sense to her. Kyra had what?

“Kyra told you she was me?”

Riddick nodded, snorting derisively. “As if I couldn’t spot the difference. A brain-dead *blind* man could tell you two apart.”

My god, she went even crazier than I thought.

There was a chair to her left. Without thinking, Audrey walked over to it and sat down. She needed to breathe. She needed some kind of massive reality check. Closing her eyes, she counted slowly to ten, begging every power in the universe for the familiar sights of her dorm room or the student lounge when she opened them.

Riddick’s alien, opulent rooms were still there when she looked again, dimly-lit and luxuriously appointed.

“I keep hoping I’m gonna wake up,” she muttered.

“Wake up where?” Riddick stepped in front of her again, crouching down so that his eerie, mercurial eyes were level with hers.

She sighed. He was as relentless as she remembered. Answering him was safer than pissing him off. “Home. Back on Deckard’s World.”

His hand reached out and tugged at the hem of her Deckard Tech U sweatshirt. “You go to school there?”

She nodded and watched bafflement cross his face. It occurred to her that her life, with its earthy, prosaic concerns, was undoubtedly as alien to him as his way of life was to her.

“I just started my sophomore year,” she told him after a moment, needing to fill the silence. She’d forgotten how easily he’d been able to make her talk. “In Sociology.”

“Sociology?” He looked as though he was suppressing more scornful laughter... now aimed at *her*.

I always knew I was just a joke to him.

Anger filled her. She’d finally made a decent life for herself, and not only had this bastard taken it from her, he was *mocking* it!

“Yeah, Sociology,” she jeered back at him. “You know, the study of how governments and societies work on all the different worlds before *your army* comes along and blows them to bits!”

Riddick rocked back as if she’d slapped him, rage suffusing his face and dumping ice all over *her* anger. He rose slowly, staring down at her, fists clenched...

...and backed away from her.

It left Audrey speechless, both the shivery knowledge that he had wanted to strike her, and the realization that he’d forced himself to disengage before he did. She watched as he stalked over to his ornate desk and began pulling off his ceremonial armor.

“Do you know how the Necromongers became *my army*?” he growled after a moment.

“No,” she managed. “How?”

“I was looking for *you*.”

That startled her, spearing through the carefully-crafted armor she’d built around herself. He’d cared about what had happened to her? That wasn’t possible. This was the same man who had abandoned her without a word, without even a good-bye. His indifference to her had been a fundamental part of what she had *known*.

“Last year the Holy Man tried to forcibly recruit me into defending his planet from the Necromongers. He sent *mercs* after me. When I got to New Mecca, you were gone, and he

fed me some shit about how you were in prison for murder.”

“*What?*”

He turned and frowned at her. “What I said. He thought you were doing time in Crematoria.”

Audrey blinked and shuddered. Crematoria was considered one of the worst outworld prisons in existence, a place that was routinely found in violation of the Federacy Human Rights Charter. Attempts to have it shut down, however, had repeatedly failed, although new petitions circulated every year and Audrey herself had been signing them ever since she reached her majority.

“He said you never forgave me for leaving you when you needed me most,” Riddick continued.

Audrey felt another spear go through her. She felt the sting of tears in her eyes, her nose stinging too.

“I forgave you,” she managed after a moment.

It had taken her a while to forgive him, and that forgiveness had only come when she’d reconciled herself to how little she—or any other person besides himself—had meant to him. It was wrong to blame or hate a person for things they were incapable of doing, she’d told herself. She’d *had* to forgive Riddick for lacking the capacity to care about her.

Now, though, he was claiming that he *had* cared.

“I didn’t abandon you,” he growled at her. “I thought you were safe with the Holy Man, and it was better for you if I wasn’t around. And I came back, but you were gone—”

“I’d been gone for *four years!*” The words exploded out of her before she could stop them.

“Why’d he think you were in *slam?*” Riddick shouted back at her.

“I don’t *know!* I don’t have any idea how he could have gotten that kind of crazy—”

Crazy.

Audrey looked up at Riddick, feeling the pieces falling together for her. “It was Kyra, wasn’t it? *She* was in Crematoria.”

Riddick nodded, his lips compressed into a tight line. “Seemed pretty *fuckin’* certain she was you, too. Who the hell was she, Jack?”

For a moment Audrey almost protested the name again, but she let it lie. If all of the darkness she’d turned her back on was being dragged right back out, she probably couldn’t win on that name, either. “She was my roommate in the psychiatric ward.”

Riddick went completely still, staring at her. Had she actually rendered him speechless? Finally his lips moved. “When were you in a psychiatric ward, Jack?”

She sighed and closed her eyes, pushing the sleeves of her sweatshirt up her arms. “Three months after you left me on New Mecca, I tried to kill myself. Almost succeeded, too.” She held her hands out, palms up.

She heard Riddick move closer, his clothing whispering as he crouched down before her again. He took her hands in his and she felt him lean closer. His thumbs ran over the old scars that ran from her wrists up her arms, halfway to her elbows. Time had faded them somewhat, but nobody who really looked at them—as he was looking them now—could mistake their meaning.

It had been three months since she’d awakened to find herself in the al-Walid guest room on New Mecca, with Riddick simply gone. The darkness had swallowed her and had almost

defeated her. She'd decided that it was time to forfeit the battle. Filling the guest bathtub with hot water and stealing one of "Uncle Abu's" straight razors, she'd climbed in and cut her wrists under the water. It hadn't even hurt. She'd watched with fascination as ribbons of scarlet spooled out in the water, slowly turning it pink, then red. It had been her last memory until she woke up in the hospital...

...and she'd never seen the al-Walid house again.

4.

The Girl Who Wasn't There

Riddick felt as though his guts had been torn open.

In all of his imaginings of what it would be like to find Jack, he'd visualized almost everything. He'd pictured what it would be like if she'd become every bit as insane as Kyra. He'd imagined her as an aristocratic lady, a street urchin, even a merc like that Logan woman. He'd truly thought that he'd conceived of every possibility.

But the one thing that he'd never conceived of, that had never occurred to him... was that she wouldn't *like* him anymore. The admiration and affection in her eyes, which had captivated him in spite of his best efforts to resist, was something he'd thought would somehow always be there. It had been one of the things he'd looked forward to seeing again when they were reunited. She'd been the one person in the universe who had thought he was a good man, and he'd needed that acceptance more than he'd ever realized.

Now he knew exactly how much he'd needed it, how much he'd *counted* on it. Now that it was lost to him.

In its own way, it was as bad an outcome as if she'd actually turned out like Kyra.

He studied her closely, forcing himself to set aside *all* of his expectations and see what was actually in front of him. A strange feeling moved through him as he realized how well she'd actually grown up, perhaps better than he'd ever hoped.

The young woman before him was beautiful. The marks of strain on her face were clearly new to her and not habitual, the sort that would vanish with a good night's sleep and a hearty meal or two. She was slim, but he could feel good muscle tone on her arms that spoke of health and vitality. Her skin was smooth, flawless, and healthy, her shoulder-length hair glossy if a bit tousled by the battle she'd been caught up in. Her hands in his were slender and unworked, with long, shapely fingers tipped by well-groomed nails. One finger on her right hand had a slight writing callus on its side, and she wore what appeared to be a class ring. Other than small gold studs in her ears, she wore no other jewelry.

Her clothes were both casual and elegant, jeans and a college sweatshirt with running shoes, all in good repair, aside from some dust from the raid and what looked like grass-stains on her sleeves. She looked like an Everywoman, he thought, one of thousands—millions—of wholesome college girls who had been strolling campuses around the galaxy for centuries, moving from class to class, dorm to dining hall. If he could have chosen a life and a future for the feisty girl he'd met in the wreckage of the *Hunter-Gratzner*, he thought he couldn't have found a better one than the one she'd apparently built for herself.

What was she doing away from it? How had this prosperous, vivacious college girl ended up a shivering captive of the Basilica? And why did she fear and dislike him?

"Tell me what happened to you," he commanded, and sadness crossed her beautiful features. His hand rose to stroke her cheek before he could stop it, and he watched the

sadness turn into confusion. Did she really think he was that heartless? Didn't she remember how hard he'd fought to keep her safe? Didn't she know that he'd been unable to stop himself from doing so?

She lowered her head, looking down at her hands in his. "I... couldn't handle it all. Everything that had happened... what I'd become... I hated it. I hated myself."

"Why?" He didn't understand that. Jack had been one of the most compassionate people he'd ever met, and had awakened an answering compassion within himself; what was there to hate?

"Because I was a killer. People died because of me."

Well, fuck. Now he understood her reasoning, better than he wanted to. She'd sought, after the crash, to emulate him, and had paid a terrible price for it. And if she'd blamed and hated herself for what had happened as a result, enough to try to end her life, how much more must she have blamed and hated him?

He couldn't even argue with her. She was, unfortunately, right in her statement. It had been her blood-scent that the creatures had been drawn to, years before, during that desperate run through the desert. At the very least, Paris had died because of an attack the creatures had launched against her. Nor could he contradict her assertion that she was a killer, because her finger had been on the trigger of the gun that had blown Antonia Chillingsworth's head apart.

The fact that he had never held any of those things against her was irrelevant. *She* had held them against *herself*. Imam had been wrong, he realized. She'd never been in any danger of becoming like him. Faced with what it truly meant to be what he was, she'd spurned it, but had done so almost too late to save herself.

Could he have helped her if he'd stayed? Were there things he could have told her, said to her, as someone who knew what it was like to take a life, that might have helped her reconcile herself to what had happened instead of taking a razor to her wrists?

*I really **did** abandon her when she needed me the most,* he thought, feeling sick to his stomach. The Holy Man had probably been too busy trying to keep her from following his path to notice that she was, in fact, wallowing in guilt and self-loathing instead. He had probably worsened things without meaning to.

Riddick could see it in his mind, the oblivious cleric warning her of how her soul was endangered by the things she'd done, not even realizing that she was *way* ahead of him in terms of recriminations and what she'd *needed* to hear was that she was still a good person. She must have found that good person within her again, but apparently she'd only been able to do it by repudiating that entire time and everything that had been part of it...

...including him. Especially him.

"You were never a bad person, Jack." It might be too late for him to counter those old beliefs and assumptions, but maybe he could reach her. "You weren't out to hurt anybody."

She shook her head. "Yes I was. When I picked up that gun, I wanted her dead."

Here was an opportunity to counter her, and he pressed it. "And why was that, Jack? What was she doing? You remember, don't you?"

Anxiety twisted Jack's face before him. She shook her head again. "It was wrong, what I did, I was wrong—"

"Was she unarmed?" he pushed.

"No, but—"

“Was *she* trying to kill someone? Maybe someone you cared about? Maybe someone you loved?” He leaned forward. *Come on, Jack, admit it.*

Jack lurched backward, the chair crashing to the floor and almost tripping her as she stumbled away from him. “I can’t talk about this. I can’t—”

“You have to, Jack,” he countered, following her. “Remember what happened. I opened the escape shuttle hatch and she was standing there. She had a gun in her hand and she fired —”

The high-pitched shriek that emerged from Jack’s mouth didn’t sound human, but more like the sound of a wounded infant animal. Riddick watched in horror as she folded in on herself. Her hands were over her ears, her arms coming forward to cover her face from view. As he watched, she dropped to her knees and then fell onto her side, curling into a tiny, tight, fetal ball. Finally the wail tapered off and she was silent, shivering.

Oh, fuck.

“Jack?” He knelt down beside her and touched her back as gently as he could manage. She didn’t answer.

He put his hand on her shoulder and gave her a gentle shake. The only answer was a soft whimper.

What the fuck did I do to her? he thought, horrified. *Shit, she never recovered from all of that. She just buried it and tried to move on.*

“Jack?” She still wouldn’t answer him. He lifted her off of the floor, still in her tight, shivering curl, and carried her over to his enormous, lavish bed. Lowering her onto it, he began trying to get her to unfold. “Audrey?”

That elicited a response. She lifted her head and looked at him, blinking.

“I’m sorry,” he told her, the words feeling unfamiliar and almost unpronounceable on his tongue. “I won’t ask you about that anymore, I promise. It’s okay...”

Her face was tear-streaked and tremulous, but she let him unbend her legs and slowly the tension left her limbs. He pulled her sneakers off and tossed them to the floor, keeping his movements slow and deliberate so she wouldn’t panic. She seemed a little confused, and he wondered if she even remembered what he’d asked her.

Whatever they did to her in that psychiatric ward, they didn’t help her enough. He needed to know exactly what had happened. It was the only way he’d be able to avoid triggering another attack like that... and maybe the only way he’d ever get through to her.

“Let’s start over, okay? Tell me about the hospital.” He stroked her cheek and was both surprised and gratified when she didn’t flinch back.

Jack swallowed, and then began to speak. Her voice was level, dry, and subdued, the words uninflected. It was as though she was telling someone else’s story, Riddick thought with awe. Awe that chilled as he realized that was exactly what it was to her. He listened intently. Somewhere in this tale, he hoped, would be the clues he needed to help her become herself again. And maybe, just maybe, an explanation of Kyra’s madness as well.

Riddick listened harder than he’d ever listened to anything before.

5.

Breathing, But Not Living

Jack woke up to a cold, sterile, white world. Everything ached, and she couldn't move. For a while, she wasn't sure where she was or why. Memory slowly began to come to her. She was dead. She'd killed herself and now she was dead.

Death, she decided, was boring. Craning her head, she began trying to figure out where she was.

A white room?

It was a small room with no decorations. Four walls, a ceiling, a floor and a door, all white. And a bed. A bed that she was strapped down in.

Well, *shit*. Maybe she wasn't dead after all.

She felt numb and floaty on top of the ache. Chilly, too. Everything felt soft and distant, even the failure of her suicide attempt. It annoyed her but the desperate emotions that had inspired it weren't there. It just was.

Drugged. She'd been drugged. That explained how calm she felt and how long it had taken her to figure out that she wasn't dead. She lay still, contemplating how long it might have been since her attempt. Her arms, she began to notice, were sore, a low throb developing centered in her wrists.

That's right, I cut them, didn't I?

The fog was beginning to lift, and with it the numbness. She still felt disconnected and off-center, but she was more and more aware. She tried lifting her head, but could only raise it an inch or two before the restraints held her firmly.

"Hello?" Her voice was raspy, like something sharp was buried inside her throat, and she began to cough. Her lungs ached, too. Why was that?

She was preparing to call out again when the door opened and a middle-aged man in white entered.

If I still thought I was dead, he'd be one hell of a disappointing angel.

"Hello, Miss Doe, I'm glad to see you're with us again."

Doe?

"Why am..." She had to stop and cough. "Why am I 'Miss Doe?'"

The man drew a chair over to the side of Jack's bed and sat down. She blinked. How had she missed the chair? How much more was she missing? "Under questioning, the al-Walids admitted that they did not know your real name. Perhaps you would like to tell me, and I can have your file changed?"

For a moment, he almost won, and she almost unthinkingly told him her name was Audrey MacNamera. But the words stopped in her mouth. She couldn't be Audrey anymore. Audrey had been a good person. Innocent. Maybe a little impatient with life, to the point where she'd done a really stupid thing in a fit of pique, but she wasn't a stone-cold, evil killer. Which,

Jack reminded herself, was what she'd become, why she was no longer Audrey, and why she no longer deserved to live.

She shook her head and the doctor—she assumed that was what he was—heaved a sigh.

“Very well, then. You are aware why you're here, aren't you?”

Jack shrugged. “Tried to kill myself, right?”

The doctor nodded. “And you very nearly succeeded, too. If Mrs. al-Walid hadn't found you when she did, you would have.”

Damn her. Never minding her own business...

“After all, when she found you, you'd already slipped under the water and drowned.”

Aha! So *that* was why her throat and lungs hurt. She must have slid under the water when she passed out.

“How'd she find me? She wasn't supposed to be home.” Jack had timed the attempt for when *nobody* was supposed to be around, especially not Lajjun and baby Ziza.

“I don't know the answer to that. Just that she came home, went to check on you, and found you mere minutes before brain death would have set in.” The doctor frowned and tilted his head at her. “How do you feel? Are you in full possession of your faculties? You do *remember* who you are, right?”

Jack nodded. “No brain damage, more's the pity.”

The doctor frowned and leaned closer. “The al-Walids say you go by ‘Jack.’ Would you like to tell me, Jack, why you tried to end your life?”

She sighed. That question had been coming from the get-go. She might as well get it over with so they could move on. “It needs ending.”

“Why?”

The sadness that the drugs had suppressed returned at that moment, a vast, empty ache yawning open. Darkness and desolation filled her, spreading out to consume everything around her. The pristine white room became coal-black in her heart. But the darkness remained empty. *He* was gone. Even Riddick had turned his back upon what she had become.

“I don't deserve to live after what I did,” she answered after a moment.

“And what would that be, Jack?” From the mild curiosity in his voice, she realized that he didn't know. Imam hadn't spilled her secret.

Too bad. Out it was coming at long last.

“Murder.”

A long, shocked silence followed.

“Who... did you murder, Jack?” Yeah, she'd startled him out of his routine approach.

Jack shrugged a little. “Her name was something Chillingsworth. Owned some ship called the *Kublai Khan* or Gobbledy-Gook or something.”

“I see.”

“No, you really don't.” She shrugged again. “You probably don't even believe me.”

“Of course I do,” he said after a pause that was just a little too long for honesty. “So, uh... how did you do it?”

“I shot her in the head.”

“Why?”

Riddick on the ground... incoherent screams of rage emerging from a twisted mouth that ought to have been beautiful, but was hideously ugly... terror and a sense that she was about

to lose something precious, and then the roar and kick—

“Because I wanted to kill her.” The rest didn’t matter. She’d lost something even *more* precious through her actions, something that she could never, ever recover. Something that she didn’t want to live without. But this doctor, who didn’t even believe she’d done what she said, wouldn’t understand that, so there was no point in trying to tell him about it.

“I see.”

This time Jack didn’t even bother to contradict his meaningless words. She just ignored him. The silence lasted for several minutes.

“Obviously we have a great deal to discuss,” he finally said. “In the meantime, I’m clearing you for the C ward.”

“C ward?” She looked at him with curiosity.

The doctor’s smile was professional, almost salesmanlike. He took a stiff paper chart out of his folder and held it up. The chart was divided into four sections, each lettered A, B, C, and D. Below the letters were headings for “restrictions” and “privileges,” with lists of each.

“There are four wards here,” he explained, touching the chart as he went. “A is for the mildly disturbed who are well on their way to recovery, and pose no threat to themselves and others, and have no intention of escaping. B is for the disturbed who need closer monitoring and restricted movement. C is for patients who may pose a threat to themselves, and possibly others, and need very close monitoring until they stabilize. And D is for patients who are deeply disturbed and violent and pose a genuine hazard to those around them.”

Jack nodded, skimming the lists. C Ward. That meant she probably wouldn’t have access to anything that would let her finish the job. She’d need to get into A Ward for that. Well, she had a goal, of a sort. “Guess you’re not worried I’ll kill again, huh?” she asked him dryly.

He cleared his throat, once more uncomfortable. “You don’t seem to pose any sort of immediate danger, no... you’re lucid, calm—”

“Drugged.”

“No, the drugs have worn off, Jack. And they wouldn’t have stopped you from saying outrageous things if that was your tendency.”

“You don’t consider a confession to murder outrageous?”

He leaned forward, an avid look sparking in his eyes. “Was it intended to be?”

I knew it, he thinks I’m making it up! “I’m not some fucking drama queen if that’s what you’re thinking. That wasn’t a cry for help Lajjun ‘rescued’ me from. I was supposed to die.”

“I understand that. And I promise you, we will help you through this. Whatever happened —”

“I *told* you—”

“No matter what happened, Jack, you are a lovely young woman with a lot of life ahead of her, and you deserve to live and enjoy it. I promise you, when you leave here at last, you’ll agree with me.”

Yeah, right, whatever. “I’m kinda tired.”

“I imagine you are. It will take a while for you to recover from the blood loss and the other stresses on your body. I will arrange for your transfer to the floor of C Ward. A nurse will be by soon with clothes, and she’ll escort you there. In the meantime, is there anyone you’d like me to get in contact with?” Another expectant pause.

I want my mommy. It floated out of nowhere, along with the sudden, powerful sense-memory of cuddling in her mother's lap, head on her shoulder, the gentle scent of her perfume—Shalimar—enfolding her. *Why* had she left home? Was Alvin really that bad?

The power of the memory closed her throat and brought tears dangerously close to the surface. She turned her face away from the doctor and shook her head.

"All right, then. I'll speak to you again soon, Jack, and we can begin getting you well." He rose, the chair squeaking back across the floor. She didn't turn to look at him as he left the room, still struggling with the pain of being what she'd become, and all the things she'd lost along the way.

I want my mommy, she thought again. *I don't want to be Jack anymore. I want to be Audrey again. I want my old life back.*

She'd thought she was completely cried out, that no tears were left. She'd felt dry and empty when she'd climbed into the tub, and sure that she would never cry again. Now, though, as the tears overwhelmed her, she knew she'd been wrong.

She was still crying when the nurse arrived with her clothes.

6.

Back in the Little Leagues?

Released from her bonds, it only took Jack a minute to dress in the standard-issue softie pajamas given to psychiatric patients. The pants and shirt had no buttons, zippers, or fastenings of any kind, and the slippers were really just thick-soled socks. Nothing in the clothes could be used as a tool or a weapon of any kind.

The nurse let Jack take another minute to compose herself and wash her face before leading her down a long, narrow corridor, past door after locked door.

“Which ward is this?” Jack asked.

“It isn’t,” the woman answered. “This is the isolation wing.”

Jack nodded and filed that bit of knowledge away. She wondered what people had to do to get in and out of it, but it made sense that everybody would start off in it.

The corridor ended in a heavy security door that opened onto a T-junction, with two more security doors on either side. One was marked “A – C.” The other was marked simply “D.” Jack watched as the nurse ran a card through the “A – C” door’s scanner and rested her hand on the screen above it.

“*Identify, please,*” the softly-modulated, but subtly mechanical, voice asked.

“Raymond, Vanessa, with patient Jane Doe 7439.”

Interesting, Jack thought. The security system needed a pass-card, a hand-print, a voice pattern, *and* specific information about the nurse’s business. A system like that would be difficult-to-impossible to beat. Her father had installed and serviced a variety of such systems, including the ones used by Sirius Shipping and the *Hunter-Gratzner*, and Jack knew most of the back doors in, but this one, she knew, was way beyond her.

Exactly why was she thinking about escape anyway?

She followed Vanessa Raymond up a flight of steps to yet another security door. A landing was beyond it, and two more doors. One, pointed in the direction of the isolation wing below it, was labeled “C” and the other, “A – B.” A small glass pane let Jack see a flight of steps going upward on the other side of the “A – B” door.

Underground, she realized. That’s where this was. What an ingenious way to minimize the chances of escape! She bet that only the A ward itself, if that, was actually on ground level.

Why do I care how the security system works? Not like I’m planning on living long enough to beat it, anyway...

It was a shame, she suddenly thought, that the doctor hadn’t assigned her to D Ward. There probably would have been someone in there with homicidal enough tendencies for her needs, who could have been provoked into finishing what she’d started. Maybe she’d luck out and someone on C Ward would be like that, but it’d be harder to find.

And everybody thinks dying is way too easy, Jack thought with bitter amusement.

Raymond finished negotiating the lock for C Ward, and Jack followed her inside, into her new home. The corridors, she noticed, had been painted a “soothing” light blue. There was the low sound of human activity, now, different indeed from the sterile quietude of the isolation wing. Voices, sound effects, the soft hum of a media screen. She passed by an open entrance to some kind of gathering room. Glancing in, she saw patients dressed just like her, all female, grouped in clusters. Some were playing cards, some were watching a car chase on the large, flat screen, and a few were milling about on their own. Several turned and glanced her way.

“That’s the community room,” Raymond told her. “There’s also a dining and recreation area, and visiting rooms. But right now, let’s settle you in your dorm.”

Dorm? Jack smirked at the use of that *school*-like word. Frowning, she glanced back into the community room, and noticed for the first time that all of the patients were very young. The oldest looked to be in her late teens.

Okay, all-female and juvenile. Strange how she’d assumed that she’d be in with adults. Maybe it was a habitual assumption given how much time she’d spent in Riddick’s company. *Like getting sent back to Little League after playing in the Majors.*

Baseball had been a big deal on Deckard’s World, and Audrey had tracked the batting averages of all of her favorite players from the time she was six. Nobody on Helion Prime seemed to have a clue about the sport, which had frustrated Jack and left her feeling even more disconnected from her old self than ever. Now it was her little in-joke, though. She realized that a grim little smile had crossed her lips and hid it away from Raymond’s view before the woman could see it.

The nurse led her to a short side-corridor, and to the second door on the left. She opened it and gestured for Jack to enter ahead of her. Jack did, noting that this was apparently Room 34C. *Guess that’s my new address,* she thought. It’d be easy enough to remember given that it was also her mother’s bra size. Another grim smirk tried to surface but she was ready for it, and it never made it onto her face.

“This will be your room,” Raymond was saying. “I apologize for the... décor. Your roommate is due back from Isolation in another day or two, and her doctor tells us that painting over her... *art*... would impede her progress. She mostly respects keeping it on her side of the room, at least.”

Jack blinked. Yeah, she could definitely tell the two sides of the room apart. One side was simple and spare, with a narrow bed next to a clean, light blue wall. The other side was a riot of garish, gruesome color. Her unnamed roommate had covered the walls, to and slightly over the invisible halfway mark, with elaborate drawings of death and mayhem. Moving closer, Jack scanned the images.

Good grief, she thought, and wondered if her roommate’s doctor was really as stupid as he suddenly seemed. The figures in the pictures were poorly drawn, but their meanings were crystal-clear to her. In the first month after Riddick had vanished, she’d still been obsessed enough with him to study his crimes, and had learned a great deal about anatomy in the process.

Each of the figures on the wall illustrated a different “kill-spot” on the human body, and the best way to reach it.

Maybe finding someone to finish the job won't be so hard after all, she thought, suppressing another smile. Looks like my roomie even knows how to make it fast.

Other drawings, elsewhere on the wall, seemed to depict some kind of shootout or massacre. Bodies were littered around a collection of low buildings, a mountain range behind them. Some of the faces were nondescript, but a few were detailed, one or two of them even decent artistic work as though their drawer had spent hours getting them just right. Written in brilliant scarlet across the mountains was a single phrase—in *English*, Jack noted with surprise—**WE NEVR SURENDURED!**

Okay, not very good English...

Jack glanced over the twisted mural again, looking for any other writing. There... beneath the kill-spot drawings. **MY FAVRIT GAME.** And scattered throughout the drawings, she noticed, were things that possibly were the letter “K.”

“Wow,” she muttered.

“She’s really not that bad anymore,” Raymond said behind her. “She’s come a long way. You should have seen the things she drew in *D Ward*.”

Jack found herself wishing that she could. “How come she’s in Isolation?”

“It’s just a precaution. The *other* patient was the aggressor. This time, Kyra was just defending herself, even if she did get a little carried away...”

Jack glanced back at Raymond just as the woman gave herself a little shake.

“Anyway, we don’t feel that it was really a relapse on her part. Don’t worry, she’s no threat to you.”

Well, damn. Jack nodded, giving the nurse what she hoped was a reassured smile. “That’s good to know.”

Raymond glanced at the chrono on her wrist. “Dinner is in about another hour. When the bell rings—”

“Emergency!” The radio on the nurse’s belt suddenly blared. *“All available medical staff report immediately to D Ward!”*

Raymond hesitated, and then continued, suddenly looking guilty. “...just go out to the main corridor and down to its end. You’ll see everyone else heading there.”

“You’re not gonna show me around?” Jack asked with mild surprise.

“I’m sorry... Jack, right? They need me in *D Ward*. Will you be okay?”

Jack nodded and sat down on her bed. “Yeah, thanks.”

She glanced at the mural, and when she looked back at the doorway, Raymond was gone.

For several minutes, Jack sat quietly, studying the pictures. There was a lot of anger in them, she decided, rising and moving closer so she could see better. The artist—had Raymond said her name was Kyra?—wasn’t really that bad at drawing, but she only ever bothered on getting a few of the people right... the rest had been left as contemptuous caricatures, with little detail and less accuracy. The kill-spot people were little better than stick figures, mostly... except for one. *He* had been drawn in lavish detail, staring down in agonized horror at the large knife piercing his femoral artery. The drawing felt almost gleeful, as if its artist had reveled in depicting that particular man’s suffering.

“You really don’t want to mess with those.”

Jack turned around. Two girls, maybe two or three years older than her, were standing in the doorway, their arms linked around each other’s waists. One of them was a petite, delicate

blonde... with the meanest, coldest eyes Jack had ever seen on a human being. The other was taller, slightly chubby, with short, dark hair.

“Sorry?”

The dark-haired girl spoke again. “Those are Kyra’s. Mess with ’em and she’ll kick your ass all over the C Ward.”

The words were less frightening than the look of joyous anticipation that briefly crossed the blonde’s face.

“Kyra’s my roommate?” Jack aimed her question at the brunette, trying to ignore the other girl.

“Yeah, guess she is. I’m Colette and this is Stacey. We’re her friends.” Unspoken was a contemptuous *and probably not yours*.

“I’m Jack.”

Colette snorted. “Great. Well, just so you know, the only ones who swing that way are me, Stacey, Andrea, and Lynn. Stacey’s *mine*, and Andrea and Lynn are an item too, so don’t you go trying to cut in.”

Jack blinked, trying to follow what Colette was talking about. It took a moment for her to figure it out.

Oh. Oh!

“No, I’m not—”

“You got something *against* lesbians?” Stacey snarled.

“No, but I’m not into that...”

Colette smirked. “Oh great, Kyra’s going to be *so* thrilled. Her new roommate’s a total wimp. What are you in for anyway?”

Jack felt her eyes narrowing. Wimp? She’d traveled with *Richard B. Riddick*, not exactly the kind of record a *wimp* could boast—

You’re not actually trying to take pride in that, are you? the voice of the girl she’d once been demanded.

For a moment her throat closed and her eyes began to sting. Stacey’s snort of contempt brought her back to herself. She raised her chin. “Attempted suicide.”

Colette began to chuckle. “Yeah, great. Kyra’s just going to *love* that.”

“At least she won’t have to worry about this one trying to take her out, like the last one,” Stacey sneered.

“Yeah, true... but just so you know, little girl, you’re in the Big Leagues now. Stacey and me, we’ve done things you can’t even imagine... and *Kyra*... you just ain’t worthy. So don’t go getting a big head or anything, because you’re the littlest fish in this pond.”

The urge to tell them who she’d run with—and what she’d done—surfaced again, but she swallowed it down. They didn’t deserve to know... and she didn’t deserve to brag about it, anyway. “Whatever you say.”

Colette narrowed her eyes for a moment, studying her. Then she shook her head and turned, drawing Stacey away with her. “We’ll let Kyra deal with you. C’mon, Stace, we got better places to be.”

Jack sat back down on her bed and waited for the dinner bell to ring. “I’m in the Big Leagues now,” she muttered to herself, and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

How she *wished* Colette was right.

7.

You Meet the Strangest People...

Jack didn't meet her roommate until the next morning.

Dinner had gone okay. When the bell rang, Jack followed Raymond's directions to the dining room, where the other girls of C Ward were serving themselves. She deliberately hung back and waited until everyone else had picked out their seats before choosing one of the few empty chairs left over. Mercifully, it wasn't anywhere near Colette and Stacey.

There *was* an empty seat by them, but she figured it was probably Kyra's. And neither girl was the kind of person she wanted to seek out as a friend, anyway... even assuming she was looking for friendship or even a future.

The girls at her table looked her over with mild curiosity and then went back to eating their meals. Jack glanced around, trying to take in as much detail as she could without staring at anyone. That was the kind of thing that would be sure to provoke someone, and for now she wanted to concentrate on blending in.

This was definitely a strictly-juvenile facility. All of the girls in the ward were at least pubescent, and none of them looked fully adult, although one or two came close. A few of the girls were obviously unbalanced, one of them rocking as she ate and another babbling angrily at her spaghetti, but most of them seemed ordinary enough.

Jack quickly discovered that she still had almost no appetite. Three or four bites of her spaghetti and her gorge tried to rise, making her push the plate away from her and shudder. She wasn't sure if it was the food or her own twisted innards, but she suddenly couldn't stand the thought of eating another bite. She'd been Lajjun's great despair, picking at the lavish plates of gourmet foods that Imam's young wife had prepared.

A sudden, vivid image of Lajjun dragging her out of the tub and trying to revive her almost cost Jack her scant meal. She wasn't sure if it was a real memory or just her hyperactive imagination, but—

"No appetite yet, huh?"

Jack looked up and met the curious stare of the girl across from her. With her narrow face, uneven features, and hungry gaze, the girl was not at *all* pretty, but Jack felt no sense of menace from her. Just interest. She shrugged, not really sure what to say in answer.

"Me neither when I first got here," the girl went on after a moment. "I was so skinny. They had to stick tubes down me at first, and one of them almost went down the wrong pipe—"

"Shut *up*, Celia!" one of the other girls snapped. "She's not interested! Why do you always have to talk about this shit when people are trying to eat, anyway?"

A look of hurt came over Celia's face.

"No, I'm okay," Jack found herself saying, wanting to soothe that look away.

"Maybe you are," grumbled another girl. "I don't wanna hear it."

"I was *just* being *friendly*," Celia muttered to her spaghetti.

Jack glanced around at the other girls and saw uniformly exasperated looks on their faces. She suddenly had the suspicion that Celia's concept of friendliness might be a little *invasive*. She felt bad for her, but at the same time she suspected that if she let Celia latch on, she'd end up feeling even more confined and intruded-upon than she had with the al-Walids.

She knew, however, that she wasn't going to manage to eat any more of her dinner. The few hints of appetite she'd had were long gone. She sat quietly while the other girls ate and discussed the plot of some soap opera they all watched. A woman in a coma, an adulterous husband, a secret love-child, and a mysterious alien artifact. *All* of the clichés.

Jack was waiting for someone—anyone—to leave the room so she could, too, without breaking some written or unwritten rule that nobody had told her about yet. Most of the girls, however, seemed content to gab and go back for seconds.

This was a ward for disturbed girls? Jack's middle school cafeteria had been more unruly. She wondered what the rest of the girls were in for.

Maybe wanton telepathy. No sooner had she thought that, than one of the girls at the table spoke to her.

"So, what'd *you* do to get here?"

Jack shrugged. If she was curious, they had a right to be, too. "Tried to kill myself."

"Yeah," the girl who had snapped at Celia answered. "Those 'bracelets' of yours were a giveaway. Did you mean it or are you one of those sob-story types?"

Jack looked more closely at her, studying her face. There was no challenge there, no belligerence, just a mixture of curiosity and caution. Like she'd dealt with a *lot* of people who carried on for dramatic reasons but didn't really mean what they were doing. Jack had met a few of those herself. Annabelle, from school, right before she'd taken off, had been like that. A "trendy cutter," she'd been a showcase of self-inflicted, shallow, non-scarring wounds that were kept hidden from family and teachers, but "accidentally" displayed to fellow students who fussed over her indulgently. Jack had been suckered in for a few weeks, herself, until she wised up to Annabelle's game. Her refusal to play along any further had earned her a few nasty epithets from the girl's "support group."

How wrong they'd been. She hadn't even *started* down the path to becoming a "cold-hearted bitch" yet at that point. Alvin still hadn't moved in, things were still right between her and her mother, and guns were still things that she would never dream of touching, much less using to blow someone's—

"So is that silence an 'I meant it,' or a..." The girl tilted her head back and put the back of one hand to her forehead, making her voice flutter on the verge of a melodramatic sob. "'You couldn't *possibly* understand!'"

Jack felt her lips twitch into a sudden smile, her first in *weeks*. "No, I meant it. You get a lot of the other kind here?"

"Not many. Most of them are in B Ward, but a few put on a good enough show to get down here. So, you planning on trying again?"

Jack felt her smile vanish. She looked away from the other girl's shrewd, worldly gaze. "Maybe. How come you're here?"

"Catatonic schizophrenia." The girl said it without a moment's hesitation or shame. "Don't worry. I haven't had an episode in a few weeks."

"Is that good?"

“Probably. Hopefully. They’re trying me out on some new medication, and so far, so good. I’m Heather, by the way.”

Jack felt the smile slipping back onto her lips. “Jack.”

“Nice to meet you, Jack.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

Celia let out a hard, aggrieved sigh and got abruptly up from the table. Jack watched her stalk out of the room, feeling a conflicted, uncomfortable mixture of guilt and annoyance. She wasn’t at all sure why she felt like it was somehow her fault, but she did.

It was, she realized, the way Annabelle had made her feel when she was *starting* to wise up to her game, but hadn’t really caught on yet.

I don’t even know what she’s in for, but whatever it is, it’s not my responsibility. She hoped she’d remember that. Nobody else at the table was paying any attention to Celia’s behavior, definitely a sign that it was commonplace.

The rest of the dinner was uneventful. Jack skipped dessert, letting the first girl who asked take her piece over. She focused on listening and filing away information, the way she had when she’d been running and hiding. The instincts, she thought, were much the same. But that puzzled her; those were survival instincts. She’d thought she didn’t have any of those left.

Finally people started leaving the tables. The orderlies—somehow Jack had completely failed to see them until now—cleared the places behind the girls as they left their tables.

“That’s fancy service,” Jack remarked, feeling a spark of her old amusement surface. Who’d have thought that crazy girls would get valets?

“Not really,” Heather answered at her side. “They clear all the plates so that they can make sure nobody’s walked off with a piece of silverware that’ll get made into a weapon. And since they clear them from the table, they know who was sitting where, and so they know who to go after. That’s why it’s like that.”

Well. That made sense. Good to know, too. One idle thought that had run through her mind had been that she could try to fashion a stolen knife or fork into a weapon of self-destruction.

*Cross **that** off the options list...*

“So, what happens now?”

“Tonight’s movie, if you like ’em. The girls voted for some spy movie... not a James Bond, one of those cheesy knockoffs. I wanted a classic myself. So I’m gonna go read instead. You can watch the movie or go to the game room, or the library, or whatever.”

It was only afterwards that Jack noticed that Heather hadn’t invited her to hang out with her. In that moment, she wasn’t aware of it at all. A small part of her was still feeling disconnected and off-kilter. She considered the possibilities Heather had mentioned, but her decision was hijacked by the yawn that forced its way out at that moment.

“I’m still pretty tired. If I want to head back to my room and turn in, are they gonna get mad?”

“They?”

“The orderlies.”

Heather grinned and shook her head. “No, they won’t give you a hard time. I usually go read in my room after dinner and they’ve never objected.”

Together they headed back toward the “dorms.”

At 22C, Heather stopped and opened the door, gave Jack a grin, a wave, and a “good night,” and was gone a second later before she could answer.

Friendly.

No really, Jack thought, Heather had been *very* friendly under the circumstances. This was a place where you could know with absolute certainty that anyone you met had something wrong with her. Friendship couldn’t be offered lightly or incautiously.

Jack headed for her room, hoping that Heather would become a friend.

Aren’t you planning on being dead before that happens?

That was right; she was.

Jack sighed and headed for 34C, opening the door and going in. Garish pictures of violence and death glared at her from Kyra’s side of the room. She turned away from them and pulled down the covers on her cot. Climbing in, she faced the light blue wall on her side of the room. At least it didn’t make her think of Riddick’s world of mayhem.

Sleep came more quickly than she would have expected, carrying her down into its depths. Those depths, though, were colder than the deeps of space, full of the lonely dreams of despair that she’d hoped to shed at last with her death. Dreams in which she faced her mother again, her hand firmly in Alvin’s, the two of them smiling at her as though the brutal murder of her dreams was a *good* thing. Dreams in which she woke up in the al-Walid home and couldn’t find Riddick. “I’m sorry, my child. He thought it best that he already be gone when you woke...”

Everybody leaves me...

Her pillow was wet when she finally woke.

She blinked; she’d gone to sleep with the light still on. Someone was moving around behind her.

Jack rolled over, groaning a little as the pain in her wrists spiked. She needed to ask for some painkillers for that—

Oh boy. This must be Kyra...

The young woman over by the other bed was maybe an inch or two taller than she was. She had long, thick, very dark hair that waved around her shoulders in wild tangles. She was surveying the wall, a red marker in one hand.

*I sure **hope** that’s Kyra...*

“Um... hi. Kyra, right?”

The girl turned, frowning. “Yeah. So?”

“Just wanted to make sure before you started drawing. Your friends said you were pretty protective of those pictures.”

Kyra was very pretty. Jack guessed that she was about sixteen or seventeen. Her heart-shaped face had an almost feline quality, Jack thought, as if she was a cat that had been made human. Her eyes were a strange shade of blue-gray that Jack had never seen before in her life. Her small chin had a little hint of a cleft in it. There was something both sensual and challenging about her face, overall... and not exactly friendly. Jack wondered if Kyra was perpetually angry.

“Thanks,” she said, as if it was a foreign word for you. “Who are you?”

“I’m Jack.”

“No. Really.” Scorn sparked in her strange eyes.

Jack suddenly felt tired again. She shrugged, cuddling up to her clammy pillow. “If you don’t like it, there’s always Jane Doe. That’s what it says on my file.”

“And here Colette said you were a wimp.” A strange mixture of scorn and amusement was in her voice.

So she’d already seen her friends.

“How come you asked who I was if you already talked to her?” Jack wondered where this smart-ass attitude was coming from. *Deathwish much?*

“You’re a suicide case, right?” Kyra’s voice was considering.

Jack nodded. Kyra walked over to the side of her bed and crouched down, fixing her with a hard glare.

“Okay, I’m only gonna say this once... *Jack*. Maybe you think if you say the right shit, you’ll get lucky and I’ll do to you what I did to Roger over there.” She gestured at the detailed kill-spot drawing on the wall. “Maybe you think I’ll do your dirty work for you. Forget it. I’m not that stupid. But you provoke me? I’ll make you wish I *had* killed you.”

Jack couldn’t look away from those strange, slatey eyes. For a moment they almost seemed silvery... almost Riddick-like.

This is who I would have become if I’d followed him.

“We understand each other, Jack?” Kyra asked, her voice almost friendly.

“Yeah, we do,” Jack sighed.

“Good.” The smile that crossed Kyra’s face was smug and mocking. “Welcome to C Ward.”

8.

Queen of the Killer's Club

It was only after a few days in the ward that Jack noticed that almost none of the girls were Muslim.

From the morning she'd awakened in Imam's house, she'd been surrounded by all things Islam, to the point where she'd come to assume that the entire world of Helion Prime was just like New Mecca. In some ways, New Mecca was very cosmopolitan, but in other ways, it was very provincial and one-note.

It had never occurred to her that it was just an ethnic suburb of a much larger city.

Deckard's World, of course, was a much younger colony than Helion Prime, and Jack was used to smaller, more rustic towns. It hadn't really entered her mind that there might be even *more* city past the points Abu and Lajjun escorted her through... and that there were people, in those other parts of the town, that she'd have related to better. People who played baseball, and allowed pork into their homes, and didn't have prohibitions against graven images. People she'd have understood, and who would have understood her... or understood her better than the al-Walids had.

Heather had looked at her strangely when she commented on how diverse the girls in C Ward were. It was only after they'd gone around the subject a few times that they realized what Jack's problem was.

"Shit, Jack, you mean you were on Helion Prime for three months and you never left MeccaTown?" Heather shook her head. "That's just too weird. You're not even Muslim, are you? I mean, the way you tore into the BLTs at lunch today, I thought you were gonna go on an eating rampage."

Jack grinned a little and shook her head, still feeling like her whole world had turned on its side. The taste of that bacon was still with her, and she felt almost like she'd awakened from a long sleep. It was the first meal, since her arrival, that she'd actually finished, much less gone back for seconds of. "I had *no* idea that the whole planet wasn't full of Muslim energy brokers. Shit, I had no idea anybody on this planet but me knew about baseball!"

Heather laughed. It was a nice sound, not mocking even though Jack knew she sounded like a complete dweeb. "Don't tell me you've decided you're normal, now, on the basis of *me!*"

Good point.

"I just... I've been pretty out of it, I guess." Jack shrugged, unable to explain it better than that. But inside her, it was all coming together. She'd been cut off, from the outside world, from herself, from everything. Strange that she suddenly felt freer, imprisoned in the sub-basement of a psychiatric hospital, than she had the entire three months she'd had the run of the planet's surface.

How could he do that to me? She wasn't sure which "he" she meant. Either one would do, she thought.

"So out of it you didn't even notice you were surrounded by a big city?" Heather looked more amused than ever.

Jack nodded. "Yeah. Well, I mean, we don't have big cities *this* big back on D— my home world. And I guess I was kinda... wrapped up in myself."

"Weird. You're not the self-centered type. Not like some of the people around here." Heather chuckled and shook her head. "So what were you all het up about?"

For a moment Jack wanted to smile and say that it was nothing. Just trivial teenage bullshit angst. But that wasn't true, and in the last few days she'd come to value Heather very highly as a friend. She couldn't lie, much as she suddenly wanted to. She couldn't meet her eyes, either.

"I, uh... a bunch of people died thanks to me."

"What, you had some kind of attack or something?" Heather had talked a little, in the last few days, about some of the "episodes" *she* had, many of which were less catatonic than epileptic in nature.

Jack shook her head. "It's complicated."

"C'mon, I told you all about *my* screwed-up stuff." Heather grinned at her, though, and Jack had the sense that, if she insisted, she wouldn't be pushed any further.

She closed her eyes. Suddenly the urge to confess was back, full force. "I shot and killed somebody. Among other things."

"By accident? Like... playing with guns?" Heather's voice was softer, a little hesitant.

"No," Jack answered, her own voice softer too. "I meant to do it."

There was a long moment of silence. Then, "Wow. Funny, I'm surprised you're not hanging out with the Killer's Club."

Jack looked up sharply, but there was no censure in Heather's gaze, just puzzled speculation. "The what?"

"You know... Kyra and Colette and Stacey and Doris. The Killer's Club."

Jack blinked. "They all killed people?"

"People, yeah, among other things. Stacey's somebody you never want to introduce to your pets, you know what I mean?"

Jack shuddered and nodded. There'd been a boy like that in her school. "Are they all like that?"

Heather shook her head. "Well, Kyra's hunted but I don't think she'd take it out on pets. She's not like them. The shit that happened to her would make *anybody* crazy."

In the last several days, Jack and Kyra had exchanged maybe a handful of words. The wild-haired girl remained an enigma to Jack, who had to admit she was curious about her and her pictures. "What's her story?"

"You ever heard of the New Christy Enclave?"

"You're *kidding!*" Of course Jack had heard of them. She'd followed the story with enrapt fascination when it was unfolding; she'd even done her classroom Current Events reports on them several times. "She was one of them?"

Heather nodded. "She was one of the last ones they caught after the massacre. I think I heard one of the nurses saying that she'd been hiding in the woods for almost a year when

they captured her. And she's the one who murdered Roger Fiennes."

Jack felt her mouth fall open in amazement as she realized where she'd seen the man on Kyra's wall before. Roger Fiennes. Red Roger. *Oh my god.*

Social Studies had always been Audrey MacNamera's favorite subject. From the time she was old enough to read, she'd been joining her father in reading the morning paper, learning about the colony worlds and their events. She'd been nine when the New Christy Enclave standoff began.

Her father had repeatedly said to her that the entire situation was one of the worst-handled ones in the history of colonization, and that she should remember it. She had, but it had never occurred to her that she'd meet any of the people involved in it.

The New Christy Colony, ironically, had been one of the very first groups to leave Earth to seek a new home in the stars. One of several religious separatist groups that had set out in the late twenty-first century, they'd left a mere ten years before the first Star Jump drives had been introduced and the colonization process had been revolutionized. While their near-light-speed ship had laboriously plodded across four hundred light years of space, their claim had been *jumped*.

More than four centuries after they'd left Earth, two years relativistic time for them, they'd arrived at their new home to find that it was already colonized and that the colonial government of the world had no intention of honoring their legitimately-filed claim. The world they'd planned to call New Christy was now a bustling colony planet called New Dartmouth. They'd filed an appeal with the Federacy and had set up a planetside camp in the mountains while they waited to hear the results. For three years, they had remained aloof from the other colonists, who considered them a pack of archaic religious weirdos anyway.

Then the trouble had begun.

It had started with a scuffle over the Enclave's children and their education. For some reason, the colonial government had gotten the wild idea that, despite their refusal to allow any of the new arrivals citizenship, they should have authority over how their children were being educated. From there things had begun to snowball. The story had broken onto the interplanetary news when the situation degenerated into an armed standoff... which had ended in a bloody massacre of most of the Enclave's members. A handful of survivors—mostly children—had fled into the woods.

And Kyra, apparently, had been one of them.

If she was the one who had killed Red Roger, Jack realized, that meant that she'd been the very last one captured alive.

Roger Fiennes had been the Colonial Marshall in charge of the standoff. Less than a week after the first video footage of the Enclave massacre reached Deckard's World, news that he and his tactics were under investigation had followed. Amnesty Interplanetary had dispatched observers and investigators, and then the news had come to light that the massacre had occurred less than a day before the Central Council was scheduled to make its ruling on the Enclave's claim.

When the ruling was made public—the Council had sided with the Enclave—the firestorm had really begun. Audrey and her parents had discussed the new developments virtually every night, as more charges of misconduct were brought out; they were, in fact, some of her last and best memories before her parents had split up. She remembered that Fiennes had

vanished right before he was going to be suspended from duty, and she'd argued with her father about whether he'd disappeared on purpose or not. In point of fact, he hadn't. He'd been ambushed during one of his patrols by one of the Enclave's now-feral children. His body was found a week later, suspended from a tree, in unspeakable condition. His captor had tortured him to death.

A few months later there'd been a small story about his killer having been captured. A girl, Jack remembered. Details about her identity hadn't been released because she was a minor. Her gender had been released, along with some of the harrowing stories she'd told about rape and brutality that had occurred during the storming of the Enclave, and which she insisted that Fiennes himself had engineered and participated in.

"Remember this, Audrey," her father had told her as they cleared the dinner table. It was only five weeks before he would abruptly move out, leaving her confused and shattered. "This is hopefully the only time things will go this out of control, but it may not be the last time the *situation* happens. There are still fifteen sublight colony ships unaccounted for, and who knows when or where they might show up. And there are three Phase One Star Jumpers that vanished, too. For all we know, they might reappear at some point."

The topic had fascinated her so much that she'd done her next history report on the Missing Colony Ships. She'd never heard what had happened to Red Roger's killer, though. That hadn't been made public.

"Wow," she breathed, and heard Heather chuckle.

"You act like you just found the Holy Grail or something."

Jack blinked and grinned ruefully over at the other girl. "I just... I read a *lot* about that whole blow-up. Never thought I'd meet one of the survivors. So... why's she here?"

Heather shook her head in amusement. "Where else would *you* send a religious wacko who killed three Marshalls?"

"Three?"

"Yeah, she'd been hunting them for a while. I think they were the three who gang-banged her mother during the massacre or something. She tortured all of them before she killed them, too. *And* she admitted to being one of the Enclave's shooters during the confrontation, so she probably killed a lot more people."

Against her will, Jack was impressed. Kyra, she thought, at least had had sounder reasons than Riddick for killing the way she did... her back had been against the wall. "How'd she end up here? Isn't Helion Prime, like... a hundred light years from New Dartmouth?"

"Well, what I hear is that they tried deprogramming her or something, at first, but then the Amnesty Interplanetary people filed to get her out of there. Something about how the people who had killed her family and way of life had no business telling her what was right and wrong, you know?"

Jack nodded. That certainly made sense to her.

"So she ended up getting sent here. They figured that Helion Prime's got so much diversity that she'd have a better shot at acceptance. And, you know, learning tolerance herself."

"And now she's the leader of the C Ward Killer's Club?" Interesting outcome.

Heather grinned. "Not really by choice. But the other girls, the ones with a real thing for violence... they just about worship her. They wanna grow up and be her or something. Sometimes she's really very nice and normal, though."

“So... what happened to her last roommate?”

Heather rolled her eyes. “Damn. That one really wasn’t Kyra’s fault. Valencia came in here thinking she was some hot shit... and when she heard Kyra’s rep, she wanted to throw down. Not smart. Kyra *trashed* her before the orderly Val had sucked off, in exchange for him disappearing, finally showed up to do his job. He got fired and I don’t know *what* happened to Val. Not that anybody cares... she was a bitch.”

Jack nodded and they headed for the dining hall. Throughout her meal, she found herself looking over at Kyra speculatively, more fascinated than ever. The girls around Kyra seemed to hang on every one of the rare words she spoke.

She’s a loner, Jack finally decided. They’re hanging all over her and it doesn’t mean a thing to her. They may be following, but she’s not trying to lead.

Kyra glanced over at her and frowned. Jack looked back down at her plate. Dumb thing to do, staring at her like that.

After dinner she headed for their room, wanting to look at the drawings again now that she knew exactly what they meant.

It was amazing what a little bit of knowledge could do. Now, remembering the pictures in the news, she realized that Kyra had captured the mountain range and the Enclave’s buildings with remarkable accuracy.

“We never surrendered,” she thought sadly. *You never should have been put in that position.*

When she’d still been Audrey, helping someone like Kyra had been her life’s goal. Before she’d *become* someone like her.

I wanna be Audrey again...

“You wanna tell me what the hell you think you’re doing?” came Kyra’s voice from behind her.

9.

Never Been to Stockholm

Jack didn't freeze at the sound of Kyra's voice. She didn't whirl around. Somehow, knowing the other girl's story, and feeling as though there was almost a *connection* between them as a result, had her at ease. Her eyes were still on the mountain range as she answered Kyra.

"Just looking. I didn't realize until now that this was the New Christy Enclave. The pictures make a lot more sense to me now."

Silence from behind her. Jack turned her head, surprising a look of complete stunned disbelief on Kyra's face.

"You know about New Christy?"

Jack nodded, moving out of Kyra's personal territory and over to her own bed. "I watched a lot of it on the news. Did some school reports on it. Never thought I'd meet one of its survivors."

Kyra shook her head and frowned. "You gonna tell me I'm a psycho religious nut, now?" She seemed to be expecting it. Her expression was a mixture of scorn and guarded blankness.

Jack sat down on the bed and shook her head, too. "No, why?"

"Great." Kyra rolled her eyes. "So I'm your hero now or something?"

Jack wasn't able to stop the startled burst of laughter that escaped her. She clapped her hand over her mouth before she could get any more offensive, but Kyra's eyes had already widened.

"What the fuck is so funny?"

"I'm sorry." Jack cleared her throat because for some reason, the giggles were still with her. "You mean nobody's ever said to you that those assholes were in the wrong?"

Kyra stared at her, confusion obvious on her face. "What, you mean... Roger and his guys? You think they were wrong?"

"I think they were butchers," Jack replied seriously.

Kyra stared at her in silence for a long moment. Her jaw tightened and she blinked three times before her face began to relax. When she spoke, her voice was a little uneven, and Jack realized that she'd almost startled tears out of the older girl. "Yeah, you got that right. But that wasn't what I was asking you, you know. You're supposed to be in Group right now. The doc sent me to get you."

"Group?" Jack had no idea what Kyra was talking about now. She wasn't upset about the intrusion on her space?

Kyra nodded. "Every Sunday night after dinner. C Ward group therapy session."

Oh. *Oh*.

"Nobody told me."

Disbelief and scorn reappeared on Kyra's face. "What, your guide didn't tell you during orientation?"

Jack shook her head. "Something happened down in D Ward and she had to go help. Probably a bunch of stuff she never told me. So, where is it?"

Kyra studied her for a moment, the look of slight puzzlement back, and then shrugged. "C'mon."

In her almost-week in the ward, Jack had rarely visited the recreation room. Usually there was too much noise and activity in it, the two vidscreens competing for attention and far too many people talking over them. Jack had avoided the room except at those odd hours when only a small handful of girls were in it, and there was relative peace and quiet. It was a perverse choice on her part; she *liked* activity and noise and the bustle of people. But it was something she no longer felt she had a right to.

The room had been rearranged for the group therapy session. The furniture had been pushed back to clear a space in the center of the room, and dining room chairs had been brought in and arranged in a large circle. Most of the chairs were occupied; Heather, she saw, had saved an empty seat by her. She split off from Kyra and headed for it, while Kyra rejoined the Killer's Club about a third of the way around the circle.

"Nice of you to join us, Jack." There was censure in the doctor's voice. It wasn't the one that had interviewed her in isolation, nor was it the psychiatrist who she'd given the silent treatment to in her last three private therapy sessions.

"Take it up with her tour-guide," Kyra answered before she could. "They never told her."

The looks on the faces of the other Killer's Club girls told Jack that nobody had been expecting Kyra to take her side. The doctor seemed surprised as well. He looked over at Jack, the sternness gone from his face.

"Who brought you into the ward?"

"Nurse Raymond, but there was some kind of emergency down in D Ward and they needed her, so it's not her fault or anything." Raymond had seemed nice enough; Jack didn't want her in trouble over this.

The Doctor made a note of some kind on his pad. "Very well, then. Let's get started. Girls, I'm sure by now most of you have met our newest resident. She's officially registered as Jane Doe 7439, but she goes by the name Jack."

The dutiful chorus of "Hi Jack" that traveled around the circle almost made Jack laugh.

Hi, my name's Jack, and I'm a Riddickaholic... She had to cough, covering her mouth to hide the smile and stifle the giggle that her thought had stirred within her.

"Hi," she managed back once her throat was clear of laughter.

"Would you like to tell us a little about yourself, Jack?" There was a strange, avid look in the back of the doctor's eyes.

Hoping to be the one who gets Stonewall Jack to open up? Bet that'd be some kind of coup or something.

She shrugged, mentally picking through what she could and couldn't talk about.

"I'm thirteen years old. I'm here because I tried to kill myself, and yes, I meant it."

Expectant silence greeted her. Everybody was waiting for more.

"Would you like to tell the girls why you wanted to die, Jack?" The doctor's expression was studiously blank, but Jack could see how avid he was beneath the surface.

Nice to know doctor-patient confidentiality is so highly honored here. Oh well, what the hell?

Deep breath. Why not let it out?

“Because I deserve to die. A few months ago a bunch of people died and it was my fault. It should’ve been me who died, not them.” Strange how saying that, in here, stirred no emotion from her. She felt like she was reciting a tedious old fact.

Curious murmurs spread around the circle.

“Jack,” the doctor continued after a moment. “Have you ever heard of Stockholm Syndrome?”

Wise mutters spread throughout the circle, but Jack shook her head. She had no idea what that would be.

“Would someone like to explain it?” He looked around at the girls.

Celia leaned forward in her seat. “It’s like this thing that happens to hostages and people who get kidnapped, where they start sympathizing with their kidnappers. Right?”

“That’s right, Celia. What Jack’s not saying here, girls, is that the deaths she’s talking about happened while she was the hostage of a serial killer.”

“When I was *what*?” The words exploded out of Jack before she could stop herself. Stares and whispers exploded around her, all focused on *her*. “I was never a—”

“Then you *weren’t* the girl on the *Kublai Khan* four months ago?”

Oh shit...

“I was, but that’s not what happened.”

The doctor lifted a paper off of his clipboard. “Jack, if you’re going to recover from everything that happened to you, the first thing you need to do is admit to what really happened. This is the official report, of both the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash and your brief stay on the *Kublai Khan*.”

The room was freezing. Jack couldn’t swallow. She stared at the doctor nervously, wondering just what he was going to say next. *Hostage? Serial killer?*

“What...” She could barely get words through her numb lips. “What does it say?”

“The truth, Jack. The *Hunter-Gratzner* crashed, and only about a dozen of you survived the crash. One of them was a very dangerous felon who was being transported back to prison. Richard Riddick.”

Murmurs from the Killer’s Club. Jack couldn’t look at anyone. She stared at her clenched hands in her lap, wondering if it was possible for her knuckles to get any whiter.

“The pilot was another survivor, and she found a geological outpost. There was a small personnel transport there, that had been left behind because it needed repair. It could only carry about a third of you. So... once it had been repaired... Riddick began picking off the rest of the survivors.”

Jack’s voice had failed her. All she could do was wordlessly shake her head in denial.

“He let you and one other live because he needed hostages. He killed the pilot because he could fly the transport himself, and because he’d already coerced the two of you into being his alibi. He tried to pass himself off as the officer who had been escorting him, but the *Kublai Khan* matched up his voice print and knew who they were *really* dealing with.”

*No! No, that’s not what **happened**...*

“He killed more than fifty people on the ship, including Antonia Chillingsworth. They say they have her murder on security tape, and that he did it, not you. In fact, they say he was using you as a human shield and she was trying to get him to release you—”

“That’s a *lie!*” Suddenly her voice was back, outrage giving it strength. “That bitch tried to kill *all of us!*”

“Jeez, what’d he *do* to you?” One of the other girls leaned forward. Chantelle. That was her name. Jack had only ever talked to her once. “He’s got you *all* messed up, girl! I mean, you’re talking about one of the most evil men in the *galaxy.*”

“No, he’s not *like* that! He kept me safe!” Jack wiped at her stinging eyes and glared around at the disbelieving faces. “He took *care* of me—”

“Whoa, is that like a euphemism?” another girl chimed in. Jack couldn’t remember her name. “Was he like, fucking you?”

“*NO!*” Jack’s chair crashed loudly to the floor as she leapt to her feet. “You guys don’t know *anything* about him, he’s not like that, he’s a *good man!*”

Skepticism colored the expression of almost every face turned towards her, except the faces of the Killer’s Club girls. They looked fascinated. Stacey looked almost enraptured.

“Please sit down, Jack.” The doctor was using one of those *reasonable* voices, talking down to her as if she was a small child. Rage flooded through her.

“*Fuck* you! All of that stuff is bullshit! He saved my life and he didn’t kill that bitch! I did, because she was gonna kill *him!* You don’t believe me, maybe you should make them *show* you that video and you can see for *yourself* that *I’m* the one who *shot her fucking head off!*”

The room had gone deathly silent. There wasn’t a single whisper, but everyone was staring.

Oh my god, I just said that, I just tried to justify what I did to her... oh god... The sour taste of bile flooded Jack’s mouth. She fled the rec room and raced for the bathroom, just barely reaching a stall before her dinner exploded back out of her.

They aren’t right, they aren’t... I know what happened. I do... he’s not what they say he is...

Was he?

“The girl. She means nothing to me.”

Did she really remember things the way they happened?

“She’s just a cover story.”

Had he really been her protector? Or had she just been an expendable asset? Why had he kept her from falling down the shaft? He’d lunged out through a hail of bullets to catch her belt and keep her from dying... *why?*

“Now just ain’t the time.”

Maybe she’d never known him at all.

Jack wiped at her eyes again and flushed the toilet, sniffing as she climbed to her feet. She headed over to the sink, still sniffing, and began to rinse her mouth out.

“Stacey’s gonna want to have your baby now.” Kyra’s voice was calm, detached, a hint of amusement in it but no mockery.

Jack glanced up and saw her leaning against the wall, arms folded. “I, uh, didn’t hear you come in.”

“Yeah, well, Doc Adams figured since we’re roomies I should check and see if you’re okay. You really knew Riddick?”

Jack nodded, spitting water into the sink.

“So you know, I wasn’t kidding about Stacey. She practically *worships* Riddick. Got pictures of him up on her wall, along with about a dozen other killers she has the hots for. She’s probably gonna want to hear all kinds of details about him.”

“He’s not what people think,” Jack managed, and filled her mouth with water again.

“So, were you two, like…” Kyra gave an illustrative jerk of her hips. “Close?”

Why the fuck does everybody think he’s a child-molester?

“Ewww, *no!* He would *never* do that. He’s my *friend!*”

“Stacey’s gonna be disappointed when she hears that. But hey, whatever. So he’s pretty cool? Where is he now?”

Jack closed her eyes. “I… don’t know.”

“Yeah.” Now there was mockery in Kyra’s voice. “You two are *real* close friends.”

Pain speared through Jack’s chest. She didn’t open her eyes until she heard the bathroom door shut behind Kyra.

10.

Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing

Riddick's hand gently stroked Jack's cheek, the caress sending shivers through her. She looked up, meeting his concerned gaze.

"I thought I was never going to see you again," she told him, unable to keep some of the hurt out of her voice. "I thought you didn't like me."

Silver eyes gleamed as Riddick shook his head in the dim room. "Not true. I went away because I thought I was bad for you. Obviously I was wrong. Jack, I'm sorry. I should have stayed."

He gathered her into his arms and she rested her head on the firm strength of his chest, listening to his slow, steady heartbeat. "It's okay. You're here now. We can make up for lost time."

"Yeah, we can." There was something new in his voice, a tone she'd never heard before. She tilted her head back to look at him and was startled at the feel of his lips on hers. He lowered her onto his huge, silky bed even as she realized what was happening and put her arms around him.

Nothing in her whole life had ever felt so exquisite. She closed her eyes and basked in the taste and feel of his mouth, exploring the strong muscles of his back even as *he* began to explore her, his hands slipping under her shirt. Her nipples hardened in response to his caresses and her heartbeat began to quicken. His hands were everywhere drawing her towards a delicious release and—

Jack's eyes snapped open and she gasped.

The dull blue of her wall greeted her and she stared at it in confusion. Where had Riddick gone? Where was he?

From behind her, she heard Kyra's derisive snort. Confusion fled, replaced by hot embarrassment. She stayed still, pretending that she'd fallen back asleep, as the other girl moved around. After a moment, the door to their room opened and closed.

Fuck. I hope I didn't talk in my sleep or anything... Avoidance had become her main method of dealing with Kyra and her friends.

It hadn't been an easy few weeks since her explosion in Group, even *before* the dreams began. She wasn't even sure why she was having them. Okay, yeah, she'd had a huge crush on Riddick back on the planet; who wouldn't have? But he'd never encouraged it or anything, and he'd certainly never done anything to fuel her fantasies. If anything, his abandonment of her ought to have quashed them forever.

She'd thought it had. Certainly all of the dreams she'd had in Imam's house had been about loss. They'd starred her father, her mother, Shazza, Fry, Riddick... even, sometimes, Imam. She'd lived for months in a desolate dreamscape until its darkness became so pervasive that it seemed to shadow her waking hours as well. But those dreams, which had

followed her to the hospital, had receded in the last month and now she almost never had them.

Instead she had *these* dreams, which left her breathless and blushing and unable to face her roommate.

She glanced over at the clock and decided that the Killers Club girls were probably done with the bathroom by now, and she could shower. It wasn't that she couldn't go in before then, or anything; on the contrary, Stacey was dying to corner her for details about Riddick and she knew it. But the girls made her profoundly uncomfortable and she always felt like they were sizing up her hamstrings when she ran into them. Better to just give them a miss whenever possible. She was proud of how well she managed that, given that she bunked with one of them.

Jack climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom, pausing by the door and listening, just to be sure.

"...ohhhhhhhhhh... *Riddick*... ohhhhhhhhhhhh..." Kyra's voice was raised in a breathless imitation of hers.

Shit.

"I *knew* it!" Stacey crowed on the other side of the door. "Little ho-bag won't admit it but she *did* fuck him!"

"Oh *please*." That was Colette. Yeah, the whole Killer's Club was probably still in the bathroom. "I don't believe it for a second. You've read all about him, Stace. What would he want with a scrawny little brat like her?"

"You heard Adams," Kyra answered. "She was his hostage. Probably it was just a convenience thing, you know? She didn't fight back much so she was the easiest one to take along with him. Easy to control, willing..."

The voices were approaching the door.

Jack hurried down the hall and ducked around the corner. They'd be heading in the opposite direction, for the community room before breakfast.

*Fuck, I hate this. I hate this place. Everything here is **shit**...* She closed her eyes and rubbed at her forehead.

"Hiding from Kyra's crew?"

Jack's eyes snapped open again. Heather was standing in front of her, her expression sympathetic. In the last few weeks, she'd aided and abetted Jack's deliberate avoidance of the Club, running subtle, and not-so-subtle, interference between them.

*Okay, not **everything** here is *shit*.*

"Yeah," she answered, giving Heather a rueful grin. "I'm popular bathroom talk for them."

Heather wrinkled her nose and put her arm around Jack's shoulders. "Yeah, I heard. Idiots. So you have a crush on the guy and dream about him. That doesn't mean you two really did the deed. I mean, if I had a dream about flying, blue-blooded, hammerhead sharks, that still wouldn't make them real, you know?"

Jack blinked and almost choked. "Um, no, it wouldn't."

"It's just gossip, you know? They're acting like he's a rock star. It'll pass."

"Not if tonight's Group is anything like the last few," Jack groaned.

In her second Group session, Adams had tried to get her to open up again, and several girls who wanted juicy details had tried to help him back her into a corner. She'd ended up

heaving in the bathroom *again*, and dreading Group so much that, a week ago, she'd hidden rather than go to it. The whole session had ended up being turned into a search for her. By the time she'd crawled out of her hidey hole, the entire hospital was seeking her and she'd ended up in front of the administrators. She was *not* looking forward to being the pick-on girl again tonight.

"Oh, don't you worry, I have an idea about that." There was suppressed laughter in Heather's voice.

"Oh? What?" Jack reached into her chosen shower stall and turned on the water, letting it heat up while she undressed. Heather was stripping down beside her, now audibly chuckling.

"You have any idea how pissed off Celia is that you've been hogging all the attention?"

"I'm not—"

"You know that and I know that, but to a drama queen like her, you've *got* to be doing it on purpose. She's just *dying* to get back into the spotlight. So I figure if, when the session starts, I tell Adams I'm *worried* about her... she'll launch into one of her dramas and monopolize the whole thing. And that gives you a break."

Jack gave Heather a grateful smile before she stepped under the water. "Thanks. I really need that. I'm sick to death of everybody wanting me to talk about him."

"No problem. I just don't want to have to hunt for you all over the floor again." Heather started chuckling again, gesturing upward. "I still can't believe you got up into the false ceiling and managed to stay up there. What do you weigh, five pounds?"

Heather had actually been in the bathroom when Jack had finally emerged from her hiding place, and had collapsed in helpless laughter that still hadn't let up when the orderlies had escorted Jack away to see the hospital Administrator, who didn't care that she felt bullied at the sessions by Dr. Adams.

"He's just trying to help you, Jack," he'd told her. "You aren't willing to talk in the individual sessions. At least there you seem to be making some progress towards accepting what really happened to you."

"What *really happened* to me? You don't even know! I don't have *Stockholm Syndrome*, okay? Riddick never hurt me and he never *would*, and you'd *know* that if you saw the video of what really happened! And if Dr. Adams tries to talk about it again, next time you won't be able to find me at *all*!"

That had earned her a night in isolation. She'd retaliated by refusing to speak at all during her next private therapy sessions, not even bothering to look at her doctor.

Heather stuck with her through breakfast, deliberately controlling the conversation at their table so that Jack could eat in peace. Jack had heard a lot of comments, in the last week or two, about Heather's apparent transformation, from an aloof and taciturn individual to a much more vibrant, outgoing person. They said her meds seemed to be helping her open up a great deal, and that she'd probably be transferred to B Ward soon. Jack was going to miss her terribly when she went, but she had to wonder if it was really the meds, or something else. Heather was *very* protective of her, and most of her social behavior seemed to be focused in that direction.

It puzzled Jack a little to realize that it was a pattern she'd witnessed her whole life. From the time Matty McDaniels had stood up to the playground bullies for her when she was five, to now, it seemed like there was a steady stream of protectors, and would-be protectors, in

her life. Even Riddick had taken on that role for a while. Did something about her just bring that out in people?

Her cousin Rachel had once told her it was her big eyes and the trapped-fawn look she'd get when she was startled or worried. People tended to look at her and assume she was helpless.

Am I? Am I really helpless? Most of the time she didn't feel that way. Most of the time, she felt like she ought to be *helping* other people, not being helped *by* them.

That was how it had felt to be Audrey, anyway. *I want to be her again...*

The other girls were rising from the table. Breakfast was over. Jack glanced down and noticed that she'd cleaned her plate. She got up and followed Heather out of the dining hall, the two of them heading for the library room. In the last two weeks, Jack had earned computer privileges and had begun using them to catch up on her schoolwork, and on events throughout the colony worlds.

She was reading the latest news about civil rights conflicts on Stradivari when Kyra came in.

"You know, I always knew you were weird, but I didn't know you were *this* weird."

Jack glanced over at her, surprised and trying to figure out how reading in a library would be a sign of weirdness. "Huh?"

Kyra's eyes were dancing with amusement as she leaned against the wall. Jack had never seen her look like this. "There's a guy here to see you. A guy in a *dress* who says his name is 'Elly Mom.'"

It took a moment for that to sink in well enough for Jack to translate it. *Elly Mom? I don't know anybody named El... oh! El Imam!*

She shut down her terminal and gave Heather and Kyra a wry grin, heading for the visitation room. Why hadn't he just told Kyra he was her "Uncle Abu?" That was what he'd had her call him for the entire three months she'd lived in his home, after all. She'd almost forgotten that once upon a time, he'd been "Imam" to her... and Fry, who had sometimes seemed to have some real hearing problems, had called him "Elmo."

The visitation room had pretty strict security, on par with the sorts of rooms Jack had seen in prison movies. A series of small booths were ranged in front of a heavy steelglass wall, each soundproofed for privacy and confidentiality. Jack was led to one by an orderly and sat down at the desk inside, slipping on the comm headset. Through the glass, she could see Imam, looking a little uncomfortable in his institutional chair.

"Uncle Abu," she said by way of greeting.

"Jack." His voice was reserved, more reserved than she'd ever heard.

She blinked, thrown. From the first time she'd met him, he'd been such a *warm* person. Now she felt like she'd been struck by a cold wind. "It's uh... good to see you. How's everybody at home?"

"We are well," he replied stiffly, "now."

What does that mean? Jack took a deep breath and reached for an affectionate smile. "It's good to see you—"

"This is not a social call, Jack," he interrupted her, his voice stern. "I am here because you are causing trouble."

Uhhhh...

“Look, I know that hiding out in the ceiling was kind of extreme, but you have no idea what those sessions were like—”

“*Jack.*” The expression of fury on Imam’s face was shocking. It turned him into a stranger. No wonder he hadn’t called himself Uncle Abu; no one by that name was here.

“Yeah?” Her voice came out as a tiny squeak.

“I do not know what you are talking about, nor do I care. My concern is the things you have been saying about Mr. Riddick.”

What?

“But... they were saying all these *lies* about him.”

“*Listen* to me, Jack. For *once*, listen to me.” The only time either of her parents had looked at her like this was when she’d broken her grandmother’s priceless 20th Century Limoges vase. Even *Alvin* had never looked at her like this.

“O...okay...”

“It is absolutely essential that the authorities continue to believe that we were Mr. Riddick’s unwilling hostages, not his accomplices. The things you are saying cast doubt upon that.”

“But this is all confidential, isn’t it? Doctor-patient—”

“If doctor-patient privilege meant *anything* to these people, how would I even know about what you’ve been saying? *Think*, Jack! The hospital contacted the *Kublai Khan* and asked for a copy of the video recording of Chillingsworth’s murder, so that they could verify the particulars of your story. Fortunately the ship’s new master, Mr. Toombs, has refused to release it to them.”

“Why is that—”

“*Jack!*” he thundered at her, making her jump and almost knock over her chair. “We are very fortunate that it is in Toombs’ interest to have the authorities believe that Riddick, and not you, killed her, and that *he* believes you suffer from Stockholm Syndrome and that was why you defended Riddick. If he ceased to believe that, he would realize that we might know more about Riddick’s current whereabouts than we have said—”

“You know where he is?” Hope and hurt speared through her. Why had they kept that knowledge from her? She’d never have told anyone.

“Yes, I do. I know how to reach him should an emergency arise.”

Oh shit. Riddick’s probably disgusted with me...

“What... what did he say when you told him what happened?” She hoped it wouldn’t be too bad.

“I have not contacted him.”

The hope crashed, leaving behind only the hurt. She’d almost died. She’d tried to kill herself, had almost succeeded, and that wasn’t important enough to tell Riddick about?

That’s not why you did it, is it?

Of course it wasn’t. She’d meant to *die*, not dramatize. But...

It hurt.

“Oh.” She couldn’t bring herself to look at Imam now. The censure in his gaze was overwhelming, and made her feel gauche and worthless.

“If anyone realized that I knew this, Jack, the consequences would be terrible for all of us. They must not know. They must not *suspect*.”

“Yeah, I understand,” she mumbled.

“No, you do not! You do not understand at all! You must stop arguing with the doctors about him. Let them believe what they want to believe—”

“But it’s not true—”

“That is not the point! You have done enough damage already, and you must *stop!*”

“Damage?” What did he mean? What had she done?

His glare left her feeling enfeebled. “You remember my little daughter, Ziza, do you not? Several nights every week, now, she wakes up screaming, from dreams of you floating in a tub of bloody water. At first it was several times every night.”

Oh god... oh god...

“I’m so sorr—”

“I will *not* let those nightmares be compounded by dreams of police invading her home and arresting her father!” Imam’s voice was a thunderous hiss. “So be warned, Jack. If your carelessness results in that happening, I will have no choice. I will tell them where to find him.”

Jack’s whole body felt cold and tingling. “You wouldn’t...”

“I will not let your selfishness destroy my family. If it comes to that, I *will*. And you would, too, if you were in my place.” He rose, his glare still beating down on her. “We are done, Jack. I wish you the best for your future, but I will have no part of it.”

He had swept out of the room before she could get her voice to work.

Afterwards, she wasn’t sure how she got out of the room. Her legs felt numb, wobbly and weak. Somehow she made it back to her bedroom and lay on her bed, unmoving, unthinking, until Kyra came looking for her because it was time for Group.

“You’re not hiding again are— hey, you okay?”

Too lost in her pain, she only barely registered that it was the first time Kyra had ever expressed any concern about her. She nodded, sitting up. Whatever else happened, she didn’t want to talk about it.

“Probably something I ate...”

“You look like shit. You want me to tell Adams you’re sick?”

Jack shook her head and headed for the door. “No, that’d just make even more... trouble...”

It was another dramatic entrance for her, another round of stares and whispers.

“She’s so pale!”

*“Her **lips** are white...”*

Celia let out a loud sigh of disgust and rolled her eyes. Jack headed for Heather’s side, not even noticing that Kyra had continued to walk with her until she sat down and the older girl walked over to her friends.

“Everything okay, Jack?” Dr. Adams, waiting to pounce.

“Yeah, just... my breakfast didn’t agree with me, that’s all.” Heather’s hand, on top of hers, felt *hot*.

“So, Jack, do you think you—”

“Dr. Adams,” Heather broke in. “I think there’s something a little more important right now.”

“Yes, Heather? What would that be?”

“I... hate to be a tattletale but... I’m worried about Celia.”

Thank you, Heather. Thank you...

Jack tuned everything out and just sat quietly, taking advantage of the lack of a spotlight on her. Celia was happy to play along with the diversion, gleefully launching into a list of nightmares and obsessions and palpitations that she was suffering from. Any time the conversation started to wind down, Heather—or, Jack noticed, *Kyra*—would stoke Celia back up. Dr. Adams never got to finish his question.

Celia was still going strong when the session ended and Jack gratefully slipped out of the community room and headed for her bedroom. She was in bed, pretending to be asleep, when *Kyra* came in a while later.

He was waiting for her when she finally fell asleep.

“Riddick!” She flung herself into his arms and hugged him tightly.

“Jack, Jack, Jack...” There was a hint of impatience in his voice. She looked up at him and was shocked to see him frowning at her.

“What is it?”

“You *told*, Jack. You gave me away. You fuckin’ sold me out.”

She stepped back, horrified at the thought. “No! No I didn’t, I promise, I—”

“You did, kid. You sold me out. Now they caught me, and they’re gonna execute me.”

“Oh God, no, Riddick! I promise you I didn’t—” She had to help him!

“Don’t worry, Jack.” He drew out a knife with one hand, his other hand grabbing the back of her neck and pulling her towards him again. “I’m not gonna go to Hell alone.”

“No, Riddick! Please!”

Silver flashed towards her, reflected in the glint of his eyes. Her throat was burning. Burning where he’d slashed it. She choked, gagging on her own blood, trying to catch her breath. She couldn’t breathe... couldn’t breathe... her scream was just a weak gargle—

Screaming. Clutching her throat and screaming.

A crack and the side of her face was stinging. She took a breath and another slap stopped her scream in her mouth.

“Damn it, wake *up*!” *Kyra* was before her, her hand raised to deliver another blow.

Light flooded the room and one of the large orderlies grabbed *Kyra*, pulling her back and away. Another joined him. More people spilled into the room, babbling.

“—going on?”

“She was attacking her roommate. Get the Thorazine.”

No...

Kyra stared up at the ceiling, a look of exasperation on her face, but didn’t fight the large men holding her.

No...

“This time it’ll be back to the D Ward with you—”

“No,” Jack finally managed. “It wasn’t her, it was him!”

The orderlies stared at her, and then at each other.

“Hey, no fuckin’ way, I wasn’t even in here—”

“No, not you... him! Riddick!”

The room fell silent. *Kyra* pulled herself out of the orderlies’ lax grasp and sat back down on her bed.

“Jack?” Heather was beside her. “What happened?”

“He... he said I sold him out and he cut my throat and—”

Heather’s arms were around her. “Shhhhh... it’s okay. It was just a dream. Just a dream...”
Just a dream. No more real than her dreams of Riddick making love to her.

But people believed those were real...

She knew what she needed to do.

Her cousin Rachel had been an expert at theatrical tears, and had taught her how to cry on cue long ago. It was a talent she’d never exploited, until now. It had always seemed *wrong*. But it was exactly what she needed.

“No it *wasn’t*,” she sobbed, letting the real tears, that had been waiting all day, flow out. “It wasn’t! He said he’d do it if I ever told...”

“He said he’d kill you?” That was Kyra. Straight, matter-of-fact, catching on fast.

Jack nodded, sniffing. “Swwhy I didn’t wanna talk about him... he said he’d let us go but only if we never talked about him... and Dr. Adams kept bringing it up and bringing it up and when he finds out he’s gonna do it, he’s gonna hunt me down and do everything he said he’d do to me—”

“Jack!” Heather gave her a little shake. “Calm down. You’re safe here. He can’t get to you here.”

“He will,” she moaned. “He’ll find me and he’ll kill me. Because they made me talk...”

She could feel the way the orderlies were focusing on her every word and knew that they’d be repeated to Dr. Adams and the others.

“It’s okay,” Heather whispered, rubbing her back the way her mother used to. “It’ll be okay. You don’t have to talk about him if you don’t want to.”

“That’s right,” Kyra agreed. “You don’t.”

So the Killer’s Club would be off her back, too. Perfect.

Riddick would be safe. They’d think he’d terrorized her, that she couldn’t possibly be on his side. They wouldn’t question Imam’s story anymore. Riddick would be safe. For his sake, she could tell these lies.

They *were* lies... weren’t they?

11.

No Escaping Life Alive

“I can’t sign this.”

The hospital director frowned at Jack. “Why not? These are your words.”

Jack glanced over the page again, at the twisted, liar’s tale of how Richard Riddick had hunted down and murdered her fellow crash survivors, had overcome her with a combination of seduction and coercion, and had ultimately abandoned her with nothing more than a threat of what would happen if she ever spoke of him. They were *not* her words. She had never said any of this. Someone else had attributed these words to her and had constructed an elaborate fable out of them. There wasn’t a single honest fact anywhere on the page.

But if she said that, things would go right back to where they’d been before Imam’s visit.

Stall, she thought. *Just... stall*.

If she signed this lie, how much harm would it do Riddick? Would a few more murders on his reputation hurt him?

Yes.

His bounty would go up, at the very least, making him a more appealing target to mercs throughout the galaxy. More importantly, the half-share of the bounty, for bringing him in dead rather than alive, would increase proportionately, and might tempt more people to try simply gunning him down. And even if they *did* bring him in alive... there was the issue of what this paper claimed he had done to *her*.

Riddick had never touched her, not in the sense alleged here. He’d never raised a hand against her, and he’d certainly never molested her. Jack had heard enough stories now to know what would happen to him in prison if he returned branded as a child-molester. Those men lived at the bottom of the prison food chain, the targets of the rest of the populace. Imprisonment with *that* on his record might be worse than a death sentence.

She could not sign these papers.

Stall. Stall.

Jack closed her eyes and covered her face for a minute, trying to compose some kind of approach to this that wouldn’t upset the charade altogether.

“I just can’t,” she hedged, playing for time. “Not here. Not like this. It isn’t safe.”

“Jack, you’re perfectly safe. He can’t get to you here. He can’t touch you.”

Here. There was her handle.

“And what about when you release me? You’re gonna just forget all about me but *that’s* when he’ll be waiting. Who’s gonna guard me then?”

“Surely Mr. Al-Walid’s home—”

“Isn’t open to me anymore. What do you think he came here to tell me? I’m a bad influence on his daughter and he won’t take me back in.”

In point of fact he really had said that, more or less. She could blame the loss of that protection for the crumbling of her supposed memory block.

The director blinked and sat back.

Good to know you didn't already know what my conversation with him was about. Did that take you by surprise?

"Dr. Adams had reported that you were unusually subdued after his visit. I understand now. Is that why you could finally admit to what Riddick had really done to you? Because your protection was gone?"

You said it. Not me.

"Yeah, that night I, uh... had this awful dream... and—"

"Yes, that much I knew all about. But Jack, if you sign this document, it will help us catch him."

That's what I'm afraid of. And what's this "us" all of a sudden?

"And what about when he escapes again? He'll know who blabbed and he'll come after me."

"He won't escape."

"He *always* escapes." Jack rolled her eyes. That part was pure truth, too. If anyone was better at escaping than Richard B. Riddick, she didn't know who it was. He'd even beaten several of her father's security systems, earning John MacNamera's grudging admiration.

"That Riddick is really something," he'd said one night at the dinner table. "If there's any kind of hole or back door in a system, he can sniff it out and beat it. I'd want to hire him except for that whole 'cold-blooded killer' part of the equation."

She wondered what her father would say if he knew that she'd traveled in Riddick's company. Probably something that would have made her mother scream at him.

"He won't. Not from the *Kublai*—"

"You mean the ship he escaped from almost five months ago?" Jack met the director's eyes squarely, suppressing a smirk as he dropped his gaze in response. "I'm not signing that paper. Not until I'm actually leaving here and I know I'm going to be safe from him. Show it to me then."

The director—Jack realized she'd never bothered to remember his name even though they'd met several times now—stared at her for several long minutes before he finally shrugged. "Very well. Personally I think signing this would help you recover, Jack, but if you insist..."

"I insist."

"All right, you may go." He was punching buttons in his comm even as she got up and left the room. As the door closed, she heard a voice coming through the speaker.

"Toombs."

Son of a bitch. Treacherous bastard! She wondered how much of a cut the director had been offered in exchange for securing her signature.

Not that it was ever going to happen, of course.

Jack let Nurse Raymond walk her back to the security doors, to begin the descent back down to C Level. She looked around as they walked, noticing for the first time that this floor of the hospital was apparently above-ground. It looked like mid-autumn outside, or what passed for autumn in this arid climate. That made sense. She'd made her attempt on her life

one week after classes began at that ghastly school Uncle Abu had picked for her. All girls, and half of them in burkhas. She'd found herself in *remedial* classes, fergodsake, because she couldn't speak Arabic very well. And all that time, only a few blocks away, there had been *normal* schools, where the kids spoke English and wore jeans—

Bastard. Bastard...

Glancing around as they approached the door, Jack realized that this was the first time she'd been up here with a level head. Her prior visits were blurs of rage and anguish. She hadn't really looked around much. Down the hall, on the other side of a security-glass door, she could see a girl and her parents. The girl, a mass of tattoos, piercings, and attitude that Jack could see from fifty feet away, was ignoring her parents as they filled out forms. *New arrival. Gotta be. Wonder where she'll land?*

The familiar sound of musically-tuned keys brought her attention back to the Ward security door.

The very familiar sound...

Jack felt her heart skip and then speed up. She let Nurse Raymond gesture her through and down the stairs, more alert than ever. They went through the A Ward doors, and she could feel her blood rising. The pounding of her heart only eased as Raymond voice-printed their way through the B Ward doors and they continued down.

I can't believe it. I can't believe it.

She'd expected to spend the rest of the day wallowing in a "what will I do then?" agony, over how she'd deflect the director when, several months from now, she checked out of the hospital. Now she knew she wouldn't have to.

The ground floor, and the A Ward, were protected by her father's security systems. Systems she'd learned, backwards and forwards, years ago. Systems whose back doors she knew by heart. Systems that would, for her, roll over and play dead if she told them to.

All she had to do was get herself cleared for A Ward. Once she was there, she could walk out of the hospital and vanish any time she wanted. She could continue the voyage that had been aborted by the crash of the *Hunter-Gratzner*, and nobody would ever be the wiser.

Jack B. Badd could cease to exist. Audrey MacNamera could catch up with her father and pretend that she'd just taken a longer route, rather than a detour through hell.

For the first time since Riddick had vanished, she felt hope surging through her.

All I have to do is graduate to A Ward. All I have to do...

"What happened, did Director Flint give you keys to the city or something?" Heather's sardonic voice cut through her reverie. She blinked and grinned, realizing that she'd been daydreaming in the middle of the C Ward hallway. Nurse Raymond was gone.

"No, but... I did kinda win our argument."

"Oh yeah?" Heather grinned, rubbing her temple.

Jack frowned. Heather had been doing that a *lot* in the past week or so, she realized, with increasing frequency. "You okay?"

"Me?" Heather blinked, then glanced at her hand. "Oh. Headache. Nothing serious."

"You've been getting them a lot lately." Now it was *Jack's* protective instincts surging to the fore. "You talk to the doctors about it?"

Heather nodded, grinning at her. "Yeah. They tell me it's a pretty common side effect of the meds, but it should go away in a few months. No big deal."

Jack wasn't sure why, but the hair on the back of her neck was prickling. She supposed she should be relieved by Heather's words, but she wasn't.

Something's wrong.

She was suddenly angry with herself that she hadn't said anything—asked anything—sooner. She'd noticed the little twinges Heather seemed to get, and noticed them increasing, but this was the first time she'd brought them up. That was taking the whole creed of minding her own business a little *too* far, she thought.

"Wanna go to the library?" Heather seemed to have moved on completely, but Jack noticed that her hand was staying near her temple.

"Yeah, that sounds good." She followed Heather, watching her movements more closely now, and hoped that she was wrong. *Please let me be wrong.*

Until Audrey had been six, her parents had owned a dog named Balto, a large Siberian Husky. Balto had been the sweetest creature on Deckard's World, and he'd been Audrey's best friend.

And he'd been epileptic.

When one of his epileptic attacks had been imminent, Audrey had always *known* somehow. Even before *he* would realize it was coming and begin to whimper because he knew he was going to bite his tongue again, she had known. The knowledge was something she could never explain to her parents, but it would prickle over her as much as an hour in advance. She'd often spend that hour getting him ready, making sure he'd gone outside and done his business, settling him in his dog bed and not letting him leave it, and petting him when he began to cry.

Audrey hadn't been home for the attack that finally killed Balto. She'd been away at school, and it had taken her parents months to get her to stop blaming herself for not being there. Since then, she'd never gotten that spooky sense that would fill her when something inside him *changed*, a harbinger of an organic earthquake that only she could detect.

But Heather was making her feel that way, right now.

Please let me be wrong.

Jack suppressed a shudder and followed her best friend into the library, eyes focused so intently on Heather that she almost walked into a desk.

Heather was digging around through some of the actual, physical books that the center had. C Ward girls weren't cleared for Readers in their rooms—too many components of those that could be used as impromptu weapons. So the hospital had ordered in a special run of "paperbacks," books with soft, turnable paper pages and paper covers, amazingly like the antiques her grandmother had. Most of them were "classics," works of the great literary figures of the 20th and 21st century. Judy Blume. Stephen King. Anne McCaffrey. Douglas Adams.

Jack had checked over the curriculum list at her hometown's high school, in one of her more intrepid moments on the terminals, and had been amused to see that a lot of her recreational reading was on the required reading list for her high school. To make the irony absolute, the "paperbacks" had been produced using wood pulp from Deckard's World.

"There we go," Heather said, pulling a book off of one of the shelves. *Hatter Fox*, the cover read in large, bold letters, above a picture of a girl who looked even more feral and dangerous than Kyra. "This is a good one."

“We gonna read in your room?” Jack grabbed a random Lois Duncan off of the shelf, not even glancing at the title.

Heather gave her a funny look, maybe sensing the change in her behavior. Jack wished she could explain without sounding like a complete head-case. “Sure, we can do that.”

They walked over to the book-scanner, running their selections through and inputting their personal codes. Books checked out, they headed back out of the library, nodding at the orderly on duty by the door.

“So,” Heather said after a moment. “*Killing Mr. Griffin*, huh? You read it before?”

“No, is it good?” Jack glanced down at the book, surprised that something with such a violent-sounding title would have been allowed into the ward.

“Yeah. Pretty good. Funny, you’d make a good Susan McConnell.”

“Who?”

“The book’s heroine,” Heather explained, grinning. “She’s a lot like you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Stacey’s voice came from behind them. “She’s a weakling and a snitch.”

Jack blinked and looked behind her. Stacey, Colette, and Kyra were coming out of the bathroom. Stacey’s eyes were smoldering with resentment, Colette looked amused, and Kyra’s face was a complete deadpan.

“I’m not a snitch,” Jack found herself protesting.

“That’s why you were up in Flint’s office, huh?” Stacey’s hands balled into fists.

“*Oh*. That.” She’d forgotten that Riddick was one of Stacey’s personal heroes. “Yeah, he wanted me to sign something about Riddick and I told him no way. I don’t think he’s happy with me.”

Stacey blinked in surprise. “You didn’t sign it?”

“Please. I’m not a complete idiot.” Jack found she was even more glad than ever that she’d refused the director.

“Good.” Stacey began to pass her, deliberately invading her personal space. Jack stood her ground, meeting the girl’s ferocious eyes. “You better not, too. ’Cause snitches get stitches.”

Then the blonde girl was past her, Colette following. She met the heavier, dark-haired girl’s malicious smirk with a calm expression, and then Kyra was passing. *She* flashed Jack a sardonic, sympathetic little hint of a smile, there and gone before her friends could see it.

What the...?

Had she imagined that? Or had she really seen it? She wasn’t sure.

“Well, that was refreshing.” Heather put her hand on Jack’s shoulder. “And don’t worry, Susan’s no snitch, she’s just got your kind of conscience. You’re gonna en—”

The hand on her shoulder suddenly clamped down hard, shaking Jack out of her momentary stupor. The sense of unease that had been with her since Heather walked up to her spiked and turned into pure terror.

Heather’s head tilted to the side, her expression a rictus of fear and agony. A high, strange, rattling whine escaped her throat.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck! Jack reached out, trying to catch hold of Heather, as the girl’s body began to writhe and buck.

They were falling.

Jack twisted so that she'd hit the floor first, Heather's convulsing body falling on top of her. She struggled to get her arms around Heather, wrestling her over, but the other girl's limbs were spasming out of control. A sharp blow struck the side of her head and for a moment she saw gray.

Got her... gotta hold her... She had Heather down on her back.

"*Help!*" she screamed, and heard the sound of footsteps heading for her at a run.

"Somebody *help!*"

Heather's eyes had rolled back. Another horrific groan emerged from her. More hands appeared, holding her down. Jack glanced up and saw Ofra, one of the ward's "quiet crazies," next to her, a grim and determined expression on her usually blank face.

"This is Orderly Blevins on C Ward, looks like we have some kind of fight—"

"Jeez, you idiot, you think everything's about fighting around here?" Jack snapped. That was the same orderly that had wanted to tranq Kyra. "Heather's having a seizure, now would you *help me?*"

The man glared at her but put his mic back up to his mouth. "Correction. Medical assistance needed on C Ward. Patient down with convulsions."

More people were gathering, babbling. Jack ignored them, turning her focus back on Heather. A hint of pink foam had gathered in the corner of her mouth, and Jack grimaced as the sudden stink of urine and feces hit her nose. But the convulsions seemed to be easing.

"Heather? Heather, can you hear me?" The girl's eyes were still rolled back. "Heather!"

Beneath her, she could feel a strange tremor pass through Heather's body, and then...

Heather went limp and still.

Too still.

Jack felt as though a rough fist had suddenly clenched around her heart. Heather wasn't breathing.

"Oh fuck! Heather, no, oh god..."

She leaned forward, pulling Heather's mouth open, trying to remember the lifeguard training she'd taken at summer camp two years earlier. She'd only ever done CPR once, and on a dummy. Pinching Heather's nose closed, she pressed her mouth to hers and blew in, tasting blood on her lips.

One, two, blow, now gotta do the chest... She ignored the excited commotion around her as she ripped open the front of Heather's shirt. *Okay, where do I do this? Oh yeah... Okay, one, two—shit!* Beneath her hands she felt something snap.

"Oh god, I think I broke something, somebody please—"

She was being lifted up, away from Heather. "It's okay," a voice said in her ear. "You did fine. The crash team's here, they'll help her now."

Heather vanished beneath a huddle of medical uniforms.

Jack struggled for a second, wanting to move back to her friend's side, before giving up. She glanced back to see who had her and was surprised, anew, to realize it was Kyra. She let her roommate back her up, away from the huddle.

"That was some fast thinking," Kyra said, a hint of approval in her voice. "Here I thought you'd be the type to go to pieces in a crisis."

"She stopped breathing," Jack answered, still stuck on that.

Kyra nodded, frowning. “I’ve seen her have freak-outs before. She never had one like that. Isn’t she on some new experimental treatment?”

Was she? Jack couldn’t remember. She couldn’t *think*.

“I’m getting nothing,” one of the orderlies said. “We’d better get her upstairs.”

They were lifting Heather’s still form onto a gurney and wheeling her down the hall. Jack watched, feeling as helpless as she had back on that planet, as her friend vanished into the emergency elevator. One of the remaining orderlies walked over to her.

“Looks like you’re going to have a black eye, Jack. You want me to get you something for the pain?”

“Huh?”

“Heather must’ve clocked you a good one,” Kyra commented. “You didn’t even feel it, did you?”

“Wait right here, I’ll get you some meds and an ice pack.” The orderly—Jack finally noticed enough to realize it was the one who had been watching the library—smiled at her and walked off. Carmouche, that was his name. She hadn’t paid attention to the names of many of the orderlies, but he was always nice to her.

A second later, her knees gave out.

“Whoa, easy.” Kyra caught her and eased her to the floor. “You gonna pass out or anything?”

Jack shook her head a little and winced as the pain around her eye throbbed into virulent life. She let Kyra push her backwards until she was half sitting, half leaning against the wall. “I’ll be okay.”

Carmouche was heading back over to them, carrying a tray. He knelt down beside her and held out a paper cup with two pills in it. “This is for the pain.”

Jack took the cup and tossed the pills into her mouth, accepting a small cup of water to swallow them down. He handed her the ice pack next, which she gingerly applied to the side of her face.

Ow... okay, that’s starting to feel a little better...

“*Station One, this is the infirmary, come back.*” A voice crackled over Carmouche’s comm.

“This is Station One. Go ahead.”

“Stand by, you’re going to be admitting a van from the Medical Examiner’s office in a few minutes. We have a DOA here—”

The hard fist was back around Jack’s heart, squeezing it.

“Shit, Carmouche, turn that thing off!” Kyra shouted.

Gray swam over Jack’s vision as she watched, with her one good eye, Carmouche scrambling to shut off his comm. The last thing that she heard, as the gray turned to black, was Heather’s name being spoken over it.

12.

Darkness With a Heart

A bell rang. Jack ignored it.

“Jack.”

She ignored that, too.

“Hey, Jack.”

She curled inward and huddled against her pillow.

“Oh, fuck it.”

She heard Kyra leave the room, closing the door behind her. A long, gray time passed and the door opened again.

“Okay, Jackie.” That was Nurse Raymond’s voice. “If Mohammad won’t go to her lunch, her lunch will come to her.”

She heard Nurse Raymond come over to her and the sounds of a tray being set down and arranged.

“Not... hungry.”

“Oh, no you don’t. We let you get away with that yesterday. Today you eat.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“Tough, kid.” Dry humor entered Raymond’s voice. “You didn’t let me get in trouble for not giving you the tour. Are you gonna let me get in trouble for starving you?”

For a moment, Jack almost felt a smile creeping onto her face. Then the pain struck her again. Heather was dead. Heather was *dead*.

I lose everybody I care about...

She turned over, sighing. Fighting did no good around here. She had no appetite but apparently that didn’t count for shit—

“Soup?”

Raymond smiled kindly. “Broth. Easier on you right now, I figured.”

Well, what the hell, right? Maybe this woman actually had something akin to a clue.

Jack sat up and accepted the mug. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

It was a weirdly civilized interchange. Somehow it had seemed to Jack as if social niceties were some of the things that ought to have mysteriously vanished. Everything felt raw to her, like the world of “please” and “thank you” should be far, far away. Yet there it was.

She sipped the broth slowly, vaguely aware that it was warm but unable to taste it. Raymond didn’t try to force conversation on her while she drank, and just sat quietly beside her bed. Finally Jack was done and set the cup down on the tray.

“That’s very good,” Raymond told her. “Now, tonight I want you to get up and come to the dining room for dinner, all right? If you just want more broth again, that’s fine, but please come there on your own.”

Jack sighed and nodded. She was aware of the threat Raymond was trying very hard not to make, that if she didn't begin eating on her own power again they'd have to force-feed her.

"I'll be back in a while to check on you, okay? Is there anything you need?"

"No," Jack sighed. "I'm fine. Thank you."

Raymond gave her a dubious look, clearly not buying her reassurance at all, but didn't push it. Instead, she carried the tray to the door. "See you in a little while, Jackie."

Jack nodded and waved as the nurse left the room, and then lay back down on her bed. There were two books lying on the little table beside her, she suddenly noticed. Reaching out, she picked them up, and felt her throat tighten. *Killing Mr. Griffin* and *Hatter Fox*, the "classics" she and Heather had checked out of the library just moments before everything went to hell.

She began thumbing idly through the first book.

There was a slight pause. Then Mark said, "Nobody wanted to miss watching you die."

Jack shuddered and flipped forward, as fast as she could, away from that eerie, sickening passage.

It hardly mattered. The cold gripping her came from within and no layer of outer clothing would ever alleviate it.

Jack swallowed and looked harder at the page. "She" was Susan, the girl Heather had said was a lot like her. *God yeah, a lot like me. That's exactly how I feel...*

She flipped again.

Susan closed her eyes. When I open them, she told herself, this whole room will have vanished and this dreadful woman with it. Ten years will have gone by, and I will be grown and far away in my private cabin on the shore of a lake. I will look out through my fine window onto deep, calm green, with millions of tiny ripples shining and sparkling in the sunlight, and a breeze will come, clean and sweet across the water, smelling of pine trees. I will think back and ask myself, where was I ten years ago. What was I doing? What was I feeling? And I won't even remember.

Jack closed the book. Heather had been right. Susan *was* a lot like her. And that cabin, that lake... John MacNamera had taken his wife and daughter to one much like that, maybe a year before Audrey's parents had split up. Deckard's World was full of woodsy places like that, lakes and rivers and mountains and little cabins. Closing her eyes, Jack conjured back that memory, of being Audrey, happy and secure, all right in the world and with her family, offering a handful of her father's fishing bait to the large turtle she'd encountered by the shore.

Ten years from now, she promised herself, I'll be Audrey again and all of this won't even be a bad memory. All of this will be forgotten as if it never happened. As if Jack... and

Riddick... never existed.

Heather's face swam before her eyes for a moment and she wiped away tears. Part of her wanted to forget the yawning hole Heather's death had left within her, more than anything, but part of her felt like that would be the ultimate treachery.

She set down *Killing Mr. Griffin*—there was no way she could read it now—and picked up Heather's book. *Hatter Fox*, with the girl on the cover who looked even more primally dangerous than Kyra. Would this one be safe to read? She flipped to the last page.

I miss her... I miss her... I miss her...

Oh god...

The book practically leapt out of her hands, flying across the room, and Jack collapsed on her bed. Huge sobs wracked her body and she pressed her face hard into her pillow to muffle them.

The door to her room creaked. She could only just barely hear voices over the sound of her anguish, and couldn't make out who they belonged to.

"Jesus."

"Look, you guys just go on. I'll be there in a bit, okay?"

"But you'll miss the part where he sky-dives off the bridge—"

"I'll see it another time. You guys go on."

The door closed. Through her misery, Jack knew that she wasn't alone again; someone had stayed.

Her sobs were easing. She could hear someone moving around and then the sound of something being put on her bedside table. Whoever it was, she realized, had picked up the books for her. Her springs creaked and the mattress down by her feet sank as someone sat down on the foot of her bed.

Guess I'd better face the music.

She expected to turn over and see Nurse Raymond, or maybe one of the orderlies, watching her. Instead, she found herself pinned by Kyra's slate-blue gaze. There was no mockery or belligerence in the older girl's expression. If anything, there was something a bit sad in it.

"Here," Kyra said, and held out the last of a roll of toilet paper.

Jack sat up, sniffled, and accepted the offering, rolling some paper off to wipe her eyes and nose with. "Th...thanks."

"No problem." Kyra's voice was noncommittal, carefully so. "Nice to see you finally moving around."

That almost surprised a smile out of Jack. She'd lain like the dead for more than a day, she suddenly realized, while Kyra had come and gone and had periodically spoken to her. For the life of her, she couldn't remember any of the things the other girl had said.

"Yeah, um..." Jack drew in a shuddering breath. Her voice was completely unsteady. She wiped at her eyes again. "I think they'd start force-feeding me or something soon if I didn't get up."

"Probably." Kyra sounded amused, but not in a hostile or mocking way. "And you should probably take a shower soon, too."

Jack nodded, wiping her nose again. “Yeah... sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Heather was really cool... and I know you two were close.” Kyra’s tone sounded awkward, almost hesitant. “How’s your eye?”

Jack hadn’t even remembered, until that moment, that her left eye was bruised. She gingerly touched the tender flesh. The swelling had begun to go down, but it was still sensitive. “It’s okay, I guess.”

“Good.” Kyra still looked very uncomfortable. “You know... when I first got here, Heather was my roommate.”

Jack blinked, startled. Heather had never mentioned that, the few times they’d talked about the hospital or the other girls in it. “She was?”

“Yeah.” Kyra scooted back on the bed, leaning against the wall. Now she seemed more relaxed. “Down in D Ward. I’d just been transferred here, and she’d been checked in about a week before me. You’re not supposed to have roommates down there, but things were overcrowded, so they bunked us in with each other.”

“What was she like?” Jack was having a hard time picturing Heather needing to be in D Ward.

“She was pretty messed up back then.” A wry smile touched Kyra’s lips. “They were trying all kinds of meds with her to control her episodes, but nothing was working. One or two even made them worse. Between episodes, though, she was cool. Like she was up here.”

“Were you friends?” As far as she knew, Kyra and Heather hadn’t spent any time together up on C Ward; they’d moved in very different circles.

Kyra shrugged. “I guess. Yeah. We were. I don’t remember a lot about that time. There’s a lot missing.”

Jack watched, her own anguish forgotten, as Kyra frowned and then winced. She waited for Kyra to continue speaking.

“They tell me the doctors on New Chris—I mean, New Dartmouth—used electroshock on me. So for the first month or so after the transfer... I don’t remember much. Bits and pieces. Mostly thinking the orderlies were Red Roger’s guys and trying to take ’em out again.” Kyra tried to smile it off, but Jack could see some lingering pain there. “I was really messed up. In and out of isolation, and when I wasn’t in Iso, Heather was... so for a while we barely knew anyone was sharing a room with us. Until we started getting better.”

Jack realized she couldn’t really comprehend it. From the sound of it, even if Kyra had escaped the fate that Red Roger and his men had doled out to most of New Christy’s women, she’d been *psychologically* raped by the authorities once she’d been caught. The only time Jack had ever experienced hallucinations was once, when she was nine, and a new variant of ’Enza had come to Deckard’s World. It was an entirely inadequate comparison, and in spite of herself, she was fascinated, wondering what it would be like to have seen the things Kyra had seen, what it would be like to be ruled by those sorts of nightmares. Her sniffles had finally stopped, forgotten.

“So then you became friends?”

“I guess, yeah. Not much else to do but talk. *Everything* is restricted down there. If you behave you can leave your room and walk around a little, maybe watch some vids... but it’s a really dead place. So we talked a lot. The Killer’s Club was her idea.”

That almost knocked Jack over. She stared at Kyra in shock.

A slow, almost impish grin spread over Kyra's face. She nodded at Jack and then reached over and pushed her mouth closed.

"No way. You have *got* to be kidding me."

Kyra smirked. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"Well, every time she talked about it, she made it pretty clear she didn't—" Crap. She couldn't say that.

"She didn't like the club. Yeah." Kyra leaned back against the wall and ran her fingers through her hair. Jack was suddenly reminded, powerfully, of Shazza's long tresses. For a moment, she could almost see the wild-haired New Australian woman sitting next to her in place of Kyra.

She blinked and shook her head, and the drift of illusion was gone.

Kyra was playing with a lock of her hair, twisting it slowly around her finger. "She first started it because she had this idea it'd help me, and maybe help her, too. We'd both killed people. I'd meant to do it. She'd done it by accident during one of her attacks. She thought it'd be nice for us to make some kind of support group, since almost nobody else understood what it was we'd done."

Jack watched as Kyra held out her hand in front of her, seemingly entranced by her own fingers. Slowly, she closed them into a fist. Jack could almost feel them closing around life itself, extinguishing it.

"What it was like to take a life," Kyra continued, staring at her fist.

Even Riddick, Jack suddenly thought, had never seemed quite so frightening as Kyra did in this moment. Maybe that was just because, at that time, she still hadn't understood the true brutality of that way of living.

Kyra glanced over at Jack. A corner of her mouth twitched up in what might have been a smirk, but whether she was mocking Jack or herself was unclear. "She figured we could get over it and move on and put it all behind us, and I guess maybe that worked for her okay, because she wasn't exactly *in* her right mind when she scragged those picnickers... but it wasn't the same for me. I knew what I was doing. I'd do it again. If possible, I'd do it even slower and more painful than I did it the first time."

Jack swallowed and tried to hide the shudder that was moving through her at those words. *Just remember, she admonished herself, Kyra lived through the New Christy Massacre. If you watched someone kill your whole family, you'd probably say the same things about them...*

Would she, though? Antonia Chillingsworth had hung her from a ceiling and loosed *Shrylls* on her. Within the twelve-hour period leading up to that woman's death, Jack had been kicked in the back, cut with a huge knife, had a gun put to her head, hung, almost fed to a Class 1 Hostile Xeno, chased down by *another* species of Class 1, shot at, and strangled. So how come she felt so *guilty* for killing her?

Because he left me. The thought was like a punch in the stomach. *I lose everybody I love...*

Riddick hadn't even said good-bye, making his abandonment even worse than her father's.

The day her father had told her he was leaving was still carved into her mind. She'd thought things were going so well, and that a reconciliation was just around the bend. Her mother seemed to *need* him again, and only the day before she'd come home from school to find them talking companionably in the living room. But then it had all shattered, and she still didn't know why.

“Audrey,” he’d told her, as they walked back from the town square, ice cream cones in their hands. “I’ve got something I need to tell you. I’m re-enlisting.”

She’d looked up at her father in confusion, not understanding at first what he meant. He’d discharged from the Corps of Engineers a year before her birth. Finally it dawned on her.

“You’re going back into the Service? Why?”

He’d started to say something and then had stopped himself. Anyone else might have been fooled and not realized he’d changed direction, but he couldn’t fool his own daughter. “They need people with my training, and... I need to do something meaningful.”

“Why, the security systems aren’t?” She’d loved playing with her father’s schematics and knew them by heart. Sometimes, in the last year or two, she’d even helped him with them; it was the only way he’d been able to squeeze in his visitation time.

“It’s not that. It’s just... things have changed a lot, Audrey. You’ll understand, soon.”

*She always hated it when grown-ups said that to her. It always meant they had no intention of even **trying** to explain themselves. That was when it struck her what he was **really** saying.*

*“You’re going off-planet, aren’t you? You’re **leaving**! You’re leaving us!”*

It was the first time she’d ever seen that look of anguish on her father’s face, that look of vulnerability, and it almost shattered her. John MacNamera was supposed to be invincible.

“I’m sorry, Audrey.”

*It was tempting to fling her ice cream cone to the ground and run off, but she managed not to. She wasn’t a little girl anymore; she couldn’t just throw a tantrum, as much as she might want to, and she knew that one wouldn’t do a bit of good. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and tried to make herself be an **adult** about it. “Where are you going?”*

“I’m being posted to Caldera Base.”

*“The **Caldera**?” The urge to throw a tantrum was back, worse than ever. “That’s on Furya! That’s half a **year** away by Star Jump!”*

*He was leaving. He was leaving and she wouldn’t get to see him anymore, and he wasn’t even going to tell her **why**.*

“They need engineers there, Audrey. Good ones. There’s still a lot of rebuilding work to do. The population’s starting to recover from the Diaspora, but they can’t do it without help.” He turned and locked gazes with her. “I can’t turn away from people who need help.”

*He had her there. It was the same way **she** felt a lot of the time. Her mother had called the two of them her “matched set of activists,” back when she’d still called John MacNamera **her** anything. He had to go where he was needed.*

*But what about **her**? She needed him more than anyone.*

“It won’t be forever, Audrey. You’ll understand, soon, why it has to be this way.”

*And she had, sooner than she’d liked. It was only a few days after their tearful goodbyes at the spaceport when she came home to find Alvin in her living room, her mother’s hand in his, and had known the **real** score, too late to demand to go with her father—*

“Hey. Jack? You awake in there?”

Jack blinked and looked up. Kyra was leaning over her, almost in her face, looking a little annoyed. “Yeah. I’m sorry. I just... I started thinking about what it’d be like to have something like that happen to my family.”

Kyra’s expression eased. She sat back, a wry grin playing over her face. “Oh, I’ve got a pretty good idea what you’d do.”

She probably thinks I'd run and hide under a bed and cry.

"Heather had a really good idea, though," Kyra continued. "With the support group, I mean. It was pretty cool, for a while. There was this other girl, Doris, down in the D ward at the same time as us, and she'd killed her uncle... bet you can guess why."

Jack swallowed and nodded.

"So we hung out, and we talked about how we had a shot at new lives when we got out of here, shit like that... and then Heather got sent up to C Ward... and I got transferred about a week later... and Doris came up a few weeks after that. And we kept going for a while."

"What changed?" Jack found she was curious in spite of herself.

A funny look crossed Kyra's face. "Stacey and Colette showed up. Hell, Heather was the one who invited them into the group. They'd killed, and all... I guess she figured they needed it too."

Jack tried to contrast Heather—kind, commanding, caretaker Heather—with those two and their deliberate viciousness.

"They like it too much, don't they? They're not looking to 'get better.'"

The gaze Kyra fixed on her was shrewd, almost approving. "Yeah. And they wanted to know all about me. I didn't get why at first. I didn't understand for a long time why Heather stopped coming to the little meeting things we did, why she didn't talk to me anymore if they were around, any of it."

"Why?"

Kyra leaned back against the wall again. "The club was supposed to be about getting over it. Not... comparing notes and discussing technique... and all that. I didn't notice because Stacey and Colette were never anything but nice to *me*, but I get why she wasn't comfortable around them. Well, now I do."

"They idolize you, don't they?"

Kyra looked almost sad for a moment. "Yeah. They do. They want to be just like me when they get out. Like what they think I am, anyway. No wonder Heather didn't want to be around them."

Jack nodded. She never felt comfortable around them either. "So when did you figure it out?"

"When you got here."

Huh?

"Me?"

Kyra smirked a little. "You got here, and Heather just took you over. And I was jealous as hell... and then I realized why she was doing that with you when she stopped doing it with me. She was starting up her version of the Killer's Club again, and this time, she was making sure the people in it were ones who didn't *want* to kill again."

Jack nodded. She hadn't known much about the deaths on Heather's conscience, but she'd known that they'd weighed on her, and—

Wait. Oh. Fuck!

Kyra knew. Kyra knew that her story—the story that *Riddick* really *had* been the one to kill Chillingsworth—was a lie. Kyra knew that *she* 'd done it. The same as Heather apparently had.

Oh fuck!

Had she actually managed to fool *anyone*?

13.

A Lot Like Me, A Lot Like You

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jack made herself say. “I never killed anybody.” The look Kyra turned on her was entirely too knowing. “Yeah, Jack, of course you didn’t.” *Fuck.*

Jack took a deep breath and glanced over at the door. It was closed; they were alone. “How long have you known?”

Kyra shrugged. “If you mean, when did I realize you were lying? The moment you told the lie. See, I saw you that day. That guy visited you and afterwards you looked like one of those zombie-freaks on Colette’s Tuesday night show. White as snow.” She smirked. “And I got to know snow really well in New Christie. Next thing we know, you’re changing your story. Contrary to public belief, I *can* put two and two together.”

“Who else knows?” She hoped *someone* believed her story.

“Far as I know, I’m the only one. I think Heather knew, too. But you seem to have the staff fooled, and that’s the important part, right?”

Jack swallowed, and leaned forward. “Kyra, listen to me. *Nobody* can know the truth. Not the staff, and not anybody else here, not your friends, nobody. If the secret gets out, sooner or later they’ll figure out that—”

“That your guardian knows where he is?” Kyra’s eyes were shrewd. “That’s what it was about, huh?”

God, I hope she knows all this stuff because she’s ridiculously smart.

“Yeah. Kyra, promise me that nobody’s going to find out from you.”

The older girl smirked at her. “Remember what Stacey said the other day? ‘Snitches get stitches.’ You don’t have to worry I’m gonna blab your secrets.”

“What about her? She’s got this whole *thing* for Riddick, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, she does. But she likes the idea that he threatened you even better.”

That made Jack blink. “She does?”

Kyra’s smirk became strangely scornful. “You’ve never seen the porn she hacks off the network. She knows where all of the ‘rape movie’ sites are. There’s nothing she loves more than watching vids of big men hurting little girls. So the idea that Riddick maybe raped you just has her *all* excited.”

Kyra looked away, but not before Jack saw her sneer of disgust.

“You don’t like that about her,” she hazarded.

“I *hate* that about her,” Kyra said after a moment. “You know, I saw a lot of what happened when Roger and his men stormed the enclave. They dragged this ten-year-old girl out into one of the courtyards and these five guys took turns with her. I took out three of them before they zeroed in on me and I had to move. She was crying the whole time...”

For a moment, the dark-haired girl's customary look of savagery was gone. She looked haunted. Vulnerable. *Human*.

"What happened to her?" Jack wasn't sure she wanted to know.

When Kyra spoke again, her voice was as close to tears as Jack had ever heard. "When I was escaping with the others, we had to go through the courtyard. She was still in the center of it. They'd killed her... and they'd... mutilated her body. I think they did it while she was still alive."

"No wonder."

Kyra's eyes flashed up at her. "No wonder what?" The vulnerability was gone, replaced by suspicion.

"No wonder you spent a week paying Roger back."

A shudder passed through Kyra's frame, and their eyes remained locked for a long moment. Jack suddenly realized that she was probably the first person to hear about this since Heather. Colette and Stacey might worship Kyra, she thought, but only her strength and savagery. The fact that her killings had been motivated by pain, and by love, was something they wouldn't be able to respect. They wanted her to be a sadist, because that was what *they* were.

Jack felt like she was inside Kyra's head. She could see it all so clearly, as if it was happening to her. Home and sanctuary turned into a bloody, violated killing field. People she knew and loved screaming, fleeing, trying to fight, overwhelmed by monsters in human form. Trying to save them, feeling each death as if it were her own. Having no choice but to flee, hating herself for not being stronger, more powerful, not being able to single-handedly save the day.

Even holding a gun, even using it to cut down attackers, couldn't have countered the soul-annihilating feelings of helplessness—

"Stop."

Jack came back to herself. "What?"

"Stop it. Don't do that." Kyra's expression was wary, defensive.

"Do what?"

"You know. Don't do it."

"I was just... thinking about what it must have been like. To be at the enclave when all of that was happening."

"I *know* what you were thinking."

"Kyra, I promise you, I don't think you were wrong. What you did, fighting back when they stormed in there, it's—"

"What you would have done, too. I know. But look, just... stop. Okay? I can't think about that stuff for long or..." She looked down at her hands, clenched tightly into fists.

"Or you want to do it all again. I'm sorry. I'll leave it alone." Suddenly what Kyra had said hit her. "You think I'd have done it too? Not wimped out?"

That seemed to be what Kyra needed her to ask. She chuckled, her equilibrium visibly returning. "You didn't wimp out when you were on the *Kublai Khan*. Did you?" She leaned back against the wall, watching Jack with speculative eyes. "You remind me of Kaylee."

"Who?"

“One of the other girls who got away, with me. She’d kept her cool all during the firefight, took out almost as many invaders as I did. But you know, afterward, it all hit her really hard, the way it hit you. She, uh... shot herself about a week after we went into hiding. Kind of a faster version of what you tried to do.”

“She killed herself?” Jack felt her heart twist, and wondered if that was why Kyra had looked at her with scorn when they’d first met.

“No.” Kyra sighed. “She did a number on herself, but it wasn’t fatal. I had to finish her off. Otherwise it was gonna take her hours to die.”

“God, I’m sorry, Kyra.”

Kyra’s smile was a bit forced in response. “How about we change the subject, okay?”

Jack nodded. “So, uh, how do we make sure that Stacey and the others don’t catch on about Riddick?”

Kyra’s smirk was back. “That’s easy. We make her believe what she *wants* to believe anyway.”

“How?”

“Well, you let her corner you, and you tell her all about how Riddick did all kinds of horrible, nasty things to you, and give her something to dream about for months. It’s what she wants to be true anyway. Tell it right and she won’t question it.”

“I can’t, Kyra. If that gets out, he could end up with a reputation as a pedophile and if he goes back to prison with that—”

“*Damn*, Jack. He must really be *something*, the way you keep trying to protect him.” Humor flashed in her eyes. “But don’t worry. Stacey just wants to believe that stuff. She doesn’t want to share it with the world. You know what she said about snitches. Telling anybody would be snitching to her. She just wants to imagine it while she gets off, if Colette isn’t around to get her off.”

Jack stared at Kyra in wonderment. “And here I thought the New Christies were supposed to be sexually repressed or something.”

Kyra shrugged again. “Maybe. I don’t rightly know. I was, what, twelve when it all went wrong. First time I got my period was in the psychiatric ward after they caught me, and I had no idea what the hell it was until they told me. At first I thought I’d just been used by one of the guards or something, like what I’d seen happen to friends of mine. I guess the Fathers thought if I didn’t know about that stuff, I’d stay innocent and pure or something.” She sneered. “I’ve seen what that gets you. And as for God, after what he let them do? I hate the son of a bitch.”

I absolutely believe in God... and I absolutely hate the fucker. Riddick had said that to Imam. It had been one of those times when Jack was deliberately lurking supposedly out of hearing range, listening. Nobody had ever seemed to notice how good her hearing really was, in spite of the fact that it had saved Carolyn Fry’s life... or at least postponed her death. Jack had made a point of being nearby, listening in, whenever important conversations were going on. She’d known by then that adults were going to hide things from her, supposedly for her own good, and that her survival and freedom depended upon knowing what they were up to. Any of them might have gotten it into their heads to abort her journey to Furya, unless she stayed a few steps ahead of them.

It was how she'd learned about the eclipse cycle, how she'd found out that Johns was planning on stiffing Riddick once they left the planet, and how she'd discovered that Johns was planning on offering her up as a Judas Goat to save his own skin. And it was how she'd learned that Riddick felt exactly the same way about God as Kyra.

"You know, you're a lot like him."

"What, I'm a lot like God?" Kyra gave her a joking sneer.

"No, sorry, you're a lot like Riddick. He's got a real hate on for God, too."

The older girl snickered. "Maybe he's my *soul* mate."

Jack found herself chuckling, too. "He's definitely not Stacey's, that's for sure. Seriously, I think he'd like you."

"That'd be pretty wild. Hey, out of curiosity, where'd you learn how to shoot?"

"Huh?"

"Well, you blasted off Shrivelsworth's—"

"Chillingsworth."

"Yeah, her. You blasted her head clean off. You can't tell me that was the first time you'd ever shot a gun."

Jack grinned and shook her head. "My dad taught me. I guess he always wanted a son to go hunting with, but all he got was a daughter who could shoot *clay* pigeons but had hysterics when she killed a *live* one."

"Hmm. Well, you know, I hunted a lot when I was in the mountains after the standoff ended... but that was for food. Survival. You probably could do it without crying if you were hungry enough."

"Maybe," Jack admitted after a moment. "But just running around out there killing for fun? Not my thing. So I stuck to the target range after that. It was one of the things my parents fought about anyway. My mom didn't even want me *handling* a gun."

"Came in handy, though, didn't it?" Kyra's smile was almost approving.

"Yeah. How'd you learn?"

"They started teaching all of us how to use the guns about... oh, a week into the standoff. I think they knew things were going to get bloody." Kyra gave Jack another wry grin, meant to conceal the twist of pain beneath. It almost did, but Jack still felt like she could see beneath the other girl's skin now. "So I went from bulls-eyeing target circles, to blowing off men's heads, to hunting deer and rabbit. One time I got a goose."

Kyra suddenly winced and put her hand over her mouth.

"What?"

"I just realized... I think that was one of the tame geese from the enclave. They'd follow you around if you gave them corn..." Kyra's voice drifted off for a long moment and then she cleared her throat. "Fuck. When I get out of here, somebody's paying for that. You know what I'm gonna do, Jack?"

"No, what?"

As she talked, the distress in her face gave way again to a calm, determined expression. "I'm gonna become a bounty hunter. Gonna go after the kinds of sick shits who do things like in Stacey's vids. If they're lucky, maybe they'll still have their balls when I turn them in for the bounty."

"Oh, Kyra, no."

“Why not?”

It took Jack a moment to compose her thoughts in answer to that. “Look, maybe a lot of bounty hunters *are* good people, I don’t know. But I’ve met a bunch now, and they’re just in it for the money. They’ll use you up for a percentage. Johns—that’s the guy who caught Riddick—he threatened a bunch of little kids to get Riddick to surrender. Killed some of them, too. You don’t want to be with people like that.”

“Well,” Kyra sighed, “it’s either people like them, or something worse, Jack. You may be the type to do the whole domestic life thing, I don’t know... but I already know I’m not. Red Roger took everything I ever knew from me. And he woke up something inside me that these docs can’t get out of me. When I leave here, I know where I’m going to end up, what I’m going to end up doing. I might as well do it in a way that the law won’t come down on me for, you know?”

“It’s just such a bad idea, Kyra. There are other things you could do. Military, or security, or something, but becoming a merc—”

“Military won’t take me, I already checked on that. Nobody wants the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain in their ranks *except* merc outfits. Don’t worry about it, though. I know the score. I’ll be careful.”

“Don’t trust any of them.”

Kyra gave her a mocking smile, but there was no hostility in it. “Jack, *I* don’t trust *anybody*.”

Someone knocked on the door at that moment. It opened, and Nurse Raymond stepped in. Her eyes and smile widened as she entered.

“Well, look who’s up! I guess that broth did the trick, didn’t it?”

Something sure had, Jack thought. She glanced over at her roommate and felt like a secret smile, visible only to the two of them, passed between them.

“Yeah, I’m feeling better, I guess.”

It still hurt. She dreaded going to the dining room and seeing Heather’s painfully empty seat. But she felt a lot stronger now, and she knew who to thank for it.

“Much better. Thank you.”

14.

The Dark Side of the Soul

Dinnertime, Jack knew, was not going to be easy.

She was dreading walking into the dining hall and seeing Heather's empty seat. She was dreading sitting close to it. Although her talk with Kyra had helped her feel a little bit better about what had happened, she knew that confronting this particular proof of Heather's absence from the world was going to hurt like hell.

Kyra must have known it, too. Jack could feel the older girl's eyes on her as she entered the dining room.

Okay, deep breath. Let's— oh, you little bitch.

Two seats were vacant at Jack's table: hers, and Celia's. Celia was sitting in the spot that had belonged to Heather.

The chatter in the room went completely silent as she approached the table, her eyes fixed on the little drama queen. She could see Celia getting paler as she approached, but not doing the smart thing of getting the hell out of that chair.

"Hey, Jack." The girl's voice cracked just to the scared side of perky.

Jack couldn't speak. Her hands were clenched tightly into fists, but the rage she felt was blocking all of the words she might say.

"So, you hungry? I know I always have trouble eating after something bad happens—"

I, me, me, me. Everything in Celia's world was always about *her*. Jack realized she was shaking. Not with fear. Not *hardly* with fear. With murderous rage. The last time fury so dark and intense had coursed through her, Antonia Chillingsworth had ended up headless.

"That's not your seat." She didn't even recognize her own voice when it grated out.

Celia blinked, and went a little paler. "C'mon, Jack, nobody's using it anymore, and anyway, it's right next to Maura, you know—"

"You have *no* business in that seat. That's Heather's seat." It sounded crazy, and yet it also sounded perfectly sensible. Heather had only been dead for two days, and already Little Miss Wants-the-Spotlight was stinking up her chair...

"Jack," Celia said, as if she was talking to a small child. "Heather's dead."

Around them, girls smarter than Celia were clearing away from the table.

"Get out of that chair." Jack's fury was so consuming now that her voice couldn't reach above a whisper.

Celia glanced around, perhaps finally realizing that she might be in trouble. Or perhaps not.

"No."

"Get... the *fuck*... out of that chair!"

"It's *mine* now. I have seniority at the table and I'll sit in it if I want. You're hardly one to complain, since you're the one who killed her."

Murmurs had been going back and forth in the background; the silence that fell after Celia's words was deathly.

"What did you just say?" In her own ears, her voice was strangely breathless. Time seemed to be moving in slow jerks, the way it had when she'd wrenched herself out of Imam's grasp and begun scrambling for Junner's discarded gun. Cold was cascading through her limbs, tightening her belly, and there was a strange, almost weightless sensation in her chest.

Her foot barely felt the ground as she took another step forward.

"Everybody saw what you did. Heather would still be alive if you hadn't—"

The enraged scream inside of Jack's skull was so loud that she never knew whether she'd made noise aloud, too, although later her throat *did* hurt. She didn't hear the chair slam into the ground, either. Her hands were around Celia's throat, shutting out the vile words. Celia was clawing at her arms.

*You fucking, lying little bitch! She was my **friend**! You wouldn't know what a friend was if you even **had** one, you worthless piece of shit! All you're any good for is wasting people's time with your bullshit dramas! You want the spotlight? It's all yours, you bitch, you can have it!*

As she struck Celia's head against the floor for the third time, she realized that everything she was screaming in her mind *was* pouring out of her mouth. Letting go of Celia's throat, she slapped the girl hard, once, twice—

A vise-like grip came around her wrist as she brought her hand back for the third slap, and then she was being pulled back away from Celia. More hands came around her and her last glimpse of the of the other girl, before moving bodies obscured her, was of a sodden, sobbing mess curled in a fetal position on the back of Heather's chair.

The wall slammed into Jack's back, knocking the wind out of her. The howling tempest of her rage still roared in her ears, blocking out all sound, but Kyra's face was before her, tense, mouthing the word "Enough!"

Two orderlies, the largest on the floor, appeared, one of them pushing Kyra out of the way and forcing her to release Jack's wrist. Jack saw the syringe too late to try to dodge it and felt its sharp sting in her throat.

The world dissolved into darkness.

Sterile white greeted her when she woke, but her mind remained muzzy, not clearing for a long time. Whatever had been in that syringe was strong. She couldn't think. Bits and pieces of thoughts and feelings, and memories, would come to her, but flit off before they could assemble into any kind of coherent order.

Audrey lay still, waiting and, when bits of thoughts came to her, wondering why she felt such powerful sadness and loss... and even more powerful guilt and shame. Something dark and horrible was inside her, gnawing at her, and she couldn't fathom what it was.

What happened? Why do I feel like this?

Slowly, so slowly, small chains of coherent thought began to assemble. There was a girl. A girl named Jack. And Jack had done horrible things, things so terrible that she shied away from contemplating them.

But she knew she needed to look.

Murder. Jack was a murderer. And a liar who had betrayed two dear friends.

Who was this girl? How did she know her?

Memory tugged at her. A woman in a beautiful dress was lying, sprawled, on a floor, a handgun discarded beside her. The coppery stink of blood filled the air. Bits of blood, gore, and hair were everywhere. Audrey forced herself to look harder at the dead woman.

Oh god, she doesn't have a head...

A man was slowly rising to his feet, his movements faltering as if with pain. He had his hand on his upper arm, blood seeping between his fingers. He was huge, darkly handsome, his lips pressed together in a grim, pained line. Dark welding goggles covered his eyes as he looked directly at Audrey.

"Awfully uncivilized thing you just did, Jack."

Oh god, no...

Audrey looked down and saw the shotgun in her hands, her finger still loosely on the trigger, smoke wafting from the end of the barrel.

No...

She knew who Jack was.

No...

She was Jack.

"Nooooooooo!" The scream ripped its way out of her already-raw throat as she fought against the restraints holding her down. She sobbed, panting, as the rest of her memories began to flood back. The planet. The eclipse. Death upon death upon death. Riddick. A strange memory of him gently taking the gun from her hands and holding her—when had that happened?—before vanishing from her life forever. The tub, and her blood curling through the water. C Ward. Kyra. Heather.

Heather.

Oh, god... did I kill her, too?

Heather bucking and writhing in her grasp, the way Balto had... no, she'd been scared, but it had been familiar to her, until the moment when Heather had stopped breathing. But...

*She'd pushed down on Heather's chest, frantic, and had felt something **crunch** beneath the heel of her hand.*

Was *that* when she'd killed Heather? Was Celia right? Was it her fault?

It took a long time for the tears to ease. The calm of pure despair finally came to her as she realized that, if she *had* killed Heather, she could never be Audrey MacNamera again. If she'd killed Heather, she'd murdered Audrey, too.

Many more long hours passed before Nurse Raymond came to take her back to C Ward.

Silence fell when people saw her. Silence and stares. She headed awkwardly down the hall, for her room, and slipped inside it. She wasn't even sure what time it was, whether it was day or night. She'd figure that out when the bell rang for the next meal.

Kyra entered the room moments later, sitting down on her bunk and watching her from across the room.

"You're back." A hint of a smile quirked across Kyra's lips.

"Yeah."

“Wasn’t sure if you would be or not. I got a little worried they were going to decide to put you in D Ward or something.”

Jack shuddered a little. Maybe D Ward was exactly where she really belonged.

“How...” She swallowed. “How’s Celia?”

Kyra shrugged. “She’ll be fine. She’s got some impressive bruises, and she was carrying on something fierce until they took her to the infirmary, but she’s not nearly as bad off as she’s pretending to be.”

Relief, and a little annoyance, washed over Jack. “Oh. Good.”

“You’ve got the whole guilt thing going again, don’t you?” Kyra’s eyes on her were shrewd.

Guilt. There it was. Guilt was what separated Jack from Audrey. Maybe as long as she still cared about things, as long as she still wanted to make things right, Audrey was still in her.

But oh God, caring *hurt so much*.

“Kyra, uh... I have a question.”

“Sure.”

“Did I kill Heather?”

“What? No way. Look, just because Celia said that, and the administration is trying to hang that shit on you, doesn’t mean it’s true. You didn’t. They just don’t want to admit the meds she was on might have done it.”

“The *administration*? They’re saying I—?”

“The administration is full of shit. I overheard some of the orderlies bitching about it. *They* all know it’s a lie and they’re pissed because most of them like you and know how hard you took her death.”

“But Kyra, are you sure that I didn’t do it? She stopped breathing and I couldn’t hear a heartbeat, but when I tried to do CPR I felt something crack—”

Kyra held up her hand. “I figured you were gonna ask that, so I did a little research about CPR on the terminal. Most of the guidelines I found said that, when you’re doing it right, you’re pressing so hard on the breast bone that you might break some of the person’s ribs.”

Broken ribs? Was that what the crunch had been?

“Those guidelines also said that if that happened, you shouldn’t let it stop you,” Kyra continued. “It’s normal, and it happens a lot. So no, you didn’t kill Heather by trying to do CPR on her, even if you did feel something break. Sounds like you were doing exactly what you were supposed to.”

Jack sagged down onto her cot, suddenly feeling boneless. *I didn’t do it. It wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t my fault...*

“Why are they trying to pin it on me?”

“Are you kidding? She was on an experimental drug that’s trying to get through clinical trials. She said something about a week before you got here about how the drug should be on the market in a few more months if everything goes well. Having it turn out to kill patients?” Kyra put her arms behind her head as she leaned back against her garish wall. “That’s pretty much the definition of everything *not* going well, wouldn’t you say? It’s a cover-up.”

A cover-up. They’d pin the death on some thirteen-year-old girl who was already certified as mentally unstable, and nobody’d have to take the consequences of a beautiful, wonderful

person dying horribly. And in a few more months, even more people could start dying from the drug as it hit the open market—

Fuck that! Audrey shouted from within her, in pure Jack dialect.

She shoved herself to her feet.

“We’ll see just what kind of price tag *Mister Flint* has,” she snarled, flinging open the door and stomping out of the room. She ignored the resumption of the stares and whispers as she stalked over to Carmouche, at the desk by the C Ward main doors.

“I want to see Flint.” She tried to keep the rage out of her voice, but his eyes widened a little.

“Jack, what is it?”

“I want to talk to him. About Heather. Now.”

She waited while he made the call, leaning against the wall and glowering at anyone who looked at her, until Nurse Raymond returned to escort her upstairs.

As they passed through the A Ward locking system, her heart began to race again. She hadn’t imagined it. They were using her father’s system, the X31-B. She knew everything about its specs—she’d even helped her father do the final drafts during one of his visitations—and it’d be easy to get around. She began paying attention to where the cameras were located.

They were using the standard camera models that came with the package, but they’d opted for the “economy mode,” with fewer cameras than were really recommended. Jack began mapping out the cameras’ “blind spots” in her mind.

Remember this. Remember all of this. It’s making a forty-second sweep. Walk across the hallway just right and you’ll never appear on the screens—

“Are you okay, Jack?” Raymond asked her.

Jack forced herself to focus. “Not really.”

Her memories and thoughts of her escape plans, she knew, would forever be tainted by the anguish and rage of Heather’s death. The two would be inextricably linked. Thinking about this moment would evoke the details of the security system, and also the pain. The way any time she thought about her report on the missing Star Jump ship called *Tenth Crusade*, it evoked the smell of her father’s broken air conditioner.

Okay, put it aside for now. Pay attention again after you’ve dealt with Flint. She let Raymond lead her to Flint’s office.

The hospital administrator looked up at her, giving her a perfunctory smile that never reached his eyes. “Yes, Jack, what can I do for you?”

Jack sat down in one of the empty chairs. “You can stop lying about me to the people investigating Heather’s death.”

As the door closed behind her, she thought she heard an approving snort from Raymond.

Flint’s brows went up. He clasped his hands on his desk and leaned forward a little. “I’m not sure I like your attit—”

“I really don’t care what you like. You’re telling people that my actions during Heather’s seizure were what killed her, and we both know it’s a lie. Her heart stopped. I tried to give her CPR.” Grief tried to overwhelm her and she ruthlessly shoved it back. *Later. After.*

“Jack, you have no idea how delicate this situation can be—”

“Sure I do. And nowhere near as delicate as, say, three years from now, when the drug gets pulled *back* off of the shelves for its high fatality rate, it coming to light that you allowed patients in this hospital to be experimented on, and tried to cover up their deaths.”

This was the most dangerous card in her hand, and she knew it. What happened next depended on exactly how dirty Flint really was... and how greedy he was. The spark of fear that appeared in his eyes told her what she’d hoped. He was in it for the money, not to get caught up in deep corporate dirt. She knew it the way she’d known that Johns would offer her up as a sacrifice even *before* he’d made his proposal to Riddick.

“Jack, think about what you’re—”

“I know what I’m saying. And I’m going to offer you a choice. An easy one. You can keep telling the investigators that I’m responsible for Heather’s death if you want, and run the risk that, when the truth eventually comes out, your career gets ruined. Or you can get your share of the bounty on Riddick from Toombs.”

Score. Flint stared at her in speechless awe. Finally his lips moved. “How...?”

Jack leaned forward, locking her eyes with his, remembering everything her mother had told her about how to negotiate to win. “It’s not important. I’m not wrong, am I?”

He just stared at her.

“Here’s the deal. You tell the investigators you were wrong. Heather’s death was caused by the seizure, so whatever caused the seizure was responsible. I was just trying to help. It’s the truth, anyway. And in return, I’ll sign those papers when I check out of the hospital. If my name is any way connected to Heather’s death, though, I’ll never, *ever* sign *anything*. Which means Riddick’s bounty doesn’t go up, and our friend Toombs won’t have any reason to give you a share of it.”

She gave him a while to think about it. He pulled out some files, leafing through them for a long moment. Anguish crossed his face.

Is that Heather’s file there? Maybe there’s hope for you yet, Mr. Flint.

“She was doing so well on it...”

Yes, that was Heather’s file.

Flint looked up at her again. “Do you promise, Jack, that you’ll sign the statement?”

“Mr. Flint, I promise. The day I leave here, you’ll have a paper with the truth about Riddick, and my signature on it, right there on your desk. You have my word.”

Flint sighed and seemed to deflate. “Very well. I’ll... set the record straight. It’s probably for the best, anyway. There are two other patients who were about to start on the trials, and...” He gave himself a little shake. “Just remember, I’m going to hold you to this.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Flint.” Jack suddenly wondered if this might result in her release being accelerated. How long would Flint be willing to wait to have those papers in his hand? Well, the sooner she got into A Ward, the better. Then she could walk out of this place and vanish.

She paid close attention to the cameras and the hallways as Raymond walked her back, beginning to map out her route in her head. Soon she’d be free of this place. And then, hopefully, she’d be free of *Jack*. She didn’t know who this hard-boiled, relentless bitch was, but the sooner she could go back to being Audrey, the better. She didn’t like Jack. Jack killed people. Jack beat people up for being idiots. Jack blackmailed people. Jack was like Riddick, and like Kyra. Jack needed to be ended.

Just as soon as I'm free of this place, she thought, as she re-entered C Ward. Until then, Jack had her uses. But it would be Audrey, not Jack, who reached Furya and her father.

"So, what have you been up to?" Stacey appeared at her side.

She pasted on a smug grin. "Threatening Mr. Flint."

"You're kidding."

Jack just shook her head and grinned, moving on. She remembered what Kyra had told her. Soon she needed to let Stacey corner her and tell the lie about how horribly Riddick had treated her. But now was *not* the time. She'd blubber later.

Kyra was still in their room. "So?"

Jack flopped down. "I'm off the hook. Hey, Stacey was almost *friendly* with me just now. What happened?"

"Are you kidding? You beat the crap out of Celia. That gave you some genuine *cred* with her." Kyra chuckled. "In fact—"

The bell rang.

"Perfect timing," Kyra said with a grin. "I'll just show you. C'mon, it's dinnertime."

Jack let Kyra lead her to the dining hall again, once more dreading the horribly empty seat she'd see there. She stopped, shocked, in the doorway.

"Impressive, huh?" Kyra said, leaning against the wall. "It was my idea."

The room had been rearranged. Completely rearranged. All of the tables had been moved to different locations, and all of the seats had been swapped around, too. Some of the girls were moving into similar groupings as before, but a lot of them had changed tables as well.

There was no sign of which spot had once been Heather's. No sign whatsoever.

"I heard Carmouche saying they're going to do this from now on if there's a death on the floor. He really liked the idea."

Jack looked over at Kyra, the absurd, Audrey-like urge to cry filling her. There had to be some way other than tears to express her gratitude, surely. "You did this?"

Kyra nodded, looking smug.

"Thank you."

Kyra grinned and took her elbow again. "C'mon."

Jack followed her, realizing that most of the other Killer's Club girls seemed to have grouped at a table that had two empty chairs, side by side. One for Kyra, she realized... and one for *her*.

She sat down at the table, expecting at least one of its resident badasses to object to her presence, but received only friendly smiles. Welcoming smiles. "You're one of us, now" smiles.

Yes, Audrey thought, the moment she got out of this place, Jack had to die.

15.

What Hides Beneath the Skin

“Do we have to?”

Kyra glanced over at Jack and raised an eyebrow. “Not if you want to tell her no.”

Jack shuddered at that. The idea of telling Stacey that no, she *didn't* want to spend the afternoon hanging out in the room of a violent psychotic who took offense easily, somehow just wasn't appealing. “Okay, fine...”

“Relax. She's just glad to be back out of isolation and needs human contact. She's not going to go after *the real story* in front of everybody.” Kyra smirked a little; there was condescension in the smirk but Jack sensed it wasn't aimed at *her*. “She wants to hear that privately.”

Only two days earlier—and Jack was still puzzling out what had happened, because it made no sense to her—there had been a sudden, violent altercation between Stacey and Celia. Celia had ended up with a bloody nose and a split lip; Stacey had been dragged off the floor screaming enraged obscenities at the girl. Nobody Jack talked to, though, knew what—or who—had started the fight; both girls were apparently claiming that the other had.

Now Stacey was back, craving a little Killer's Club company... something that apparently now included Jack. Reluctantly, she climbed off of her bed, shooting her nonchalant roommate a dubious look. After all of her efforts to avoid being alone with Stacey lately, she was now going to be visiting the girl's room.

“Fine, just don't leave me alone with her, okay?”

Kyra shrugged. “I won't, but you know, sooner or later you're going to have to tell her the story. You can't avoid it forever.”

“I just...” Jack had found, in the last week, that being honest with Kyra was remarkably easy. “I don't know *what* to tell her. I mean, I'm a *virgin*. I've never *been* with a guy, much less been raped by one. I don't know what to say that's not... really obviously fake. She's gonna *know* I'm lying.”

Kyra nodded, her expression becoming serious. “We'll work on your story later, okay? But right now we'd better get over there.”

Suppressing a shudder, Jack followed Kyra out of their room and down the hall. Stacey, she recalled, roomed not with Colette but with a smoldering, taciturn girl named Omphalé, whose crime had qualified her for Killer's Club status but which had never been explained. Ahead of them in the hall, Jack could see Colette heading into a room, followed by *her* roommate, Xi Hin. Kyra headed for them.

Jack had grown used to the sight of Kyra's “artwork” on their walls; the plain light blue expanse that greeted her took her by surprise. Then she turned.

*Oh. That must have been **Omphalé's** wall.*

It was rather like another version between the dichotomy of her side of the room and Kyra's. Where Omphalé's side of the room was plain and pristine to the point of sterile, Stacey's side was jumbled and garish. The wall over her bed was covered by an enormous collage of pictures. Moving closer, awed, Jack realized that most of them were pictures of very savage-looking men. The killers Stacey admired and hoped to emulate, she realized... including Riddick.

Riddick.

Jack had only seen his face in her dreams and imaginings, in the course of the almost-half-year since he'd vanished. Now it glared down at her off of Stacey's walls. In virtually every shot, he looked enraged with her, staring at her with mute accusation.

Not me. He's not mad at me. It's just the way he looked when they took his picture... he was mad at them.

There was no reason to think Riddick knew or cared where she was or what she was doing, or what she was claiming in her attempt to throw people off of his scent. Just because *she* felt guilty about it didn't mean *he'd* blame her.

Still, looking at him on the wall above her, she felt like a traitor.

Why? He never cared about you. If he had, he'd have stayed to say goodbye.

"Check out who's in love with your wall, Stace," she heard Colette saying.

Stacey's snicker, behind her, wasn't entirely unfriendly. "Or one person on it, anyway. Hey Jack, wanna start your own collection?"

"Huh?" She looked back at the blonde girl, confused.

Stacey's eyes were glittering with a sort of malicious amusement. This, Jack realized, was her *friendly* mode. "I've got some extra pictures of Riddick I didn't put up, if you want them for *your* wall."

"No, that's okay," Jack replied automatically, even as a pang of longing moved through her.

Damn it, I need to get him, and that whole time, out of my system.

"You sure? I've even got a picture of him from back when he was busted his first time."

That made Jack blink. "Really?"

"Heh. *Thought* you'd be interested..." Stacey pulled a thick folder out from under her mattress and opened it up, leafing through it. Watching with the other girls, Jack felt a wave of nausea move through her as she saw what most of the pictures in there were.

Kyra had been right. Stacey had a *thing* for depictions of rape. How the hell had she managed to assemble a collection like that—images of large men sexually assaulting small, childlike women—in C Ward?

Kyra's breath against her ear sent a chill through her; or perhaps that came from what she was seeing. "They don't take them from her," the older girl murmured too low for the others to hear, as if reading Jack's mind. "She'd just get more and they say as long as she still has them and wants them, they know she's not well yet. I heard one of the nurses saying that when she's ready to voluntarily give them up, they'll know she's responding to treatment."

Jack nodded, a little shakily. The images were revolting in the extreme, and surely Stacey's possession of them was illegal. Back on Deckard's World, Audrey's cousin Rob had had his own collection of pornos—which had offended her at the time but now seemed almost *wholesome*—and he'd told her that he had to buy them secondhand or steal them from his

father because he couldn't legally buy them from a store until he was eighteen. Stacey was sixteen at the most; how was she even *getting* this stuff?

"Here it is!" Stacey crowed triumphantly as she pulled a page out of the pile. "Check out your *boyfriend*."

A few of the girls giggled. Jack reached out, unable to resist her curiosity, and took the page.

It was a mug shot; Stacey had printed it out in color. Riddick—very young, maybe only four years older than *her* in the picture—was staring at the camera with an inhuman sort of rage on his face, holding up a numbered placard with his shackled hands.

He has hair.

Jack had always wondered what Riddick would look like with hair, and now she knew. Close-cropped and tightly curled, the hair hugged the crown of his head. She found herself wishing she could touch it, feel its texture under her fingers instead of just paper—

"Yeah, it's *definitely* love," Stacey snickered, making the other girls laugh, and Jack realized with a flush of embarrassment that she'd been touching the picture.

Shit, just like that fangirl dweeb Joslin back home, with her actor pictures... I'm pathetic.

"So c'mon, Stace, spill," Colette was saying. "What happened? What'd that bitch Celia do?"

"Nothing." There was laughter in Stacey's voice.

Jack looked up from Riddick's picture, confused. Celia hadn't done anything? Then why...?

Stacey was looking archly around at the other girls. "There's this game me and my friends used to play in my old school, when somebody pissed us off. Any of you ever played it? How you destroy someone's reputation without getting in much trouble yourself?"

Several of the other girls in the room looked confused but were nodding.

"Can't say I ever got to play those games," Kyra said. She had her game face on, her *I'm tougher than all of you combined* face that Jack had begun to understand was a false front. But she alone, of everyone in the room, had a history of enough social isolation to get away with admitting ignorance of such things. She could ask what the others couldn't without losing face.

Jack, however, already had a sick feeling about what Stacey was going to say. If she wasn't mistaken, she'd seen it done to some kids back home.

"Okay, it's like this," Stacey began. "If you don't like some bitch, and you get into fights with her all the time, sooner or later the teachers decide it's your fault. If you get all your friends and go teach her a lesson, same thing; *you're* the ones who are 'ganging up' on the little cow and she's all *innocent*."

"Right, that makes sense," Kyra said.

Because that's exactly what you're doing, Jack added silently.

"But if you and your friends take turns—one of you gets into a fight with her one day, another one of you gets into it with her a few days later—yeah, you each get sent to a detention once, but *she* gets sent every time, and it's not long before they decide that she's fighting with so many different people, she must be the one starting it. Now *she's* the troublemaker, not you. And nobody will believe a word she says anymore."

Yeah, it was what Jack had seen done in her school; Ahmed, a perfectly nice boy who had gone from being bully-fodder to being a fall guy and scapegoat. Someone had even hidden their cigarettes in his locker one time when word got out that a random locker search was imminent; he'd constantly been in trouble, and Audrey had earned an asskicking of her own when she'd gone to the teachers and told them that she'd seen those cigarettes being stashed by Missy Barnstable before the search, proving it by opening the locker herself. Deckard's World was more than a little Muslim-hostile, thanks to too many encounters with fanatical members of the New Taliban during its early colonial days. Ahmed and his family had ended up moving away a few months later, something that had made her parents argue about whether they were raising their daughter on "a racist planet." It had been one of the nails in their marital coffin.

"...all going to take turns with her, huh?" Colette was saying.

"That's the idea," Stacey replied, her voice smug. "Jack and I have already gone, so one of you needs to be next. Wait a day or two, and start it when there's nobody around to say *she* didn't start it. Who's up?"

"I am," Xi Hin said. "Always wanted to kick that little bitch's ass."

Jack felt sick to her stomach. Celia was a pain and a drama queen, but there was no way she deserved *this*. She looked back down at the picture of Riddick in her hands, trying to focus on it instead.

His eyes are brown, she thought with wonder. They seemed to smolder with rage in the picture. Obviously this was long before his shine job, long before he evolved from the furious man in the picture to the ominously contained predator she'd met in the wreckage of the *Hunter-Gratzner*. She could see hints of what he'd become, but it was almost like looking at a completely different man.

"Damn, girl," Colette said, nudging her shoulder. "You're like, totally in love with Riddick. You're even worse than Stacey."

"I'm not." Jack could see that none of them believed her. "Where'd you find this picture?"

Stacey smirked and Jack realized that now all of them believed, more than ever, that she was completely gone on the guy. "Pulled it out of his file on the Universal Merc Registry."

I need to check that. I need to see what they know, and what they're saying about him.

"I didn't realize we could access that."

"You can't." Stacey looked extraordinarily smug now. "I can, though."

"How?"

Omphalé chuckled and spoke for the first time since Jack had come in. "We have staff accounts."

"You have *what*?" How the hell had they managed to hack into the staff computers?

"Remember Dan Tavey, the orderly who was sacked a few months ago for being too friendly with patients?"

Jack shook her head. "Guess he was before my time."

Omphalé snickered. "Well, he was a pretty good fuck, and one time, I got him to trade me some access so I could check in with my boys back home. And while I was in there, since he was pretty high up in rank, I created a few new accounts and hid them from the general roster. When he got sacked, I couldn't use *his* account anymore, but they didn't find the other ones. We can go anywhere we want."

That, she realized, explained how Stacey was getting her hands on porn, too.

Jack felt a strange hunger begin burning inside of her. Access to the Merc network, to flight schedules, to all the things she couldn't look at now without possibly giving the hospital too many clues about her identity... nothing had ever seemed so important to her. With that access, she could plan out her escape even better, timing it for just the right moment so she could catch a flight offworld. She could ensure that her escape was successful, that she had a route to Furya and her father.

I need that.

But how could she get one of the girls to—

Oh. Oh!

She already had a bargaining chip. Stacey wanted to hear stories about how Riddick had sexually abused her during her supposed captivity; now she could set a price for the tale. Staff account access in return for her tale of woe; Stacey would help facilitate her escape.

Then I can go back to being Audrey and forget I even met a sick creep like her...

“Jeez, talk about a love-hate relationship. Stare any harder at Riddick and you’ll burn a hole through that paper, Jack.”

Fuck. She’d been letting her feelings show. Her feelings about *Stacey*, though, not *Riddick*. Still, she could use it; it fit with what she wanted Stacey to believe.

“I uh...” *I need out of this room. I don’t know how Kyra stands it.* “I need to be alone for a while... you guys mind if I bail?”

“No problem.” Stacey was smirking again. “Take the picture with you. It’ll help.”

Rob, she recalled, had used exactly that tone when talking about taking his dirty magazines into the bathroom.

“Thanks.” Jack headed for the door quickly, afraid to meet Kyra’s gaze. She hoped that she’d stayed long enough to be friendly, to not mess things up, but she needed time away from the sick hypocrisy of it all. It was too big to swallow; she was choking on even a tiny sip of it.

Back in her room she waited and thought, spiraling her plans around each other.

She needed to lie about Riddick to escape. She needed to get in Stacey’s good graces enough to get access to the false staff accounts, in spite of how much Stacey frightened and disgusted her. Once she had access she could plan. She could figure out escape windows, work out the route from the hospital to the spaceport, make sure that nobody was anywhere near finding Riddick based upon anything she or Imam had said, make sure her father would still be on Furya when she got there, everything.

All of this had taken so long, she thought. *Was* taking so long. She’d been twelve, going on thirteen, when she ran away. It had taken her a month in cryo to reach Vasenji Station, a week before she’d boarded the *Hunter-Gratzner*, another twenty-two weeks in cryo before the crash; about a week on the planet and on the *Kublai Khan*, and then a month in cryo before Riddick had dropped her off with Imam on Helion Prime and vanished without a trace. Three months of darkness before her attempt, and almost two months trapped in this place.

More than a *year* had passed since she’d run out on her mother and Alvin. It had only been about six months for her, but she was biologically thirteen, and back on Deckard’s World her fourteenth birthday was coming up. Her mother probably believed she was dead by now.

The thought made her feel nauseated again.

It was supposed to be so simple. From Tangiers Prime she would have had a two-month hop to Furya; she would have been there right now. Instead she was trapped in this place, conniving as Jack to manipulate people who disgusted her into helping her escape. This was what *his* influence had done to her.

I have to get out. I have to get out.

She looked up as Kyra came into the room and shut the door. The older girl sat down on her bed and regarded Jack with a steady gaze.

“I’d give you shit for leaving early, but actually that kinda worked out.”

Jack felt relief move through her; Kyra wasn’t angry. “How?”

“Well, Stacey’s now convinced that Riddick mindfucked you good. You’re all set up there. You won’t even have to go into much detail and she’ll buy it.”

“But that’s the thing, Kyra... I don’t know *any* detail. And those pictures she has are—”

“Really disgusting. I know. I hate it when she brings them out, too.” Kyra grimaced.

“Why do you hang out with her?”

Kyra rose and went over to the door. Opening it, she leaned out into the hallway and looked around for a moment. Then she closed it again and turned back to Jack. “Two reasons. The first is... you don’t get to pick your friends in a place like this. You want to survive, you run with the biggest and the strongest. Most of the girls in the Killer’s Club think that’s me, but it’s not. It’s her, because she’s the one who has no conscience. As long as she likes you, thinks she understands you, hell, even *looks down* on you... you’re good. If she gets it into her head that you might be looking down on her... you’re fucked. If I let her know what I really thought of her and her kind, they’d see to it I never left D Ward again.”

Jack blinked, trying to comprehend it. Stacey was tiny; how could Kyra fear someone as tiny as her?

*It’s not her size. It’s her influence. She’s an instigator. She **owns** Colette and Omphalé, and she wants to own Kyra and me, too. As long as she thinks she can, we don’t have to deal with her enmity. If she realizes she can’t, though, we’re dead meat.*

“I see.” She flashed Kyra a sympathetic look. “And the other reason?”

“You may not have noticed, but... these are the kind of people I’m going to be hunting once I leave here and sign up. People just like them are going to be my bounties. I figure I’d better get to know them now. Who knows, one day I might even be the one bringing Stacey herself in.”

A chill moved through Jack and she stared at Kyra in wonder. “You’re really going to do it, aren’t you? Even after what I told you.”

Kyra nodded, a grim expression flitting across her face. “Someone has to put them away. If I can even save one girl from what I— saw...”

Her words trailed off and she went back over to her bed, sitting down and rubbing her forehead. Then she looked up at Jack and gave her a wry smile.

“The trick is to give them what they think they want. Do the Tough Girl routine. Let them think you’re one of them. Let them think they’re in control. Get what you want, and get away clean. If I can get up to B Ward they won’t be able to touch me, because the nurses? The ones I heard talking about Stacey’s porn stash? They say she can’t get up there until she throws it away. But you didn’t hear that, okay?”

Jack nodded. “No way do I want her up on B Ward.”

Kyra grinned. “Planning on going for it yourself, huh? By the way, I’m *not* going to pick a fight with Celia. Because I already know you’re going to ask me not to, and anyway, if I did, B Ward would be that much farther away.”

A funny feeling moved through Jack and she heard herself speaking. “We could try to get there together.”

Kyra got a startled look on her face, and then nodded. “Yeah. But you’re still going to have to tell Stacey your story before we go, you know.”

“I know. Anyway, I’m going to charge her for it. I want access to those staff accounts. So that’s going to be the price for my story.”

“Setting a price tag. I’m impressed.” Kyra’s voice was admiring. “That means, though, you’re gonna need to really spin a good tale.”

“Yeah, and that’s the problem. I’ve never even had sex... how am I going to convincingly describe what it feels like to be *raped*?”

Silence greeted her comment. She looked up, and Kyra’s eyes were on her, wary and weighing. They stayed that way, eyes locked, for a long, long moment.

“What I’m about to tell you,” Kyra finally began, “I never, ever said. You never heard it from me. It never, ever happened. Pay attention because I’m only going to ever tell this once. Okay?”

Jack felt chilled again, but nodded. “Okay.”

Kyra began speaking, and continued until the bell for dinner rang. By that time, Jack had no appetite. She picked through her meal, managing to eat little bits of it, and noticed, when she finally rose from the table, that Kyra’s own plate was almost untouched, too. Fortunately the other girls at the table seemed oblivious.

Sleep that night was a long time coming.

No wonder Kyra was so bent on her desire to get involved in law enforcement even if she’d chosen its seediest side. No wonder she didn’t trust *legitimate* law enforcement, either. No wonder she spent all the time she could practicing combat moves, and no wonder she was so determined to come across as the toughest of the tough. Jack knew, now, what lay behind it, what had been done to her. By Red Roger and his men. By orderlies in her first psychiatric hospital. By a whole parade of men who should have been trustworthy but had used her like a toy, and then used her reputation—as a religious nut and then as a nutcase—against her.

At three in the morning, Kyra fast asleep across the room, Jack slipped out of the bedroom and hid in the bathroom for a good, long cry. Kyra’s story had broken her heart. She knew, now, exactly what to tell Stacey when she spun out her lie, and knew that she’d cry again as she told it. Stacey would think she was weak when she saw the tears, not knowing that they were for someone else.

What am I going to do? she thought as she washed her face and crept back towards her room.

She was going to escape this horrible place, as quickly as she could, but now she had a new problem.

She couldn’t leave Kyra behind... could she?

16.

Spinning the Tangled Web

When Jack finally fell asleep at last, she dreamt, strangely enough, about Star Jumping.

She was ten years old again, hard at work on her history report. Audrey MacNamera routinely brought home high marks on her schoolwork, to the point where it had become expected of her. It wasn't merely that she was intelligent; she threw everything she had into her assignments. As an only child who lived on a street with few other children, most of them too old or too young to be interested in playing with *her*, she had time to devote to schoolwork that most other children chose not to.

Also, it meant she didn't have to think about her parents' unfolding divorce.

Audrey had tried everything she could think of to stop it, but nothing had worked. She didn't have much to bargain with—how could she swear to get better grades, for instance, when she was already top of her class? She'd offered to do more chores, start hunting with her father again, go without an allowance—*anything* to bring her father home, but the answer was the same every time. It wasn't about her. She hadn't done anything wrong. Her parents just couldn't live together anymore.

Funny. It felt like it was *all* about her. Wasn't she the one paying for whatever had gone wrong? Didn't that mean it *had* to be her fault somehow?

So she'd thrown herself into her history report, about the Lost Colony Ships, with more enthusiasm than ever before. Most of it was finished, and she was beyond proud of it, but she'd hit an enormous snag. After half a week of fretting, she'd gone to see Mr. Reilly.

Mr. Reilly taught Audrey's year and had approved the scope and subject of her report only after some argument, telling her that it was an extremely ambitious topic. Now, with some trepidation, she had to go to him and ask for some help. She'd run up against an enormous wall, perhaps the very wall he'd been warning her against.

After the room cleared of her classmates, she approached his desk nervously. He smiled as he looked up and saw her. He always had a smile for her; several of her classmates accused her of being the Teacher's Pet. She didn't see how that could be true, though. All she did was study; it wasn't like she sucked up to him or anything.

"Yes, Audrey? Did you want something?"

She took a deep breath, pulling one of the chairs over in front of his desk. "I need help, Mr. Reilly."

He frowned. "What with?"

"My history paper. I'm having trouble."

"That was a very ambitious topic, Audrey. I'm not surprised. After all, the fifteen sublight ships alone are—"

"Oh, that part's done." She felt her cheeks heat up when he stared at her in disbelief. "It's the three missing Star Jumpers that are causing the problem. I've found out the basics about

the ships themselves, but... there's nothing about how Star Jump drives work, or why those ships would have gone missing."

Mr. Reilly's face cleared, an understanding smile appearing. "Ah. That's not surprising. I should have told you that you'd have trouble with that."

"Really? Why? Was I looking in the wrong place?"

He shook his head. "Not much is known about Star Jump drives. How they work is a closely-guarded secret of the Quintessa Corporation, and has been for hundreds of years now. I can tell you what I do know, though. First, do you understand the problems with light-speed travel?"

Audrey frowned. She thought she *sort of* did. Maybe. "Um... I'm not sure. I know it has something to do with relativity?"

Mr. Reilly got up and moved over to the board, writing an equation on it.

$$E=mc^2$$

"This equation is where it starts, Audrey. The 'E' refers to the amount of energy needed to move an object. Then the 'm' stands for mass. Specifically the mass of the object."

"What's the c²?" So far it made sense to her.

"C-squared. That is the square of the velocity you want the object to travel at. For example, if you wanted the object to travel at a speed of ten units, your c-squared would be one hundred units."

"Okay. I think that makes sense."

"And if you wanted the object to travel twice as fast, a speed of twenty units, your c-squared would be what?"

"Four hundred units," Audrey said after a moment of thought.

"Yes. Now, what does that mean?" He waited, giving her an encouraging look.

Audrey thought about it, and then suddenly it hit her. "You'd need four times as much energy, to go twice as fast."

"And to go three times as fast?"

Realization hit her. "Nine times as much energy."

Mr. Reilly smiled at her and nodded. "So, do you begin to see the problem with traveling faster and faster?"

"Yeah, um... after a while, you'd need huge amounts of energy just to go a little bit faster?"

"That's exactly right. Now, how could you begin to compensate for that?" He watched her expectantly.

It came to her after a moment. "Reduce the mass?"

"Yes, Audrey, and that's exactly why, when you're looking at the speeds of things, smaller particles can move faster than larger ones. The smallest particles of matter of all are photons, which move at the speed of light, and no larger particle has ever successfully moved that quickly. And as larger particles *approach* the speed of light, a very unique phenomenon occurs for them." Mr. Reilly leaned forward, warming to his subject. "Time slows down for them."

“It does? How?” She had to admit she was fascinated. She’d read fantasy stories about time travel, but the idea that, outside of fiction, the very *speed* of time could somehow be controlled was... *exciting*.

“Well, you see, time—as we know it, anyway—is something we perceive in terms of motion and causality—”

“What?”

“The connection between an event and the effects that result from it. Cause and effect. Those things only move in one direction. You can’t smash a vase and then undo it, for example.”

“Yeah, okay.” She’d learned that one the hard way when she was nine.

“Most of the time, though, when we talk about measuring time, we’re really talking about measuring *motion*. The movements of the hands on an old-fashioned clock, the beat of your heart, the decay of particles in an atomic clock... it’s all about how things move. Now, as you speed an object up, it takes more and more energy for it to move any further, right?”

“Right.”

“Now think about how that would effect all of the particles within that object. So much energy is needed just to keep it moving forward, that less and less is available for its other movements. If you were in a ship, going faster and faster until it got near the speed of light, every atom and molecule within the ship, including all of the ones in you, would begin to move more and more *slowly*.”

Audrey contemplated that for several long moments, while Mr. Reilly waited.

“So... my heart would beat more slowly, and the ship’s clocks would go more slowly...”

“And all of your nerves would fire more slowly. You wouldn’t even notice that you’d slowed down because to your slowed-down eyes and brain, everything would still seem to be happening at a normal speed.”

“Because everything in the ship would slow down the exact same amount? So that’s why they say that you’d only age an hour but you’d come back to find everybody else had gotten old?”

“That’s exactly right, Audrey. And that was a huge problem, when Earth first started sending out ships. The nearest neighbor star was more than four light-years away, and most of the stars with real potential for colonization were much further out. To get ships to them in a reasonable amount of time meant they had to get as close to light-speed as they possibly could... which meant that the crews of the ships, in many cases, knew that by the time they got back to Earth, everybody they knew would be long dead.”

Audrey contemplated that for a moment. What a harsh, horrible time that must have been, people launching themselves out into a bleak and empty-seeming void with no idea what would be on the other end of their journey... and no way back if things went badly.

Like Kyra and the New Christy Enclave... The schoolroom melted away and she felt like she was hovering over the mountains, gazing down at the bloody disaster as it unfolded. A girl with dark, wild hair was huddled on top of a building, shaking as she aimed a rifle down towards a group of men. Screaming floated up towards her, and cruel laughter. She slowly began to squeeze the trigger, unaware of more, crueler men moving up behind her on the roof

*“Never gonna be free of you, I kill you and kill you and kill you and you just won’t stay dead, why won’t you fucking **die** already, damn you?”*

Jack’s eyes snapped open.

The room was lit with the dim simulation-daylight that signaled morning. Kyra wasn’t in her bed. She was huddled by the wall, by the invisible line of demarcation between her side of the room and Jack’s.

She was drawing.

Jack could hear the squeak of the felt-tip pens Kyra used as they were pressed into the wall, pressed hard and fast. Something was very wrong, she realized. She climbed out of the bed and moved over to Kyra’s side for a closer look.

Roger. Kyra was drawing Red Roger... and herself. Whereas in all of the other pictures of Roger, he’d been helpless and at her mercy, this time the reverse was true. He had her by the throat, his other hand groping inside her shirt, a cruel leer on his face. Her knuckles, on the marker, were white, and she was staring with fixed attention at the drawing.

“I kill you and I kill you and I kill you but you won’t... leave... me... alone...”

Did she even know she was talking?

“Kyra?” Jack said, keeping her voice low and soft.

“You never get out of my head... why won’t you get out of my head...”

“Kyra, it’s me, Jack... he’s not here. He’s dead. He can’t get you.” Would the older girl listen to her?

Kyra went still, and slowly turned to look at her. There didn’t seem to be any recognition in her eyes. “What?”

Shit! Realization struck her. The horrible tales Kyra had told her the night before had awakened the old demons for her. Was that what happened? Could just talking about past darkneses bring them back?

Would she *ever* be able to go back to being Audrey if that was the case? Or would Riddick and Chillingsworth haunt her forever?

“Red Roger’s dead, Kyra. You killed him.”

Kyra’s face contorted in anguish. “You don’t *understand!*” She flung the pen down to the floor in emphasis. “I killed him and he keeps coming back! He keeps getting back in my *head!*”

Jack reached out, catching at Kyra’s upper arms. “We’ll get him out, okay?”

“*How?*” Kyra sounded panicked.

*Shit, I can’t let the other girls, especially **Stacey**, see her like this! This is my fault, she’d be okay if she hadn’t relived this stuff to tell me about it... I don’t know what to do to get her back to feeling strong—*

That was it.

Kyra had given her something important the night before. She could do the same. Whose strength, after all, had she turned to again and again, after the crash? Whose power had reassured her like nothing else could?

His. Riddick’s.

Kyra had given her knowledge; she could give her that power.

“I’ll show you, Kyra, but you’re going to have to let me draw. Is it okay if I change your picture?”

Kyra nodded, still looking oddly helpless, her usual composure still shattered. Jack reached down and picked up the discarded pen. It was black, the red one resting on Kyra's bedside table. Jack knew she'd end up using them both. Walking over to her own table, she picked up the picture that Stacey had given her the day before. Drawing Riddick would be easier with a "model." She set to work.

Kyra rocked and muttered behind her as she carefully drew Riddick into the picture, standing behind Red Roger. Jack realized she was proud of the likeness she was achieving; Riddick's face looked very real and recognizable to her. She kept working, now drawing his arms.

"Who is that?" Kyra finally asked.

"Riddick."

"Your Riddick? What's he doing?"

"He's killing Red Roger, too. To make him *stay* dead." She didn't know if it would work, but maybe it'd be an idea that Kyra could hold onto. Maybe the idea that, when Roger tried to get back into her head, there was something else that would kick him out again, no matter how weak *she* felt... maybe it'd help her. She carefully drew Riddick's hands, one gripping Roger's hair tightly while the other brought a blade across his throat.

"He'll stay dead? He won't come back?" Kyra's voice was almost *needy* as she asked.

I hope I'm right about this. "That's right. He won't come back." Jack began to change the expression on Roger's face, as well as she could, from a gloating smirk to a look of fear and pain. Then she went to work on Kyra's face, changing the terror to relief.

"I could never get him to stop coming back, he just kept coming back over and over..." A note of relief had entered Kyra's voice.

God, I hope this works. "He can't now." She walked over to Kyra's table and picked up the red marker, and returned to the wall. In a moment, Roger's throat was spraying blood where Riddick's knife touched it, but none of the blood landed on the image of Kyra. "He's dead."

"He's dead..." Slowly, a strange smile spread over Kyra's face. "He's dead! I killed him and now Riddick killed him too and he's finally *dead*!" She lunged at the wall, smacking her hands onto it on either side of the drawing. "You're *dead*, you son of a bitch! You can't get me any more! Not ever again!"

Damn. Jack hoped Kyra would be back to herself a bit more before it was time to go to breakfast. This was getting a little spooky.

But the tension was finally leaving Kyra's frame, the pinched and harried look easing off of her face. She let out a deep breath, and glanced over at the picture of Riddick. "What's he really like?"

"Who?"

"Riddick. What really happened after the *Hunter-Gratzner* crashed? To everybody."

"Wow... that's a long story." Jack glanced at the clock. They only had an hour until breakfast now... maybe half an hour until the Killer's Club came looking for them. "Tell you what... how about I tell it tonight, after lights-out? When nobody else is around."

After all, it would fly in the face of everything she intended to tell Stacey today.

Kyra looked at her weighingly for a moment and then nodded. "Yeah. Maybe it'll give me some *good* dreams. What'd you dream about?"

Why the hell was the Theory of Relativity making Jack blush?

“A lesson a teacher gave me back at my old school.”

Kyra’s eyebrow went up.

“Oh god, no, nothing like that!” Jack found herself laughing. “It’s just I’m such a great big geek. It was all about the science of space travel and other stuff like that. Crazy, boring stuff.”

“Crazy is never boring.” Kyra smirked as she opened her dresser drawer and started pulling fresh clothes out. “You wanna see something?”

“Sure.” Jack walked over to Kyra, studying her for any lingering signs of her earlier distress, but the older girl seemed to have shaken it off completely. As she watched, Kyra took out a thick pair of socks that had her name scrawled on them in permanent marker.

“We’re not supposed to ‘own’ clothes here, but they decided I needed to have a few things that are totally mine. After I did this to a whole bunch of them, anyway. So these are my socks... and...” She touched the unusually thick soles and a small blade sprang out from the seam. “...my knives.”

Jack gasped. Kyra had a *knife* in the ward? How the hell...?

“They had an electrician from outside in here a while back. He wasn’t all that careful about his tools. I swiped two of his spare cutter blades when he had his head in a panel and nobody was looking.”

“Holy shit. Better you than Stacey.” Jack’s mind was reeling. What did Kyra expect to need knives for?

“That’s for sure. Those thick soles are a perfect hiding place. They also fit in the mouth but that’s kinda risky.” Kyra definitely had her equilibrium back, along with a pleased-cat expression on her face.

“What do you need them for?” She figured she’d better ask.

“Not much, here... this place is pretty decent.” Kyra put the socks away. “I promised myself I’d never get caught by some perverted fuck again, you know? We didn’t have guys like Carmouche at my last hospital, you know... guys you could actually trust to treat you like a human being, and who’d help you if you needed it. So I planned on helping myself as much as I had to.”

By having lethal defenses if she needed them. After the stories she’d told last night, Jack couldn’t really be surprised. “Yeah, I get that.”

Kyra started gathering up her clothes. “Riddick’s like that too, isn’t he? Like Carmouche. You didn’t need a knife because he *was* your knife.”

Something inside Jack’s chest twisted at that, as she began gathering up her own clothing. “Pretty much, yeah, until he ran out on me.”

“What are you going to do when Flint figures out you don’t really know where he is, and won’t sign those papers?”

Moment of truth. Jack realized she’d come to her decision while she slept. She turned and looked Kyra square in the eyes. “I won’t be here when he does.”

Kyra’s movement towards the door of their room came to a dead stop. For a moment, the two girls stared at each other, until the silence became so strong that it seemed to fill Jack’s ears. Finally, Kyra spoke. “You have a way out of here.”

Jack nodded, picking her words carefully. “We get up to A ward, and I can handle the rest. I know a back-door through the security.”

“So, what... you’re planning on just sashaying out?” Kyra seemed to have missed the significance of the *we*.

“Yeah,” she said, trying to keep her response nonchalant. “You wanna come with?”

Kyra shook her head, not in a gesture of *no* but rather one of *I can’t believe it*. “How the hell are you gonna manage that?”

People were stirring in the hallway outside. Jack stepped closer to Kyra, lowering her voice. “I know a back-door through the security system they’re using. I’ve used it before. And I know how they have the cameras timed. Seriously. We get up into A Ward, and we can waltz out of there any time we *want*.”

“There’s no way it can be that simple,” Kyra whispered back.

“Maybe not. That’s why I’m also gonna get a staff account from Stacey. I’m still working out all the details, but I figure we’ve got a little time, right? Nobody goes straight from C Ward to A Ward overnight. You want in?”

Slowly, *finally*, Kyra nodded. “I want *out*. I want out of this fucking hole, and away from all of these people. Too fucking many of them...”

Jack nodded, wondering where Kyra would want to run to when they got out. Would she really go merc? Maybe she’d head off to some backwater planet where she could live out in the woods like a wild woman, the way she had before she was finally caught. It made her wonder, all over again, where Riddick had gone, and how he was living. Was he vanishing into crowds, blending in with the people around him... or had he taken off for some barely-habitable world to live like a wild *man*? She really didn’t know. He’d handled himself well enough with people, but he’d been quick to disappear, too. Again it struck her that Kyra was more Riddick’s kind of person than she was. She might have shaved her head to express her crush through emulation, but Kyra... Kyra was the one with a seed of the same darkness in her.

The darkness was a part of Riddick that Jack had *never* tried to emulate. When she’d heard stories about him, she’d shuddered and tried to ignore the tales about his killing ways, focusing instead on the spectacular escapes he’d engineered. Her father had loved recounting those, especially when he was working on revamping a security system that Riddick had beaten. If there was any way Jack wanted to be like Riddick, anymore, it was that: his facility for escaping from places everyone thought inescapable. Kyra could take on the rest of him, if she wanted.

“Deal. We’ll talk more about that tonight, too, okay?” Voices were approaching, familiar Killer’s Club voices.

“Okay.” Kyra nodded and started moving for the door, just as Stacey knocked and then opened it.

“There you two are! C’mon before all the little brats use up the hot water.”

They headed, en masse, for the showers. Most of the other girls in the ward tried to avoid showering at the same time as the Killer’s Club; Jack sure had back before they’d swallowed her up. Now she was one of them, though...

...And now it was time to make the most of what that meant.

Kyra gave her a significant glance as she headed for Stacey after showering. The girl was dressing, preening at her reflection in the mirror. It occurred to Jack that Stacey was really

very beautiful, but in much the same way that cobras were beautiful. What would Stacey do once she was released? Who would she do it to?

“You need something?” Stacey’s eyes, technically, were beautiful too, or should have been, crystal blue with lush eyelashes... but they were the coldest, cruelest eyes Jack had ever seen in her life.

“Yeah,” Jack made herself reply. “After breakfast... I wanna talk to you about some stuff. Meet me in the library?”

She glanced around at the other girls to indicate that none of them were invited to the little tête-à-tête she had in mind.

Stacey smirked. She *obviously* knew what Jack wanted to talk about. “Yeah, I can do that. Gimme about an hour after breakfast and I’ll be there.”

An hour. Perfect. Carmouche would be on duty in the library; she could take care of something else she needed in the meantime.

Watching carefully all through breakfast, Jack caught the little bits of clues she’d need. Xi Hin was going to go after Celia right before lunch, probably while she’d still be telling Stacey her manufactured story about Riddick. She pretended not to care and was careful not to look Celia’s way; she doubted the girl would listen to a thing *she* had to say, anyway.

But things were coming together in her head. She could see the escape route forming. Now all she had to do was walk it.

After breakfast she went back to her room and picked up the two library books, giving Kyra and the other girls a friendly wave as she passed them again and wiggling her books to show her mission. There’d be no question in anybody’s mind later, if she did this right, that she was totally innocent. If she did this right, Celia would soon be out of their reach, and they’d never realize she was responsible for it.

The library was virtually deserted and, as she’d hoped, Carmouche was on duty. She carried her two books over, *Hatter Fox* on top. That had been the one Heather had chosen for herself on that final day; oddly enough, the titular character made Jack think a *lot* of Kyra. One of the images from the novel, Hatter trapped in a dog cage, kept haunting Jack, and she wondered if anything like that had been done to Kyra at her last institution—

Focus!

“Here, I need to return these.” She gave Carmouche a genuinely tremulous smile. It was still a little hard to talk to him without being reminded of Heather’s death. She’d been kind of surprised that she’d been able to read the books at all, but part of her had felt like reading them would actually bring her closer, in some strange way, to her lost friend.

“Thanks, Jack, I’ll get these signed right—”

She leaned forward, aware that nobody else was in the room and wanting to take advantage of it. “Celia’s going to get attacked again,” she whispered.

Carmouche started to pull back, alarm and awareness that he was inside the acceptable proximity borders between an orderly and a patient on his face, but he froze as her words registered. “What? When?”

“Xi Hin’s going to jump her a little before lunchtime.”

He frowned. “Xi Hin? Why her?”

She’d committed herself; the Killers Club girls would kick the shit out of her if they ever found out. She’d just have to go all the way.

“They’re doing this for entertainment, okay? I flipped out at Celia and now they’re just keeping it going because they think it’s *fun*. And ’cause if she keeps getting into fights all the time, it’ll go on *her* record instead of *theirs*. Look. *You* can’t stop the fight... it can’t be anybody they think I’ve talked to today, okay? But *stop* the fight, and for god’s sake, get her up to B Ward where she belongs.”

She could see him figuring the rest of it out. Celia wasn’t violent, not really. She was melodramatic as hell and probably talked a good game, but when it came right down to it, she wasn’t even self-destructive. A trendy cutter, maybe... maybe even a *real* cutter who really needed the self-mutilation for something other than truckloads of sympathy, but she wasn’t going to hurt anybody else and she wasn’t going to kill herself. And C Ward was going to chew her up if she didn’t get out fast.

Yeah, Carmouche got it. Jack stepped back from his desk and headed for one of the educational terminals. She’d catch up on her studies while she waited for Stacey to arrive.

Three orderlies passed through the library while she waited, and Carmouche got into hushed conversations with two of them. Jack hoped she’d get her staff account, and be familiar enough with the system, before anything appeared in it where Stacey might see. That sudden thought chilled her. An all-out war with Stacey would be a disaster.

Speak of the devil...

She entered the library alone and headed straight for Jack. They were far enough away from the orderly’s desk to speak in privacy, especially with the place almost deserted. Curiosity, and a sick hunger Jack didn’t want to contemplate, dominated her face as she took the empty chair.

“So, what’s up?”

First rule of negotiation, at least according to her mother: start from a position of strength. Ask for what you want as if it’s your native right.

“I want one of those staff accounts.”

Stacey’s eyebrow arched. “Those are pretty heavy-duty. I don’t just toss those around to everybody, you know.”

Of course not. “But you can get me one, can’t you?”

Cold blue eyes narrowed a little. “I *can*... what’s in it for me?”

She had to know already. But this was how the game was played, and Jack could play it. She had no choice. These wheels needed to get in motion, unless she really wanted to walk out the door of this place by betraying Riddick.

“Maybe...” She took a deep breath and frowned, pretending that the subject she was bringing up was hurtful and traumatic. Like Rachel had told her, she could look like a trapped fawn with enormous ease; it was time to use that to her advantage. “...I... could tell you about...”

“Riddick? You want a staff account in return for your story.” Stacey’s smile had become predatory.

“...yeah.” Jack’s voice was small and sounded rough in her ears as *real* anxiety started to surge. What if this didn’t work? This *had* to work. Everything depended on it working... what if she fucked up and Stacey didn’t believe her... or didn’t *deliver*?

“You got a deal. But your story’d better be good. C’mon... we’ll go to my room and you can tell me the story there.” Stacey started getting out of her seat.

“The account first.”

The other girl’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t trust me?”

“I just... I wanna know it’s made. Lots of people I thought were gonna be nice to me... y’know... weren’t.”

Like Riddick, if you’re catching my implications.

Stacey’s superior smile was back. “Okay. I can do that.”

She turned around and started punching things up on the terminal by her chair. After a few moments, she sat back with a smile and wrote something down on a piece of paper. “Okay, you’re in. This is the address of the screen you need to call up, and all of the commands you put in... and your user name and password. Which I’ll give you in my room, once you start talking. Okay?”

That’d do. It’d have to. “Okay.”

“Lemme just back out of here and then we’ll— well, *fuck*.”

Jack felt a chill move through her. “What?”

“They’re transferring that little bitch up to B Ward. What the fuck? She gets in two fights, and she gets to go to B Ward? This is so unfair.” Stacey slammed her fist down on the table.

Carmouche glanced up from his desk. “Everything okay, Stacey?”

“Yeah,” she ground out between clenched teeth. “Everything’s fine. Sorry.” She shut her terminal down with a gusty sigh. “Well, that just fucked my day. Your story’d better be good, Jack, because right now I could just... argh! Who the hell decided she was ready for B Ward?”

Me. But Jack couldn’t say that to her. She took another tack instead. “Who?”

“That fuckin’ Celia. She’s going upstairs, god damn it.” Stacey rose to her feet. “They had a transfer order up. She’s probably already heading up there. And we had it all worked out, too... shit.”

Jack climbed to her feet and followed Stacey out, glancing nervously at Carmouche. He’d moved fast. She hoped he’d been discreet about what he actually knew. If not, she hoped that her staff account would let her hide things from Stacey.

Definitely going to be “studying” after lunch. And moving as fast as she could to hide any handles she’d left sticking out.

Stacey led her back into her room, back to where the images of dangerous, brutal men dominated an entire wall. Riddick glared down at her from that wall, along with a few dozen other hardened criminals, his expression accusing. What she was about to claim he’d done, the lies she was about to tell, would be the worst sort of treachery.

*I have to do it. It’s not like anybody’s going to take her claims seriously if she **does** repeat the stories. Hearsay of a crazy girl? Yeah, right. Better her than Flint. Better her than Toombs.*

“So, c’mon... spill.” Stacey flopped down on her bed and gave Jack a sullen glare.

Jack took a deep breath, aware that now she was Stacey’s sole source of entertainment for the day. *Make it good. Make it real.*

“I...” She sat down on Omphalé’s bed and took a deep breath. “Do you want the whole story? Or just... the stuff he did to me?”

“Hmmm...” A hungry smile twitched at the corners of Stacey’s mouth. “How long had you been with him when he started hurting you?”

Jack took another deep breath. *Okay... gotta keep these facts straight in my head. He caught me alone in the settlement, before the eclipse, while the others were running tests on the skiff. Caught me alone, figured out I was really a girl... and made me pay for it. Just gotta keep the "facts" straight...*

She began talking, weaving her false tale of threats and taunts and sexual assault, feeling sick to her stomach. There wasn't any act. As she spoke, the emotions she wanted to convey to Stacey became real and immediate to her. Fear, not of Riddick, but that Stacey would see through her. Horror, not of Riddick's supposed acts, but the very real acts she was drawing her descriptions from, that had been committed against Kyra. Nausea and anguish, again for Kyra's sake and for the sake of every girl who'd ever really lived through this. As she spoke, as Stacey's expression became more and more enrapt, she started to feel something else as well... understanding even better why Kyra wanted to become a merc and hunt the kinds of criminals who would really do these things. Even understanding a little why the mercs who thought Riddick was one of that kind would treat him the way Johns had, using bit and blindfold and billyclub against him as though he was a rabid animal.

Her tears were real. The pain twisting at her as she spoke was real. Everything was real, except the story itself that she was telling. That, and that alone, was a lie... but Stacey would never know.

It *was* a lie...

...wasn't it?

17.

The Player and the Game

Jack ran out of Stacey's room at top speed, heading for the bathroom, the precious slip of paper with her staff account information clutched tightly in one hand. She ran flat-out, as though pursued by the natives of a world with too many suns and too much darkness. She still almost didn't make it.

It was only when she was already heaving that the full weight of the déjà vu settled on her. Weeks ago, after her first group therapy session, she'd flung herself into this very same stall. Then she'd been struggling to make people believe the truth about Riddick. Now... lies. She'd been telling horrible, nauseating lies that had driven what was left of her breakfast right back out of her.

If he knew what I'd said, he'd hate me so much...

It was over, she realized, as she forced herself to her shaky feet. Whatever chance she'd had of one day meeting Riddick again, renewing their friendship, indulging her fantasies... was over. She'd never be able to look him in the eye, not after betraying him like this. Even if he never knew, *she* would. She'd destroyed it, all of it. There was nothing left; nothing more. Richard B. Riddick was out of her reach forever, and she'd never have the right to look for him.

Jack had betrayed him. Jack had to die. Audrey would leave here and resume her life, but Jack had no right to live on anymore, within or without.

But first, she had to get out of this place.

Stacey's door was still closed when she left the bathroom. She tried not to think about what Stacey was doing behind that door, let alone what the vicious girl was imagining as she did it. Instead, she walked resolutely back to the library and the vacant terminals.

It had felt like she had been talking forever, but the clocks said it hadn't been all that long. Lunch was still two hours away. She could hear the sounds of a popular movie playing in the main recreation area. She recognized the opening credits theme and knew it was one almost everybody had been waiting to see. Abu and Lajjun, still trying to pull her out of her downward spiral, had taken her to it during its first week in theaters, a scant month before she cut her wrists.

The library would probably be deserted. Maybe she could get her ass covered even before lunch.

Carmouche had gone off-duty and been replaced by an orderly that Jack didn't recognize. That wasn't ideal. The woman was tall, slender but muscled, her medium-brown hair tied back. She was reading one of the old, thick, Victoria Holt novels from old Earth and *seemed* absorbed in the text, but her posture reminded Jack somehow of Riddick at rest: contained peril that could burst forth at any moment. Jack wondered if the orderly normally worked on D Ward. Most of her nametag was blocked by the book she held, but it ended with "-AN."

Pretending to ignore the orderly, Jack walked over to the terminals as calmly and resolutely as she could—*act like you belong and people will believe you belong*—waiting to

be challenged, but she wasn't. Either the orderly bought the act or just didn't care either way. Then again, everybody on the staff seemed to think they had all of their patients sandboxed on the computers. The truth was anything but.

Whatever else could be said about her, Stacey *had* come through. The login worked. Even better, as the staff menu opened up, Jack recognized its layout immediately.

Her father had helped design it. He'd shown her how it worked. And best of all, she still remembered the law enforcement override that he had helped build into it. Any law enforcement agency that had the command on file could get in. *She* could get in. On a level that the other girls had no idea existed.

I might not even have to wait to make my move until I leave C ward, she thought with shaky amazement.

Before she did anything else, though, she needed to make sure that she had control of the Celia situation. Stacey would be preoccupied for a little while longer... she hoped... and that would give her enough time to make sure that neither she—nor any of the other Killers Club girls with purloined admin accounts—could ever find out that it was Jack's intel that had led to the girl's transfer.

Snitches get stitches, she reminded herself. *Those would be hard for Audrey to explain.*

She pulled up the transfer notice and read it carefully. No signs of her handiwork there. Next, however, was Celia's file.

There it was.

Based on confidential information from a fellow patient, we now know that Celia has been targeted for group bullying by a clique in the C ward nicknamed the "Killer's Club." Given her relatively clean record and overall progress, we are moving her to B ward to ensure her safety.

That wouldn't do at all. Only members of the Killer's Club had been in the room when Stacey revealed her plan, and only Jack was an unknown quantity to them. If any of them read it, it would be instantly obvious that the patient in question was her.

Let's just fix that, shall we?

Jack rewrote the paragraph, changing the wording carefully so that it would still sound like something an adult, a professional, had written. Finally she was satisfied.

Based on similar prior incidents, we believe that Celia has been targeted for group bullying, possibly by a clique in the C ward nicknamed the "Killer's Club." Given her relatively clean record and overall progress, we are moving her to B ward to ensure her safety.

That, she finally thought with a sigh, was as good as she could make it. Now she just needed to make sure there were no handles in her own record... and do a little sanitizing of any information that could be used to track her once she bugged out.

Her record still listed her as Jane Doe 7439. That was a good sign. If they were trying to pin her identity down, nothing had come back yet. She moved to the most recent entries in her chart first. Would they have mentioned the incident?

Damn. Of course they did. And they have no idea how porous their system is...

Not that the code was porous, of course. Her father didn't *do* bad work. It wasn't his fault that one of the orderlies had been so lax about security, or that none of the features to detect and prevent that kind of breach that had been enabled. And she might just clean up a few more things once she launched the law enforcement back door.

But first, there was an entry to fix—and carefully—before any of the Killer's Club girls thought to take a look.

In spite of the fact that Miss Doe was the first to get into a fight with Celia Wyndham, she has obliquely expressed remorse for the act by warning us that Miss Wyndham is now the target of systematic bullying. The previous concerns about her closer association with the Killer's Club may be unfounded.

She definitely couldn't risk any of the girls seeing that.

It took her almost a half hour, and a dozen unsatisfactory attempts, to find wording that would work. Not far off, she could hear the movie getting more and more car-chase and explosion heavy. Although few girls ventured into the library at any time, she couldn't risk any of Stacey's friends looking over her shoulder while she worked on this. Satisfied at last, she saved the new paragraph.

Miss Doe's instigation of the systematic bullying of Celia Wyndham seems to confirm our previous concerns about her growing association with the Killer's Club. She should be monitored closely for any signs of remorse for her actions.

Much better, she thought. Now she was the Killer's Club's newest accomplice, not their snitch.

She read through the rest of her record carefully, looking for any notes that could potentially connect her to Audrey MacNamera once she went on the run. Someone had identified her accent as common to Deckard's World. She deleted the line and found three more references to Deckard's World—all speculative, but still—that needed to be deleted as well. The movie ended as she saved and closed Jane Doe 7439's files. Nobody had come in yet; the orderly who had taken over from Carmouche appeared to be engrossed in her Victoria Holt novel and happy to ignore her.

Perfect.

Backing out to the administrative main menu, she launched the special login for law enforcement, holding her breath until its distinctive menu appeared. Now for the important moves.

She changed her staff account so that it was top-tier, with access to everything, and checked that the other Killer's Club accounts—easy to identify now that she could see who

had created each account—had been on the same tier that her own had been. She was relieved to see that none of them would have had greater clearance than she had; she didn't need to dig back into her file, or Celia's, to make sure that she hadn't missed anything she hadn't had access to. When it suddenly occurred to her to check Stacey's file for references to her, she was relieved to see that there were none.

She only got to spend a few more minutes poking around on the law enforcement level, gleaning passcodes and information about lockdown systems, before she heard voices approaching. Her screen was back to normal—the screen of an ordinary patient—before Xi Hin and Omphalé walked in.

She suppressed a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Jack,” Xi Hin said, her voice very nearly friendly. “You haven't seen a certain drama queen around, have you?”

Jack glanced nervously at the orderly, who was continuing to ignore them. The woman turned another page in her novel, seemingly oblivious to their conversation. *Or she's really good at pretending not to listen...*

She decided to at least pretend to go with the latter.

Making her glance at the orderly a little more obvious, Jack motioned Xi Hin and Omphalé to move further away from the front desk with her. Both girls looked intrigued as they followed her.

“She's gone,” she whispered, once she was sure that even an astute eavesdropper would be out of range.

“Gone?” Xi Hin blurted. Omphalé shushed her. “What do you mean, gone?” she continued in a whisper. “It's my turn to—”

That earned her another shushing from Omphalé.

“Stacey told me earlier,” Jack whispered, glad that she didn't have to be the originator of the news. “Sent up to B Ward.”

“Why?” Omphalé whispered, her expression shocked. Stacey had been enraged, but Omphalé just seemed confused. The plans for tormenting the girl had probably just been a diversion to her, and not the serious business they'd become for Stacey.

Jack shrugged. It was better not to leave too many handles out by knowing too much. “That's what she wanted to know, too.”

Xi Hin turned and sat down at the nearest terminal—Jack's—and logged her out before logging into *her* staff account. After a moment, she swore. “They figured us out, looks like. Sounds like Stacey's not the first one to play that game here.”

Omphalé gave Jack an askance look and whispered something to Xi Hin, who started typing up a new query.

Bet I know what they're going to check...

Omphalé's amused snort confirmed it. “They say you instigated it all, Jack. Stacey's gonna be pissed that you're getting all the credit.”

Jack walked over and read the doctored passage over Xi Hin's other shoulder, taking her time before reacting. Let them think she was a slowish reader. Let them think she'd never read that paragraph before, much less written most of it. “Looks to me like that's *blame* I'm getting, not credit.”

“Po-tay-toe, Po-tah-toe.”

Inwardly, part of her wanted to curl into a ball and shiver for hours. She had come dangerously close to earning the lifelong enmity of the cruelest and most brutal girls in the ward. If Stacey had decided to dig into the reasons for Celia's transfer *before* hearing Jack's story, or if the other Killer's Club girls hadn't been distracted by an action movie...

I'd be in pieces, or maybe just in D Ward... and I'd never get out of here.

"You okay?"

She glanced over at both girls. "Yeah, sorry. I, uh... told Stacey some stuff she wanted to know about... uh... Riddick... and..."

She swallowed. Thinking about that recitation in Stacey's room made her feel ill and guilty all over again. No faking needed.

The girls' faces were almost sympathetic.

"Hey," Xi Hin said after a moment. "I bet the therapists'd say it's good you're facing that stuff head-on. You know, admitting the truth."

She and Omphalé nodded at each other with the sage expressions of old veterans at therapy.

"I guess," she replied, and the lunch bell rang.

Food had no appeal to Jack. She sat quietly at the table, picking at the unappetizing contents of her plate, while conversation flowed around her. She avoided even glancing in Stacey's direction. It was hard to look Kyra's way, either. Those had been *her* ordeals she'd been describing. She just hoped that Kyra was right about Stacey, and that the stories would never spread. Having Riddick's reputation tarnished with Red Roger's crimes on Canaan Mountain would be a disaster.

I need more time in the system, she thought to herself. The sooner she could get out of this place, the better, before even more of her soul was compromised. She needed codes. She needed to sanitize Kyra's records, too, so that her friend would also be harder to trace. There were a thousand moving parts and she needed to line all of them up—

Everyone was getting up. The meal was over.

"I'd ask how it went, but I guess I know," murmured Kyra as they rose. "You okay?"

Jack looked over at Kyra, wishing she had even half the armor and aplomb the older girl possessed. Knowing what she had endured just made her all the more impressive.

I have to get her out of here.

"I will be," she managed after a moment. "I need to get more time on the library terminals. Can you cover for me? Keep people from wondering what I'm up to?"

Kyra nodded, although she seemed to be wondering why it was so important. When the other girls in the Killer's Club headed for the recreation room, she kept them distracted while Jack slipped away.

The romance novel enthusiast was still on duty in the library. Jack picked a different workspace, selecting a table with two terminals facing away from both the duty desk and the entry. On one, she began leading a set of false trails, using her patient account to browse pages that related to interests she'd never had as Audrey MacNamera. On the other, she logged in to her improved, highest level staff account and made some further changes to her patient record, deleting entries about her prior browsing history and the subjects she'd pursued. In their place, she added records connected to the new sites she was browsing. Jane Doe 7439, she had decided, liked to read about neo-Cajun cuisine, watched New Creole

cooking shows, liked to listen to zydeco music, and never made anything above a B- on her schooling modules.

While another cooking show started on the terminal beside her, she switched over to the law enforcement account and began setting up a master passcode that would let her go through all of the facility's doors... undetected. Via Ghost Mode.

"They don't understand what they're asking for," John MacNamera had grouched at her two years ago, leaning back on his couch and blowing out a frustrated breath. "This 'Ghost Mode' is going to blow up in their faces one day."

Audrey had sat quietly. Her father would explain without her asking. He always did. She had glanced down at the specs he was working with. There it was: Ghost Mode. She scanned over the instructions for using it, filing them away in her memory.

It was very fortunate that nobody in the hospital had any idea just how good her memory *was*.

"Eidetic" was the term her mother used with her. She only had to read things once to remember them clearly and precisely. And her mother had sternly explained, after she got into a fight with one of her cousins about which of them was remembering an event "right," that what she could do was extremely rare, a gift that she hadn't done anything to earn, and that it was rude to show it off and unkind to expect others to have it.

Which, fortunately, meant that long before she left Deckard's World and began her run, she had become an old hand in concealing the full extent of her knowledge and recall. Nobody *expected* a kid to remember everything, down to the tiniest detail, so nobody—except possibly her parents—ever realized that she was *faking* it when she got less-than-perfect marks on a quiz or test, or claimed not to remember something that had happened when she was three.

Now, however, sitting at the terminal, she could still see the instructions for "Ghost Mode" in her memory, and still hear her father grumbling about the mistake the security firm was making.

"When this mode is attached to a security code, no records are generated when the code is used," he'd explained after a moment. "Sure, that's great for a situation where you think someone high up is compromised and you don't want them to know they're being investigated, or the police are on the way... but I can think of a million ways it could be abused."

"What are you going to do?" Audrey had asked him.

"I can't take it out. We can't have one package for clients who want Ghost Mode and another for clients who don't. The code's too integral." Her father had sighed. "But we can make two sets of documentation. Only the clients who *request* Ghost Mode will get instructions on how to enable it."

But it was always there, asked for or not, enabled or not. Now Jack keyed in the instructions for making her newly-minted security codes "Ghost Mode," hiding them from the general administrative registry as well. She'd chosen a number combination that no one else used. Now it would open any door on any of the floors and there would be no record that the doors had opened at all.

Sure, she could have gone through the doors using any combination of the administrators' passcodes—they were all in her head now—but this code had a further advantage: she could

share it with Kyra, and her friend would only need to remember one number.

She spent the next hour—while a middle-aged woman, on the screen next to her, quietly droned on about the best jambalaya recipes—studying the camera layouts and timing on the stairs between C Ward and A Ward, and the layout of the ground level. She had the escape route picked, the timing worked out, and everything memorized when she heard voices approaching. By the time four girls entered the library, she seemed to be doing poorly on an algebra quiz while listening to singers from centuries earlier admonish listeners: “Don’t Mess With My Toot-Toot.” She got a few funny looks, but nobody seemed to suspect anything.

They’d never heard her listen to music before. They’d never know that she listened to anything but zydeco. Now, though, there would be witnesses to the fact that this was Jane Doe 7439’s music of choice. Everything in her record would point to a colony on the opposite side of the Helion system from Deckard’s World.

We can leave whenever we want, she reassured herself. *As soon as I clean up Kyra’s records so she’s harder to trace.*

That, she decided, would be her next stop once she was alone again.

Score one for zydeco music. The girls, muttering about how weird she was, left quickly with their books. Once they were gone, she logged back in as a top admin and got back to work. She opened up Kyra’s file—

Oh. Shit.

A cold chill flowed down her back. Her fingers shook as she typed. She didn’t dare change much—the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain was, after all, the facility’s closest thing to a celebrity patient—but she changed what she could.

This was bad. This was very... *very* bad.

Her decision made, she switched over to the duty rosters and made subtle adjustments that would ensure a nice, wide open gap in coverage, all along her planned escape route, between 2 and 3 am. Scrolling through the daytime duty roster, she found the anomaly she was looking for. She switched back over to the law enforcement account and looked at the orderly’s records again.

It was even worse than she had thought.

Fuck. She glanced up at the seemingly-oblivious woman at the front desk, wondering whether she was just killing time or paying closer attention to everything than it seemed.

It wouldn’t matter. It couldn’t matter. She couldn’t *let* it matter.

She shut down the terminals when the dinner bell rang, and walked out of the library as calmly as she could, trying not to let it be too obvious that her skin was trying to crawl right off of her body.

She forced herself to eat her entire dinner. It was dry and tasteless in her mouth, and most of her attention was spent on keeping it down. From the few comments she could make herself focus on, everybody thought she was still out of sorts from her morning conversation with Stacey. She squirreled away a few rolls when nobody was looking.

For later.

The woman was gone when she returned to the library, replaced by one of the regular evening-duty orderlies. Jack felt a tiny amount of the tension leave her spine as she worked. It only took her another two hours to get everything in place. Her hands shook a little as she

shut down the terminal, spent a few minutes pretending to be a germaphobe and wiping down all of the terminals she had used that day, and left the library.

Normally she showered in the morning, but she felt like she stank of fear. After a quick shower, she killed time cleaning the room she and Kyra shared, wiping down every surface that she might have touched at any point. Would anybody bother dusting for fingerprints? She wasn't sure, but she didn't want to risk it. While she waited for Kyra to return for Lights Out, she ran over the plan again and again in her mind, rehearsing each step of the way, each possible complication.

It would work. It had to.

Finally Kyra arrived, saying goodnight to Colette and Xi Hin before she entered their room.

"You've been the talk of the Club," she said with a wry grin. "Not that Stacey's sharing the story you told, thank God, but it bought you some legit cred. Especially with you being the insti—"

"Don't let anybody give you meds tonight. If they do, fake swallowing them. Spit them out when nobody's looking."

"Okay...?"

Jack walked up to Kyra, getting close enough that she could breathe the next words and her friend would still hear them, but nobody else possibly could. "We're leaving tonight."

Kyra went still, staring at her in surprise and wonder. "Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" It was to her credit that she didn't even ask *how*, given that Jack had previously said they needed to get to A Ward first.

"There's a transfer order in for you. For tomorrow at noon."

"*What?*" Kyra whisper-hissed in astonishment.

"Somebody decided you're well enough to stand trial. They're shipping you back to New Dartmouth. And the mercenary in charge of taking you there is already here, pretending to be an orderly."

"But—"

"Doesn't matter. We're going tonight. 2 am. Don't go to sleep."

Someone knocked on the door.

As if controlled by the same set of puppet strings, Kyra and Jack retreated to their beds in tandem. "Come in!" Jack called.

The Victoria Holt-reading orderly stood in the doorway. Her name tag, no longer obscured, confirmed everything Jack had already learned about her.

E. Logan

They didn't even bother giving her a fake name...

The false orderly, a woman Jack now knew was really named Eve Logan, professional bounty hunter, entered the room with a smile that was just a hair too wide to be authentic, carrying a tray with pills on it. "Time for bed, girls!"

Neither one of them were normally scheduled for bedtime sedation. Their eyes met for the briefest moment. Then Kyra was all smiles, reaching for the cup the merc was offering her.

Jack accepted hers, fumbling the cup long enough to keep Logan from noticing that Kyra was pocketing her pills instead of putting them in her mouth. *She* was glad that her cousin Rob had gone through a “close-up magic” kick and had insisted on teaching her several variations of the Vanishing Quarter. Eve Logan left a moment later, undoubtedly convinced that both girls would soon be sedated heavily enough that neither one would be up before noon.

Kyra gave her a haunted look as the lights were lowered. Jack nodded. She had set a timer in the system. The lights would come partway back up at 2 am exactly, right as their door unlocked and all of the orderlies would have assignments to be nowhere nearby. Eve Logan, she knew, would be asleep in the administrative guest building by then; if she woke up for any reason, she’d find her door and comms mysteriously locked and unresponsive until daybreak.

Glancing over at Kyra, barely visible in the dark, Jack had a feeling that both of them would still be wide awake when the lights came up.

18.

The Game, Afoot

By the time the lights rose at 2 a.m., Jack's nerves were screaming at a fever pitch. She and Kyra sat up simultaneously.

Jack walked over to Kyra's side so she could keep her voice to a whisper. "Anything you want, grab now. Once we walk through that door, it's going to lock behind us and nobody will be able to open it until Lights On."

Kyra gave her an impressed look, walking over to her drawers and grabbing the two pairs of socks she had told Jack about: the ones hiding her knives. She gestured to her pajamas. *Do we need to change?* was her unspoken question.

Jack shook her head and motioned toward the door. The only thing *she* had chosen to take was a small cloth, which she planned to use to keep her fingerprints off of everything. She'd already erased her fingerprints from her files this afternoon, retracting two outstanding database queries at the same time, but there was no point in leaving them new samples to collect. Their room had already been thoroughly wiped down.

The lights dimmed back off as Kyra opened the door, exactly according to plan. Jack followed her out, closing the door behind them and giving it a gentle, testing push. It had locked. She took a deep, shaky breath, aware that Kyra was watching her in the dim light, and led the way toward the door out of C Ward.

The halls were empty and silent, with no sign of the usual guard staff that would normally be on duty. On the very rare occasions when Jack had needed to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, someone had always been nearby and watching. Not now. It was more than a little spooky.

Jack knew exactly where all of the staff probably was right now, exactly where her faked orders had sent each of them at 1:45 and how long it would take them to complete the tasks they believed they had been assigned... but there was always the possibility of error, of some annoyed or bored person deciding "let's not and say we did" about an assignment, someone being so efficient that they would manage to get done well ahead of schedule, or someone procrastinating. Her nerves screamed at her that, any moment, she and Kyra would be caught before they had even left C ward. It took all of her effort not to launch into a flat-out run for the door.

She made herself keep walking, steadily and carefully. She had budgeted them plenty of time. As long as they weren't seen, they should be all right.

They had reached the door when she heard voices around the corner, grumbling about the stupid task she had assigned them and arguing over whether it really had to be done *right this moment*. Kyra gave her a stricken look.

Deep breath.

Her cloth-covered hand was surprisingly steady as she punched in the Ghost Code. The security light flashed green and, with a soft click, the door opened before her. She motioned Kyra through.

And then, they were in the stairwell. She closed the door as softly as she could, releasing the breath she was holding as the security light switched back to red.

Two more doors greeted them. One, to Jack's left, opened on the stairway down to D Ward and the isolation wing, while the other, across from the door she had just closed, led upward to B Ward and the levels above it. Like a twisted airlock, the landing itself was just a waiting area, a security measure to prevent... well, to prevent exactly what she was doing.

Next to her, Kyra looked as taut-wound as she felt. An aura of danger was coming off of her, similar to the one that she had felt coming off of Riddick months ago, as he prepared to flood the skiff with fire suppressant. The older girl had switched into battle mode.

Jack didn't, as far as she knew, *have* a battle mode, but she could feel her own mode switching on, the one that had let her power through exams and crack her way through research sources. The one that she had used when she was leaving Deckard's World, to make her way through both familiar and new security systems. Her focus had gone needle-sharp.

"Nobody can get into the stairwell now, not as long as we're in it," she murmured to Kyra. "I need you to remember this number chain. 7-4-3-3-4-2-5. Put it in any keypad and whatever you're trying to open will open. Repeat it back."

Her voice the tiniest thread in the silence, Kyra responded. "7-4-3-3-4-2-5."

Jack nodded and punched the code into the door that led up to B Ward. She ushered Kyra through, made sure it locked behind her, and began climbing the steps. She could hear Kyra almost-silently repeating the numbers beside her.

Most of the keypads had letters on them. She wondered if Kyra would notice that the code was spelling out Riddick's name. Didn't matter. That had been her own private joke. She was, after all, pulling a Riddick here, breaking out of a place that was supposed to be too secure for such breakouts.

She wondered if her father would be mortified by what she was doing.

She had, after all, cut through virtually every safeguard he had ever designed, because she knew the designs as intimately as if she had created them herself. That, she realized, was one handle she would have absolutely no control over: if anybody spotted that the compromised systems had a designer in common, John MacNamera, who had a missing daughter her age...

It didn't matter. Not now. There was nothing she could do about it, anyway.

They had reached the door to the next landing. Jack entered the code again. Green. They passed into the B Ward vestibule.

Below her, she knew, things would be returning to almost normal. Aside from her room with Kyra remaining locked until Lights On, few other anomalies would remain as long as nobody tried to go *up* from either C or D Ward. If D Ward called for backup for any reason, the orderlies on C Ward would know and could respond, and the reverse was true as well. Only a few minutes had passed so far, but they were on schedule, and the disruption was still minimal, negligible, hopefully both unnoticeable and unnoticed.

She punched the Ghost Code into the door for the A Ward stairway and ushered Kyra through. The older girl had remained silent and hypervigilant, seeming to understand the stakes every bit as well as—and perhaps even better than—she did.

And now, Jack thought as they climbed the stairs toward A Ward, B Ward was returning to a level of normalcy... as long as nobody needed to go up.

They passed through the A Ward doors two minutes later. Now all of the wards could go about business as usual, slightly more isolated from the outside world than they realized, but otherwise normal except for one locked and very empty room.

The last flight of stairs, used by both the girls' and boys' wards, was as ghostly-silent as the previous ones, but it felt somehow more momentous. At the top, she would no longer be controlling most of the cameras, after all. She wouldn't need to.

They reached the door at the top, and she put her hand on Kyra's shoulder, feeling the tiniest flinch beneath her fingers. She kept her voice to the thinnest thread of a whisper.

"Okay. This is where you want to do exactly what I do, exactly when I do it. If I walk, you walk with me. If I stop, you stop too. I know how all of the cameras on the main level are timed. If we do this right, we won't appear on any of them."

"What about the cameras in the stairwell? And below us?"

"I put them on a loop."

Kyra looked stunned. "How?"

"I set it up this afternoon. Short loops of the cameras, seeing nothing, from recordings made about this time last night. So the light would be the same. The loops started when I punched in the code to leave C Ward. When we walk through this door and it locks behind us, they'll go back to actually recording what's happening now."

"You couldn't do the same with the ones up top?"

"Not with most of them. Many of them are moving. And this level has actual windows. Furniture. Things that get moved around from day to day. A loop from another night would be more obvious. But it's fine. They'll never see us. You ready?"

She could feel Kyra steeling herself next to her. "Let's do it."

Once more, Jack punched in the Ghost Code. The door's click echoed through the stairwell as it opened, but nobody from the lower wards should hear it. She hoped.

Most of the people who worked on the Admin level worked there in the day. The nighttime staff was a skeleton crew, much as the orderlies on the Third Shift were a third in number of either of the two day shifts. A handful of security staff and a few janitors were the only occupants, and almost all of them had been assigned to the two upper floors for the next hour. Jack glanced at the chrono in the hallway.

2:15.

Their silent, careful ascent had taken fifteen minutes, mostly because of how cautious she was being.

Jack closed the door behind them. She rested her hand on Kyra's arm as she watched the movement of the cameras closest to them. One stationary camera stared right at them, but saw nothing. It would continue to loop on nothing until she punched in the Ghost Code again, away from its reach.

Once she was certain of where she was in the timing, she squeezed Kyra's arm and began walking. Not toward the exit.

Kyra gave her a confused look but kept up with her, halting when she stopped abruptly and then walking again with her once the cameras were looking away again. When they reached Jack's destination, she gave Jack another quizzical look.

Jack wished she could put more concrete meaning into the smile she gave Kyra in return, as she punched the Ghost Code into the door of the Women's Locker Room and ushered her through.

The lights came on automatically as they entered, and Jack closed her eyes against the sudden brightness for a moment. Behind them, the locker room door closed, locked, and became impervious to all codes except the Ghost Code until their exit.

"What's this for?" Kyra whispered.

"We can't go out in our PJs," Jack whispered back with a grin. "It'd be dead obvious where we escaped from. Locker number 223. The nurse who uses it has your shoe size and is maybe a size bigger than you in pants and shirts. She's on duty down on D ward right now, so her street clothes should be in there. Her shift won't end until after they realize we're gone."

"What's her combination?"

"Just use the code I gave you. It works for all the locks."

Kyra gave her another impressed look and walked over to locker number 223. Jack walked over to 347 and popped it open. Her choice was an orderly on B Ward, who was tall enough that her pants wouldn't show Jack's ankles.

The chrono read 2:25 when they finished changing, and 2:35 when Jack finished going through the night shift lockers for spare cash and wiping prints off of everything she and Kyra had touched. There wasn't a huge amount of money, but there didn't need to be. She had other plans for that. But cash was always useful, and its absence might distract law enforcement, briefly, from the real nature of what had happened that night.

"One more stop and then we're on our way out."

She could see that Kyra was already feeling antsy. Freedom was so close, after all, why delay it? But this was necessary.

They reached Director Flint's office, unseen, at 2:40. Twenty minutes left until the diversionary activities she'd assigned the staff ended on the levels below them, fifty until they ended in the admin levels. Jack intended to be out of the building before 3 am, but she had built in the extra time, just in case.

His office was much as she remembered it. She glanced over the papers on his desk, quickly, spotting the transfer orders for Kyra, awaiting final signatures. Helion Prime, it seemed, had a real *thing* for hard copies rather than digital, probably thanks to the whole AI Rebellion that had happened on Helion Six a decade earlier. Lajjun had told her about that one day, when she'd asked why so many of the things that were automated on other worlds—or, at least, on Deckard's World—were done manually. The people of Helion had a huge distrust for computer minds.

Which, come to think of it, probably explained why so many of the higher security features on her father's systems had been switched off. In all probability, the hospital and local law enforcement didn't even know Ghost Mode existed on their systems.

She moved to Flint's file cabinet. Its keypad control was susceptible to Ghost Mode; she'd made sure of it a few hours ago. The files, well organized, included hard copies of everything

known about her and Kyra. She pulled their files out and closed the cabinets.

The decision, to go full-on Scorched Earth, had come to her when she was almost done preparing for their escape. At 3:30 am, the instructions she had left behind would wipe the last year's worth of backup data stored by the hospital, in both its secondary and tertiary locations. Meanwhile, a small collection of its data, about Heather and other patients on her deadly medicine, would be forwarded to several local media outlets. Most of the current, live records would be undamaged by the purges, but two files would be irretrievably corrupted: hers, and Kyra's. With their hard copies lost as well, it would be hard for the hospital to reconstruct most of the details they had amassed about their two missing jailbirds... especially given the heat that would hopefully come down on them almost immediately with the news about the potentially lethal drug being handed out to a dozen patients.

"Wipe down anything I've been touching, please," she said to Kyra, as she moved to Flint's physical Inbox.

Kyra nodded, pulling out one of her special socks from the pocket of her new pants, and running it thoroughly over the file cabinet. Jack flipped through the Inbox until she found the packet she was looking for. It would have arrived shortly after midnight—the courier had been instructed to deliver it between midnight and 1 am—and so no one except the front desk would have seen it.

Inside, a dozen cards, ostensibly reward gifts for high-performing staffers, waited to be activated. Jack logged into Flint's terminal, in full Ghost Mode, and activated them, one eye on the chrono. It was 2:50 once she was done. She divided the cards into two piles, pocketing half and holding half out to Kyra.

"Funds for our travels," she whispered. "There's a muni transport card in there, and money for food and clothes."

Kyra's expression was a little awed as she took the cards.

The last time Jack had staged a bug-out—back when she'd left Deckard's World to go after her father—she hadn't had these kinds of resources, and she'd found herself desperately wishing for them. This time, she was going to make sure she didn't have to learn from the same mistakes twice. The hospital might not even notice how light their petty cash account was until after they finished dealing with all of their more pressing scandals, by which time—she hoped!—the last traces of the path the money had taken would be wiped away.

"We're almost ready," Jack said. She slid her file, and Kyra's, and Kyra's transfer papers, into the empty envelope. Then she opened up Director Flint's printer, pulling out a loose piece of paper and nodding for Kyra to wipe the machine down. She set the paper on Flint's desk and inscribed her final message to him.

I promised you that I would tell you the truth about Riddick
before I left.

I always keep my promises, so here it is:

You will never, ever find him.

—Jack B. Badd

Kyra laughed softly beside her.

She *had* promised that the truth would be sitting on his desk when she left, but that part was one she needed to break. It would be too easy, too obvious, and would give the game away too quickly. She folded the paper, twice, and opened the drawer that had contained her file. She tucked the paper into the now-empty hanging folder that bore the label Jane Doe 7439, closed the drawer, and gave it a final wipe-down.

It was 2:55.

The stuffed envelope tucked under one arm and a smaller envelope in her hand, Jack opened the door to Flint's office. He rated a stationary camera, which had begun looping when she and Kyra had left the women's locker room. It would continue looping until she put in her next code. With Kyra waiting beside her, she timed the nearby cameras in their sweeps, and then began walking purposefully toward the front desk. Kyra kept pace silently. Jack was suddenly aware that Flint's decorative letter-opener, a bit of metal styled like a miniature antique sword, was now in Kyra's right hand.

Well, why not? So far, everything had gone according to plan, but there were no guarantees.

She could make out the bank of monitors at the front desk, showing moving and static shots from around the hospital wards. The timing was completely randomized, but she knew that nothing had appeared to break the desk guard's boredom.

Well, until now... She put her hand on Kyra's shoulder, stopping her by a door with a keypad. Taking out her little cloth, she keyed in one penultimate code.

It wasn't 7-4-3-3-4-2-5. Not this time. Instead, she keyed in a new Ghost Code, switching from the quiet escape scenario to her Scorched Earth plan: 4-3-2-8-4-3-7.

HEATHER

And all hell began to break loose.

The monitors on the front desk dissolved into static. Then the lights died, plunging the complex into total blackness for ten seconds before emergency lighting activated. Throughout the hospital, Jack knew, a very convincing simulation of a blackout was unfolding. To everyone else within the building, it would appear that the emergency generators had switched on, powering essential systems.

Except that none of the cameras were recording anymore.

Except that some of the locks that were supposed to automatically unlock in an outage appeared to be stuck. And others, that were supposed to automatically lock down, were wide open.

Such as the freight entryway, just out of the direct line of sight of the front desk, and right next to her.

She pushed it open and ushered Kyra through, closing the door quietly as she heard the front desk guard trying to reach for backup on his comm.

Too bad the comms system was completely offline, now, too. All he'd get in response would be static.

Low red light bathed the short corridor she and Kyra hurried down. At its end, she simply pushed on the waiting, disarmed door. It opened onto a driveway with LOADING ZONE marked on it in Helion Prime's four primary languages.

Heather's body, she suddenly realized, would have taken this exact route when it left the hospital.

"Come on," she murmured to Kyra. "We're almost all the way out."

"There's more?" Kyra asked, keeping her voice soft as she jogged beside her up the driveway.

"Just the gate. Then we'll be out. Gonna take us about five minutes to reach it."

It took less than that.

With the gate almost in sight, Jack pulled Kyra to the side of the driveway and motioned for her to get low, creeping forward next to the hedge that lined both sides of the drive. She could hear the gate guard cursing, unable to raise either the outside world or the main building. The gate stood partway open, frozen in that position, seemingly having malfunctioned upon the start of the blackout.

"We can make it if we run," Kyra murmured.

"We're not going that way," Jack told her. "C'mon."

The hedge had a small break between one bush and the next, and a cobbled pathway emerging between the two bushes. Jack pulled Kyra down the path, to a small human-sized gate that appeared in the wall. Through the bars, she could see the virtually deserted parking lot beyond it. Only one vehicle was parked there; only one visitor was staying overnight.

She keyed Riddick's name into a security keypad for the final time, and the little gate opened.

"When you go through, go left and stay close to the wall so the guard on the main gate can't see you," She told Kyra in a whisper.

Kyra nodded and went left. Jack closed the gate and followed her.

Now, behind them, the security system moved into its endgame, simulating a whole slew of minor malfunctions that expanded to include the guest facility—mostly—and the outer grounds. The lights over the parking area flickered and died. Most of the guest facility lost power as well. But not Eve Logan's rooms. Nothing happened within them to disturb her rest... Jack hoped.

Enveloped in full darkness now, Jack grabbed Kyra's hand and pulled her into a run, through the vast emptiness of the parking lot and toward the driveway beyond.

"Is somebody out there?" a man's voice called from behind them.

A moment later, Jack heard a window roll up.

"What's going on?" a woman called.

Fuck. Eve Logan, awake. Jack squeezed Kyra's hand and ran flat out for the driveway.

"We got no power down here! I can't even call anybody! Can you?" the gate guard shouted to Logan.

Jack and Kyra reached the driveway and sprinted up its length as the guard began sweeping his flashlight around the lot. Kyra had begun to outpace Jack, but waited for her at the edge of the road.

"Where the hell are we?" she asked. "I thought we were in a city!"

"More like its outer suburbs," Jack told her. "Don't worry. Logan can't get out of her room for about another fifteen minutes, tops, and by then..."

The headlights for the muni bus appeared as it rounded the corner and approached. Jack stepped up to the bus stop and touched its call button. This, she knew, was how most of the

staff got to and from work.

“...we will be long gone. Get out the muni transport card I gave you.” Jack already had hers in her hand.

Kyra fumbled for it, almost dropping her other cards, but then had it in her hand as well. Jack wasn't sure what she'd done with Flint's letter opener, but doubted she'd actually let go of it.

Jack opened the smaller envelope she'd been carrying and pulled out the final two items she'd ordered along with the money cards. “Here,” she told Kyra, clipping a GUEST tag from the hospital onto her shirt. She clipped her own on just before the headlights from the bus illuminated them.

The driver barely gave them a second look once he'd glanced at their tags. The muni transport cards worked. Jack sank down into one of the bus's seats, Kyra beside her, struggling not to give into the urge to shake herself to oblivion.

“Four stops from now, we get off, and get on the train. We're taking a detour into one of the shittiest parts of town to get rid of our files and change out our clothes. Hope you still have your knives on you,” she murmured to Kyra, low enough to keep the bus driver from hearing.

Kyra's nod was tight, but the look in her eyes was warm in a way that it had never been before. Jack had been aware that, at some point in the past, she had earned Kyra's respect, but that had changed.

Now, she realized with a strange lurch, she had earned something even stronger. Admiration.

19.

Forgive Me, Gina

Jack had only managed to get three hours of sleep the night before the breakout. When the sun finally rose on her and Kyra, a surreal veil was beginning to drape itself over her perception of the world. Fortunately, her plan was working without a hitch. She felt like she could probably sleepwalk her way through it. In fact, she probably did at times.

Too little sleep could impair even her phenomenal memory. Later, she would recall much of the rest of that night and the next day in little fragments, moments that stuck out from the parts of the journey that had played out exactly the way she had visualized.

Explaining to Kyra, in whispers, that the bus driver had strict instructions not to let any passengers without staff or guest passes board at the stop by the hospital...

...Kyra suggesting, on the bus, that they should go a few stops beyond the train station and double back, so that the driver wouldn't know they had taken the train...

...Kyra, fully uncaged at last, climbing two trees and a scaffold so that she could drape a leafy branch over the security camera monitoring the station...

...finding someone's lost baseball cap, for a team called the Helion Hellcats, on the way out of the next station and putting it on, while Kyra teased her that she'd probably get head lice from it...

...walking through one of the seediest, roughest neighborhoods they could find, their money cards hidden deep in their smalls, a wallet with the two hospital guest passes bulging conspicuously in her back pocket, and feeling the moment when someone brushed past her and the wallet was gone, exactly as she had intended. A second later, a yelp and a voice swearing, "that bitch *cut* me!" while Kyra smiled serenely...

...crumpling up the papers from the hospital files and feeding them, a few at a time, to a trash can fire that had burned low before they got there, while Kyra read over the notes in her file before adding them to the flames...

...calling out to two working girls on their way home, as the sky lightened, asking if they wanted to make more money in five minutes than they'd made all week by swapping clothes...

...how jarring Kyra looked with a short, blonde bob, after one of the working girls also sold them her wig...

...taking another train ride, their trail hopefully broken, to the spaceport, while Kyra tried not to shrink away from the stares their outfits were drawing...

...yet another costume change after hitting one of the 24-hour stores situated around the spaceport, now into the same kinds of coveralls that Jack had observed a dozen workers wearing on their commute into the station...

...passing a group of kids right around their age, dancing and freestyling for coins from passing travelers and feeling a wistful longing to stop and get to know them better...

...finding a data kiosk that she could log into, turned away from most of the cameras...

That was when Jack came fully awake again, her focus snapping back into place. It was almost ten in the morning.

By now, she figured, the pandemonium her Scorched Earth plan had created would have been mostly brought under control. It would have receded slowly, simulating various system failures for several hours before allowing the systems to be restored more than an hour after shift change would normally have occurred. By the time the day crew could even get into the building, any patients who had slept through the chaos would be awake and expecting breakfast... and their morning meds. None of which would have been prepared during the crisis.

If they were lucky, the purely human bedlam that would have resulted from *that* would only now be coming under control. And if they were *really* lucky, nobody would have bothered to check in on how two heavily sedated patients, who were expected to sleep past noon, were faring while there were so many more immediate concerns.

It would be especially ideal if nobody realized anything was amiss in their room until it was time for the custody transfer. But Jack was a realist. More likely—and especially given her personal history of hiding in unexpected places to avoid group therapy sessions—the ward was being searched, top to bottom, and within the next hour the search might begin to spread outward.

Sitting at the data kiosk, Jack felt herself relaxing just a little as familiar menus appeared. Apparently the government of Helion Prime had contracted for a lot of the products her father's old firm had designed. The hospital, law enforcement, and now the spaceport...

A moment later, she had logged into the law enforcement back door and was configuring their next moves.

"Who taught you how to do this?" Kyra whispered, watching the screen intently.

Jack liked Kyra. She trusted her. But, she realized, not quite enough to actually tell her the truth. "I ran with a guy, Paris, for a while. He was a smuggler."

Every word she'd just said was, technically, true. It just wasn't the real answer to Kyra's question.

Kyra, however, seemed content with the answer, nodding and going back to watching as Jack pulled up maps and schematics, memorizing them and setting up subroutines for the security system to run when she put in her ghost codes. She wouldn't do anything dramatic, not here. Drama would ground all the flights, and they were trying to get offworld. Instead, things would be subtle, insidious, minor glitches that rectified themselves mere minutes later. Much like her original escape plan for the hospital before she realized nothing short of total chaos would give them enough of a head start.

Finally she felt ready. She'd picked their ship, cleared the path, and even arranged for a few things they would need. When a courier approached them ten minutes later and asked her to sign for a package, she inwardly sighed with relief. Now they had everything.

"One day," Kyra said, attaching the ID tag that identified her as J. Houlot, electrician, to her coveralls. "You get a staff account for *one day*, and this is what you do. And I thought *Stacey* was scary..."

Kyra grinned at her to soften the words, the admiration in her eyes reassuring Jack that, in this case, "scary" was a compliment.

“Says the girl who climbed thirty feet in the air to disable a camera,” Jack teased back. That was something she’d never have had the guts to do, herself. Her tag identified her as P. Finch, systems tech. With AI systems completely outlawed on Helion, computer technicians were fairly commonplace. No one would question them.

And, given how haggard she and Kyra were beginning to look after being up all night, no one was likely to think they looked too young for the job. She hoped.

“So what’s the plan?” Kyra asked, keeping her voice soft. The spaceport was noisy, and the acoustics in the main departure terminal were terrible, but they were still taking no chances.

“There’s a ship scheduled to depart this evening, the *Scarlet Matador*, that will take us to Tangiers Prime.”

“Why Tangiers Prime?”

“Its spaceport is five times the size of this one,” Jack explained. “We get there and we can go anywhere.”

“Won’t that make it obvious that we’d try to go there?” Kyra asked, her expression keen.

“Normally, but I left clues in my file to suggest I’m from the Bayou Nebula and might try to go back there. It’s in the opposite direction, and the ship going *there* leaves an hour and a half after the *Matador*. Hopefully that’s the one people will be watching.”

Kyra chuckled. “You really plan ahead. So why the maintenance worker costumes?”

“We’re going to board the *Matador* through the service corridors an hour before passengers are scheduled to start boarding,” Jack explained. “That’ll be at 4:30 pm. I saved spaces for us. Officially three cryo tubes are malfunctioning, and we can even say we were dispatched to look at them if anyone asks. So any last-minute passengers won’t be able to reserve them. They’ll be ours.”

“I don’t know. I hate the thought of being in cryo if anybody catches up with us.” A worried frown creased the older girl’s forehead.

“Me too. You don’t even *know*.” The hour she’d spent trapped in her tube, during and after the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash, might have counted as one of the most terrifying of her life, if that whole damned planet hadn’t decided to engage in a progressive game of one-upmanship. “I’m going to set our tubes to wake us up the *moment* anything goes even a little weird, and—if everything goes normally—two hours before the crew is scheduled to wake up. We’ll be ghosts.”

Kyra’s uncertain look faded, and she nodded. “I guess that’s as good as we can get, right? So now what?”

“Food. I planned on bringing some of the dinner rolls from last night with us, but I forgot the damn things. I really need something to eat.”

The two girls grinned at each other and went in search of a long-overdue breakfast.

Small as the spaceport might be compared to other worlds, the place was still enormous. They stopped in a few shops after eating, buying bags that passed for the kinds of gear bags technicians would carry, filling them with basic necessities: toiletries, a change of clothes, items of that nature. Jack found herself an auburn wig in a small boutique, and swapped out her “Helion Hellcats” cap for it, adding to her disguise. Then they began to wind their way through the crowds toward their destination. Helion was a peaceful and prosperous world, untroubled by political strife and terrorism, and its spaceport reflected that; non-passengers,

meeting or seeing off friends and family, could walk almost all the way up to the gates before any security screening commenced.

Which, Jack realized as her heart lurched, meant so could mercenaries on the hunt. Her arm flashed across Kyra's midriff, stopping the girl in her tracks.

Two familiar figures were studying the departure lists ahead of them, right where the hallways divided.

"So, which do ya reckon they'll try to take?" Toombs asked in a raspy drawl. "The *Bon Temps* or the *Scarlet Matador*?"

Eve Logan, standing next to him, shook her head in annoyance. "How the hell should I know? My mark isn't exactly a worldly type."

"So let's dope it out. Which one do you think *he* 'll want to take?"

Kyra pulled at Jack's arm, drawing her over to some empty seats near the mercs. They sat down, backs turned to Toombs and Logan, listening carefully.

"You really think *he's* with them?" Logan asked.

"Are you kidding? Who *else* coulda planned that escape?" Toombs demanded. "This has Riddick written all over it. Bastard walked right in and snatched them from under our *noses*."

"Doesn't seem like his usual M.O. to me," Logan objected.

"Oh *really*? And why's that?"

"Nobody's dead."

Toombs's only response was an annoyed grumble.

"So why the *Bon Temps*?" Logan asked after a moment.

Unlike Toombs, who had pronounced "Temps" as if he were talking about short-term workers, Logan pronounced it the French way, almost rhyming it with "Bon." That earned another grumble from her companion.

"The Jane Doe's from there," Toombs told her. "He probably thought he was hot shit, scrambling their files and stealing the hard copies, but he didn't get her browser records from yesterday, when you were hangin' out in the library. Girl was all up in her favorite shows, *The Cookin' Cajun* and *Bayou Dreamers*, fergodsake. You had to hear 'em."

"I heard some. She wasn't anything to me back then except my mark's roomie."

"So you gotta know she's from the Bayou Nebula."

"Sounds like you've made up your mind."

"Sounds like I have."

"Tell you what," Logan said after a moment. "Your reasoning is sound, but just in case, how 'bout I stake out the *Matador* while you're staking out the *Bon Temps*?"

"Don't you be thinkin' of cashin' in on all three of 'em without me. You need me. Riddick eats little girls like you for breakfast."

"Is *that* what he's doing with them?"

Toombs let out a raucous laugh. "You got a sick turn of mind. I like it. Okay. Fine. I take the *Bon Temps*..."

This time, he deliberately pronounced it correctly, his tone mocking.

"...and you take the *Matador*, and if either one of us sees somethin' we call the other."

"Sounds like a plan."

Jack risked a peek behind her. Toombs and Logan had parted ways and were walking toward their respective departure gates. As Jack watched, Logan sat down on a bench that

gave her a prime view of all of the foot traffic that would approach the *Matador's* gate. Fifteen feet behind her, the security screening station was open and processing early arrivals. Another ten feet past her, on her right, was the service entry that Jack had planned to use.

There was no way to reach it without walking right in front of Eve Logan.

"We can't go in through another corridor?" Kyra asked, when Jack told her the problem.

"Each maintenance corridor is for one gate only. They don't connect up."

"Why?" Kyra asked in exasperation.

"Probably in case quarantine has to be called." Jack's mind was racing. They needed to get past Logan without her seeing. They needed her attention focused elsewhere. And they couldn't do anything dramatic—

Oh.

Oh hell yes I can.

The plan bloomed in her mind and she almost laughed out loud. She glanced at the nearby chrono. They had time. She could make it happen.

"Come on," she told Kyra, shouldering her bag and retracing their steps.

Aside from one collision with a distracted-looking man—"I'm so sorry, I didn't see you there!"—nothing slowed them down. Kyra didn't even notice until they were almost back at the spaceport entrance that Jack now had a fancy-looking comm unit and a snakeskin wallet.

"Where did you get—? You know what? Never mind."

One more stop, in a greeting card store, and Jack was ready. She pocketed her ID tag, prompting Kyra to do the same, before pushing through the outer doors, instantly feeling relief when she spotted the freestylers still performing.

"Hey kid!" she called out to the obvious ringleader of the group.

The kids tensed. Their leader, however, puffed up on the spot.

"What, you think you some rent-a-cop? Think you gonna roll us? Who you callin' a kid anyway? You look like you twelve!"

Jack grinned and rolled her eyes. "Ease up. I'm not here to chase you off or anything. Damn, even gettin' a degree don't help. People still think I'm a little kid. I'm gonna be gettin' carded when I'm fifty. Shit."

The kids laughed, relaxing.

"So you ain't here to roll us, what you want?"

"You wanna make some money helping me out?"

The ringleader smirked. "Depends on what kind of help you need."

"Okay, it's like this," Jack began. She hoped Kyra would play along with the wild ride she was about to take them on. "My brother Travi is a grade-A douchebag sometimes. I love him, but it's the truth. Douchebag. Anyway, he fucked up on the royal the other night and now his fiancée is pissed at him and, like, threw the ring at him and told him she's taking off for the Janus systems. Like, seriously, he's totally unworthy of her but we all love her and want them to stay together. I mean, I'd trade him in for her in a heartbeat, you feel?"

The kids listened, their expressions still a little dubious.

"Yeah, and?" their leader prompted.

"So she's got her ticket and everything, and she blocked his comm number, and all of our numbers. And *he's* off feeling sorry for himself because he's that doofed, you feel?"

The kids nodded.

“So I figure, she’s not gonna talk to me, if I walk up to her she’ll walk right off, maybe get security to roll *me*, but maybe if she gets a kind of... singing *telegram* that she thinks is from him...”

“You want us to do our thing for her?” The leader asked, his eyes lighting up.

“Yeah, and give her this.” Jack handed over the card. Covered in hearts and frills, with a sappy message inside and an even sappier inscription, done in her best imitation of her cousin Joey’s handwriting:

Please forgive me.
I never meant to hurt you.
You are my world and I’m lost without you.
Call me.

She’d even added a comm number, using the Al-Walid household’s number but with the last three digits changed. If Eve Logan tried to call it, she’d end up speaking to someone who had no idea what was going on.

The group’s leader grinned and accepted the card, along with the wad of cash Jack had taken out of the snakeskin wallet.

“I’m gonna record it all,” she said, brandishing the hapless traveler’s comm, “so when she *hopefully* tells my brother she forgives him and thanks him for it, he’ll know what it is he’s supposed to have done. But she can’t see me, okay? She’ll rabbit if she sees me.”

“Okay, we’re in. Who is she and what does she look like?”

“Gina Stansfield,” Jack told them, and then described Logan to them in detail. It was a level of detail that only someone intimately acquainted with a person—or someone, like Jack, with eidetic recall—could manage. She knew that she had sealed the deal with it. Then she gave them directions to the place Logan had staked out.

The little troupe crackled with energy as they led the way back to Logan, chattering about dance move combinations. Jack let a bit of distance build. Stopping at a random door, she keyed in one of her Ghost Codes. For the next ten minutes, nothing in the vicinity of the *Matador*’s gate would be recorded. And the randomized loops at the security desks would omit those cameras altogether. There would, sadly, be no record of what was about to happen.

Logan was so focused on scanning the crowd that she had looked at, and mentally dismissed, the entire troupe before they suddenly had her surrounded.

“This song’s for you, Gina!” The leader boomed, catching the attention of everyone in the causeway.

The kids were damned good. Along the way, they must have planned out which routines they intended to use. They ringed Eve’s bench, moving in remarkable synchrony as they danced, spun, flipped, and wove together an eight-part harmony backup tune for their leader.

“Baby I was wrong,” he belted in a stunning tenor, “So listen to my song...”

Pulling out the stolen comm and holding it in front of her face, Jack approached the group with Kyra behind her, blocked from Logan’s view.

“Gina don’t you know
You’re up in my soul
There’s nothin’ I won’t do for love
And babe, you’re all I’m thinkin’ of...”

Still pretending to record the performance, Jack circled wide, not even trying to go near the *Matador*’s gate, keeping her face hidden and her body interposed between Kyra and Logan. The kids were drawing a crowd.

“Come back to me Gina
You know I’m always yours...”

People were clapping and cheering. If Jack had really been recording the performance, their bodies would now be in the way. She finished circling, standing in front of the maintenance door. Glancing over at it, she punched in the code and ushered Kyra through.

The door closed as the group’s leader presented Logan with the card. “Travi says he’s sorry for how he hurt you. Please call him, yeah?”

The crowd erupted with applause as the door clicked shut.

“You... are... *insane*.” Kyra whispered, a mile-wide grin on her face.

Jack reattached her nametag, gesturing for Kyra to do the same, but was unable to suppress a grin of her own. “Come on. We’re twenty minutes behind schedule.”

But the rest ended up being all too easy. An hour later, hidden away in a utility closet by the cryo-lockers, they got to listen to embarking passengers griping about the mercenaries who had insisted on looking each of them over before they were allowed to board. The hardest part was liftoff, which they had to endure with less padding than the other passengers, but even that couldn’t dent their sense of giddy triumph. Jack had spent the pre-boarding time programming their tubes and the special security routines that would apply to them; once all of the passengers and crew members had gone to sleep, it was finally their turn. The “defective” units turned on for them immediately.

Kyra had never worked a cryo tube, so Jack helped her in and got her settled, feeling like an old hand. Climbing into her own tube and settling in, she snickered at the image of Eve Logan surrounded by the freestylers. She had already disposed of the stolen comm, but part of her wished she had really recorded the performance.

As sleep claimed her, she could be forgiven for thinking that the worst was finally behind her. But it would be a very long time before she would forgive herself for it.

20.

Level Five

Jack had been in cryo before. Even before she ever climbed into a cryo-tube, she knew how they worked and what, in theory, to expect. The reality, however, was always a little jarring.

Cryosleep had taken more than a century to perfect, to find just the right cocktails of ingredients to add into human cells to make them resilient against the freezing process, to keep them from cracking and shattering. The ultimate result had been a formula that slowed, but never completely stopped, the internal processes of the slumbering body. There was, however, a weird side effect: synaptic rates sped up rather than slowing down.

Most cryo-chambers administered sedatives carefully calibrated to ensure that their occupants remained in a peaceful dream-state while frozen. But occasionally things could go wrong. Riddick had told Jack that he had been conscious for almost the entire voyage of the *Hunter-Gratzner*. Its twenty-two week journey before the crash had felt, to him, like twenty-two years. He claimed, when she asked, that he spent most of the time meditating. Certainly, he had come out of it remarkably sane; most people whose tubes malfunctioned spent years in therapy, and some never left psychiatric care again.

Antonia Chillingsworth had planned to put him in a similar state, permanently. Perhaps that was why Jack had felt so uncomfortably *un*-guilty about shooting her.

Jack's cryo-tube worked perfectly, leading her into a world of benign dreams. Most of them were so soothing and innocuous that she wouldn't recall them later. Somehow, though, she ended up back in Mr. Reilly's classroom, replaying their discussion about the Lost Ships she was researching, and the fundamentals of faster-than-light space travel. He had just explained to her how little time would pass for people on the fastest sub-light ships, but how much objective time would still be lost. But Audrey knew that people could now cross dozens of light years in a matter of weeks, objective time. She just didn't understand where the breakthrough had come from.

"How did they solve the problem?" Audrey had asked him. None of the books had explained it very clearly.

"Astrophysicists always posited the idea of wormholes, places that served as shortcuts through space," he said. He walked over to one of his cupboards and removed some items: two balls, a length of string, and a short straw. "If these were the two stars you wanted to travel between..."

He set the balls on opposite ends of his desk.

"And this was the distance between them..."

He stretched the string between them, in a straight line. Looking around his desk, he grabbed a tape dispenser and taped the ends of the string to the balls.

“The wormhole would be a place where time and space folded up and a shortcut appeared.”

He set the straw on the desk. Then, holding the balls, he drew them together until each one touched an end of the straw. The string, between them, was no longer stretched tight, but had relaxed into loops and squiggles.

“How could they *do* that?” Audrey asked.

“It wasn’t something they could do, not at first. Wormholes are rare and hard to find. Wormholes that exist where you conveniently need one are even more rare. Emergency revival. And then the founder of the Quintessa Corporation patented the Isomorpher.” Mr. Reilly frowned. “Not the best name for it, in my opinion.”

“What does it do?”

“You’ve heard of the Many Worlds Theory, right? We won’t cover that in detail for a few more months.”

“A little.”

“Our three dimensions—four, if you count time itself—are only the first of roughly ten dimensions. Now, if we were two-dimensional beings, we would live on a plane, and only move through that plane... like this piece of paper. That would be our whole world.” He set the paper on the table. Then, he picked up a stack of papers and set them on top of it. “And there would be an infinite number of other two dimensional universes outside of the world we know. Level five incident detected. The same is true within three, and even four—and even more—dimensions. Parallel worlds, *perpendicular* worlds, do you understand what I’m suggesting here?”

“So, like...” Audrey took two pieces of paper from the pile. “If I were right... *here*... in my two-dimensional universe, there’d be another universe that had a spot that was exactly the same place as where I was, in my two dimensions, but was in a different place in the third dimension... so there’s another universe in exactly the same spot where I’m standing now... but it’s separated from me by being elsewhere on a higher dimension?”

She could barely find words for what she was trying to puzzle out.

“Yes. Even when you’re standing perfectly still, you’re moving through a succession of three-dimensional spaces courtesy of time, the fourth dimension. Advance revival protocol initiated. And our spacetime moves through five-dimensional space. And that five-dimensional space moves through six-dimensional space... and so on... with parallel spaces existing on every level.”

“The sliding doors thing?” she asked with a gasp.

“Very good. Infinite possibilities, room for infinite choices to play out. Some of those parallel universes would be very similar to each other, almost identical. Others would be radically different. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-nine seconds. So Joren Kirshbaum—that’s the Quintessa Corporation’s founder—suggested that the wormholes we wanted, leading between different star systems, might not exist in *our* universe, but they would exist in plenty of other universes.”

That part, at least, made sense. “Okay, yeah. But how would we get to them?”

“That was what his patent was for. It’s... very incomplete. He filed it and made it proprietary, but exactly how the Isomorpher was built and programmed is something he never actually revealed and no one’s successfully reverse-engineered. The gist comes from

quantum physics. When you get down to the extreme subatomic level, you no longer have particles. You have ‘strings,’ and the strings ‘vibrate’ at specific frequencies.”

Audrey nodded. Her parents had once watched a vid series that had discussed that topic. Now the vid made a little more sense to her.

“Kirshbaum proposed that each universe had its own frequency set,” Mr. Reilly continued. He had warmed to the subject, probably because he had the full attention of his audience of one. Most of Audrey’s classmates were fairly inattentive. “He found a mathematical model that could predict the frequencies that the other universes, the ones with the specific wormholes he was looking for, would vibrate at on the quantum level. Emergency revival. His machine would latch onto the frequencies that that other universe, and ours, had in common, and use them as a gateway to help objects transfer between universes, taking on the rest of the other universe’s frequencies and temporarily resonating with it instead of ours. They could then pass through the wormhole and, at the other end, transfer back to our universe.”

“And it worked?” There was so much in there that felt like guesswork to her.

“It’s the basis for the Star Jump drives we use now. Trust me, it *still* sounds crazy to most physicists... but you can’t really argue with the results.”

Audrey walked over to Mr. Reilly’s supply closet and brought out two more balls and a bright yellow pushpin. She walked over to his desk with them. She smoothed out the ball and string arrangement so that the original balls were on opposite sides of the desk once more, and then rested one of the new balls next to each of them. She inserted her pushpin into one of the original balls.

“So if I’m here...” She touched the pushpin. “And I wanted to get here...”

She leaned over and touched the ball on the opposite side of the desk.

“...the Isomorpher would move me...” She transferred the pushpin to the ball next to the first one. “...to here, which is in the same fourth-dimensional space we occupy but elsewhere in a higher dimension... and which has a wormhole...”

She held the straw up to the ball.

“...connecting it to here...” She walked to the opposite side of the desk and pressed the other end of the straw to the ball resting next to the one attached to the string.

“That’s right. Level five incident detected.”

Audrey removed the pushpin from the second ball she’d inserted it into, miming it traveling along the short length of the straw. “So I’d only have to travel this far to get there...” She inserted the pin into the ball at the other end.

“Exactly. Advance revival protocol initiated.”

“And then the Isomorpher would move me from that point back to...” She removed the pin from the ball connected to the straw, and inserted it in the final ball, connected by the string to the very first ball. “...here.”

“Yes. And instead of having to travel sixty light years, you would only have to travel, say, the length of an average solar system. One hundred astronomical units is still a lot, but there are more than sixty-three *thousand* astronomical units in a *single* light year. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-eight seconds. So, while you’d still need to build up some speed to cover that distance, it’s not nearly enough to have to deal with time dilation.”

The numbers were enormous enough to boggle Audrey for a few minutes. Then an odd thought occurred to her.

“But how do they figure out which universe to find the wormholes in?” she asked. She couldn’t imagine how any theoretical model would be *that* accurate.

“That’s the part no one knows. The patent doesn’t specify how the Isomorpher runs the calculations. It just claims that’s one of the proprietary things it does. And nobody else has ever figured out how. Emergency revival. Level five incident detected. Which is why every Star Jump drive in the Federacy is made by the Quintessa Corporation.”

“Including the three that disappeared?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes. And here’s what you’re not finding in the books, because nobody wants to be the one to write it down where they can be sued for saying it.” Mr. Reilly sat down, leaning back in his desk chair. “The big theory is that the three that disappeared got lost in other universes. Advance revival protocol initiated. They ‘isomorphed’ over to them, but couldn’t get back. Most Star Jumpers don’t make just one jump, after all. So, for example, the *Tenth Crusade* was supposed to make four jumps. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-seven seconds. Maybe, after one of those jumps, it couldn’t reconnect with the frequencies of our universe. Maybe it got stuck between two of the other universes, even.”

“Stuck between?” Audrey tried to imagine it: a ship straddling two whole, separate universes the way a child might straddle a fence. Or had it vanished into the fence itself?

“That’s happened several times to ships that *didn’t* disappear, too.” Mr. Reilly told her, his expression sober.

“It has? What happened to them?”

“Well...” Mr. Reilly shrugged. “Again, we don’t really know all *that* much. But the Quintessa Corporation can’t gag everybody. Emergency revival. Level five incident detected. But imagine you’re in two worlds at the same time. One’s fine, it’s normal... but the other one’s on fire.”

Audrey shuddered. That was a horrible image. “So the people on board died?”

“Sometimes. One ship’s passengers came out of cryo and seemed to be hallucinating, describing animals that the ground crews couldn’t see but all the other passengers could.” Mr. Reilly’s expression sobered. “Then one of *them* got *attacked* by an animal, or something, right in front of the ground crew. Torn apart by a creature that nobody, except the other passengers, could see or hear. Quintessa couldn’t cover *that* up. After a few more incidents, it even got an unofficial name: threshold syndrome.”

That, Audrey thought, was a good name for being caught in a space that was neither one universe nor another, but both at the same time.

“So is that the main theory about the three missing Star Jumpers?” she asked after a few minutes of quiet thought. “They never made it back from the other universes, or only made it partway back?”

“It is. But it’s something most people don’t want to acknowledge, and something the Quintessa Corporation doesn’t want people talking about.” Mr. Reilly studied her dejected expression for a moment before continuing. “I can give you some links to articles about it. But you will have to be careful about what you use and how you cite them. Most of them are highly speculative. Advance revival protocol initiated. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-six seconds.”

Audrey had been gathering up her things, armed with all the information she needed to finish her report, when a new question occurred to her.

“Why didn’t the Quintessa Corporation use what they could do to just find alternate Earths humanity could settle on? Wouldn’t that be a million times cheaper?”

“It probably would be,” Mr. Reilly told her, putting on his coat. “But something seems to happen, the longer people stay in other universes. Most of the cases of threshold syndrome happened after really long jumps. That’s part of why most Star Jumpers take several shorter hops instead, these days. Maybe, the longer you’re in another universe, the more it changes you. Emergency revival. Level five incident detected. Advance revival protocol initiated.”

He kept talking as he locked up the classroom and walked her outside. Sunset was approaching, and the light had taken on a molten gold, almost orange, quality.

“There are rumors—the Quintessa Corporation really tries to stamp these out, but they keep coming back—that some frequent Star Jump travelers stop being entirely *human*.”

“What are they instead?”

“I guess you’ll find out,” he suddenly said, turning to fix Audrey with an intense gaze. “Won’t you, Jack?”

She flinched. This was not how it had played out in reality.

“You need to wake up, Jack. Right now. Because it’s happening. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-five seconds.”

The golden light of late afternoon was changing, turning blood red. Lightning flashed somewhere close by, strobing the air. Some strange bird was screaming in a nearby tree, long and keening. Jack—no longer Audrey—wanted to run but she couldn’t. She suddenly couldn’t move at all.

“Wake up *now*, Jack,” Mr. Reilly told her before he melted away.

Her eyes, she realized, were open.

She was in the cryo tube. Sensation and motion were returning to her body. She focused on the readouts, trying to understand what was going on, part of her still wondering where Mr. Reilly had vanished to.

EMERGENCY REVIVAL
LEVEL FIVE INCIDENT DETECTED
ADVANCE REVIVAL PROTOCOL INITIATED
CREW WILL WAKE IN 14 MINUTES 54 SECONDS

Level Five Incident... that had been the code phrase that the Quintessa Corporation had used to label threshold syndrome incidents. Jack realized that the screen in front of her had only just switched on a few seconds earlier, while skeins of time had spooled out in her dream state. Her tube, and Kyra’s, were both programmed to revive them a minimum of fifteen minutes ahead of the crew’s tubes.

She forced her hand to rise and pull the release, sending up a last minute prayer that, whichever universes the ship was straddling, none of them would be on *fire*.

The air was chilly and stale. Definitely not burning. She bumped into the tube across from hers and ricocheted back toward her own. Gravity hadn’t kicked in yet. Grabbing onto her tube, she hauled out her bag and awkwardly slung it over her shoulder, the move sending her

into a slow spin. It took her a precious minute to stop the spin, close up her cryo-tube behind her, orient herself, and kick off again toward Kyra's tube.

She was still two cryo-tubes away when Kyra's tube burst open and the older girl flew out, gasping. She grabbed Kyra's bag for her and closed the tube.

On the off chance that they survived whatever had gone wrong, after all, she didn't want there to be any clues that they had been on board. Weeks ago, she had programmed both cryo-tubes with instructions to sanitize and reset themselves once vacated and shut, and then delete all records that they had ever been occupied.

"Hurry," she said, awkwardly swimming through the air toward the utility closet where they had hidden during the launch.

"What's happening?" Kyra didn't sound entirely awake yet. Jack wondered if either of them really was.

"We're in a lot of trouble. I'll explain after we get back out of sight."

Gravity was slowly asserting itself. No longer completely without control, both girls were able to make use of its low setting to leap moonwalk-style toward their destination, at the far end of the aisle of occupied tubes. They reached the utility closet just as gravity normalized and Jack heard a cryo-tube opening one aisle over, where the crew had been sleeping.

They got out of sight just before the crew began emerging. Jack jammed the utility closet handle and hoped that, if anybody tried to open it, they'd assume that its non-functionality was just another symptom of the emergency.

It was hard to make out what the crew members were saying to each other. The muffling effect of the door between them was bad enough without the way that they were talking over each other, quarreling as they went. From what Jack could manage to make out, most of them were vehemently arguing against the possibility of a threshold incident.

Jack could almost see their point. Nothing *felt* off at the moment. But then, they were still in space. Aside from the wormholes, there wasn't much that was likely to differ across the universes chosen by the Isomorpher, at least within the near-vacuum of space. Jack wondered what might happen when they made planetfall.

The voices receded as the crew headed for the flight deck.

There was a comm terminal in the utility closet, one Jack already knew was susceptible to her ghost codes. As the voices receded, she found it and opened it to all active and passive comm frequencies, in "muted" mode. She needed to hear what was happening.

"So, what the hell is going on?" Kyra whispered.

"Our ship's Star Jump drive fucked up," Jack told her, trying to condense Mr. Reilly's lesson down into as few words as possible. "Star jump drives work by taking us through wormholes in other universes and then bringing us back to our universe. Our drive didn't bring us all the way back. We're stuck between universes."

The play of expressions on Kyra's face was, in the dim light, astonishingly vivid. Confusion, enlightenment... horror.

"*Tangiers System Control, this is the Scarlet Matador on secure channel 9157-B, come in, please,*" the Captain said, registering on both the outgoing radio channel and the passive flight deck monitor.

"*Scarlet Matador, this is Tangiers System Control, go ahead.*"

“We are on long-range approach but our ship is registering a Level Five Incident. Can you confirm?”

There was a pause.

“Scarlet Matador, our long-range sensors are picking up unusual energy field signatures around your vessel. Level Five Incident is confirmed. Are you experiencing any anomalies at this time?”

“None so far,” the Captain said. *“Please advise of containment protocols.”*

Jack pulled up the Tangiers System orbital schematics, finding the current location of the *Matador* on it.

Oh, thank God, she thought disjointedly. They had almost reached their destination before disaster had struck.

It could have been so much worse, she realized. The journey had been long enough that there had been some two dozen Star Jumps involved. If the Level Five had occurred at any other transition point, they would have been forced to divert to whatever outpost existed within range—and at least one always had to be—the way the *Hunter-Gratzner* had.

And that had been catastrophic.

The *Hunter-Gratzner* hadn’t experienced a Level Five Incident, but it had emerged from its Star Jump into some kind of meteor storm that had swiftly riddled it with stellar bullet holes. And although there had technically been an outpost nearby, it had been deserted for more than two decades thanks to an ecosystem that was hostile at the best of times, and purely lethal every so often. Loss of contact with that outpost, Jack had come to understand, had resulted in the shipping lane’s reclassification as a “ghost lane” and its removal from mainstream usage. In the wake of the survivors’ testimony that she and Imam had supplied, he had told her that that particular Star Jump route was likely to be discontinued permanently, its standby outpost world declared uninhabitable. No other cut-rate vessel would ever make use of it.

If the *Scarlet Matador* had been further out on its jump itinerary, and had been similarly forced to divert to an outpost, the best *possible* outcome would have been that she and Kyra would have been discovered and arrested as stowaways. Worst case, it could have turned into another *Hunter-Gratzner*.

But the *Matador* had made it all the way to the Tangiers system. It was a tiny mercy, but she held onto it nonetheless. Things had only gone pear shaped at the very end of the journey.

Normally, she realized, the crew wouldn’t have awakened for another day. She had set the cryo-tube controls to wake them up a full two hours ahead of the crew—under *normal* circumstances—and had mandated a minimum fifteen-minute head start for any emergency revivals. The Level Five must have been detected the moment they isomorphed back into their home universe. They were only just inside the system’s Oort cloud.

The comms pause stretched out for several minutes before the voice on the other end finally spoke again. *“Scarlet Matador, you are being given new landing coordinates. You will not dock at Tangiers Station B. It is not equipped for this situation. You will need to land on Tangiers Prime itself. Your specs indicate you have planetfall capacity. Is your crew trained and certified to perform a landing?”*

“We did on Helion Prime, yes,” the Captain replied, a hint of annoyance in her voice. *“We can do it here too.”*

*“Good. Do **not** wake your passengers. We are bringing you down near our best hospital complex and will transfer them to it prior to opening their tubes. Strict quarantine protocols will be observed.”*

“Understood. I assume we will be quarantined, too?”

“Yes. Please submit a list of people to notify on your behalf and forward a copy of your passenger manifest and each passenger’s next-of-kin data. You are to maintain radio silence on all channels except this secure channel. Keep your comms open to us at all times and inform us of any anomalies you encounter.”

“Will do. Any idea what we might be about to experience?”

There was another pause. *“None, Ma’am. This is the first Level Five Incident on this endpoint of a Star Jump. We have no idea what might be across your threshold.”* The voice, which had been clipped and precise until then, softened. *“I’m sorry. I wish we knew what was going to happen.”*

“You and me both. Scarlet Matador out.”

There was a long, pregnant pause in the flight deck.

“Son of a fuck,” one of the crew members snarled.

“Well, everybody,” the Captain said after another moment, “we’ve got a day to kill. Joe, turn those fucking alarms off before I purge them, would you? We all know what’s going on now.”

The high, keening alert, which had been the strange birdcall in Jack’s dream, finally went silent. The strobing ended at the same time. A moment later, the lighting in the utility closet switched from red to bluish white.

“Anybody got a deck of cards?” someone on the flight deck quipped.

Jack looked around the closet, trying to decide how likely it was that the crew might come their way in the next few hours. It’d be just their luck if it housed decks of cards and other supplies a crew killing time would suddenly conjure a need for.

One day. She had one day to figure out how they were going to dodge not only the *Scarlet Matador*’s crew but the emergency personnel on the surface... assuming that nothing on the other universe’s version of the surface, itself, didn’t try to take them out. Her plans were falling apart. In spite of everything she had learned from Mr. Reilly, years ago, this was a scenario she hadn’t thought to plan for.

Maybe because she couldn’t figure out *how* to plan for something this fucked up, she fumed to herself.

“We are *so* fucked,” Kyra muttered beside her.

Jack couldn’t think of a single argument against that assessment.

21.

Matador Falling

“Here,” Jack told Kyra, handing her a protein bar she’d stowed in her bag. “Breakfast.”

She pulled out one for herself as well. In all honesty, she had almost no appetite. The stress of the new situation, the new crisis, had stolen it away. But they needed to eat. They needed their wits about them if they wanted to maneuver their way through this latest disaster.

The speaker on their comm panel indicated that the crew had stayed on the flight deck for the moment. They were arguing, with little enthusiasm, over how long they were likely to have to stay quarantined once they landed.

Nibbling at the protein bar, Jack stood up and looked around the utility closet, taking in its contents and estimating how likely it was that the crew of the *Scarlet Matador* would decide any of it was important during the next twenty-four hours. After a moment, she sighed with a small amount of relief.

Most of the items on the shelves, beneath their protective webbing, were things for a port crew to use to clean up and recondition the cryo tubes between uses, and to tidy up the cryo deck once all of its occupants had debarked. There were some spare comm panels and other bits of hardware, some hazmat jumpsuits and helmets, and a handful of scanners—Geiger counters, toxic gas detectors, others she couldn’t identify at all—but very little else.

Jack grabbed a bin of comm hardware and pulled it down for a closer look. After a moment, she began assembling some of the pieces.

“What are you making?” Kyra asked in a whisper.

“Video screen,” Jack answered, unwrapping a screen unit and settling it in its housing. “So we can see what’s on the ship’s cameras.”

Once she realized that Kyra was interested in what she was doing, she kept up a soft running commentary as she worked. She never mentioned that it was her father who had showed her how pieces like these fit together, hinting instead that this was another thing Paris P. Ogilvie had taught her while she was “running” with the smuggler. But she explained what each part was for, what each connection would do, as she assembled them. Finally, she was ready to plug it into the comm panel.

There were dozens of cameras placed throughout the ship, more than Jack had expected. She went through their pre- and post-launch feeds first, strategically erasing any footage that she and Kyra had appeared on. Once that was done, she began examining the feeds from right before the emergency revival had been triggered.

“What are you looking for?” Kyra asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. I want to know more about what went wrong.”

Nothing seemed to change, anywhere on board the ship, during the half hour leading up to the moment she burst out of her cryo-tube. She erased the footage of her and Kyra, up to the moment when they had vanished into the utility closet.

Maybe, she thought, the Isomorph Drive would have something useful in its logs. She pulled them up, and sighed. Most of the records were identical.

2517.02.12.21:15:30 ARRIVING AT FIRST JUMP POINT.
2517.02.12.21:15:33 ISOMORPH DRIVE ENGAGING. ACCESSING U137. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.
2517.02.14.15:32:02 ISOMORPH DRIVE DISENGAGING. RETURNING TO U1. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.
2517.02.14.15:32:37 NO ANOMALIES DETECTED. MOVING TO SECOND JUMP POINT.
2517.02.14.19:15:21 ARRIVING AT SECOND JUMP POINT.
2517.02.14.19:15:24 ISOMORPH DRIVE ENGAGING. ACCESSING U23C. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL...

The log went on like that. Some of the jumps lasted two or three days, while most lasted only a few hours. Jack scrolled down to the final Star Jump.

2517.04.12.18:25:22 ISOMORPH DRIVE ENGAGING. ACCESSING U322A. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.
2517.04.16.20:43:04 ISOMORPH DRIVE DISENGAGING. RETURNING TO U1. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.
2517.04.16.20:43:39 ANOMALY DETECTED.
2517.04.16.20:43:42 ISOMORPHIC OVERLAY IN PROGRESS. ATTEMPTING TO CORRECT.
2517.04.16.20:43:45 CORRECTION FAILED. REATTEMPTING.
2517.04.16.20:43:48 CORRECTION FAILED. REATTEMPTING.
2517.04.16.20:43:51 CORRECTION FAILED. ANALYZING STRING FREQUENCIES.
2517.04.16.20:43:54 STRING FREQUENCIES FLUCTUATING BETWEEN U322A and U1. LEVEL FIVE INCIDENT CONFIRMED.
2517.04.16.20:43:57 QUINTESSA CORPORATION NOTIFIED. DATA PACKET DISPATCHED. ADVANCE REVIVAL PROTOCOL INITIATED.
2517.04.16.20:45:48 REDACTED
2517.04.16:20:47:27 REDACTED
2517.04.16:20:58:57 CREW REVIVAL COMMENCING.
2517.04.16:21:03:58 CREW REVIVAL COMPLETED.
2517.04.16:21:08:15 INSTRUCTIONS FROM QUINTESSA CORPORATION RECEIVED.
2517.04.16:21:11:32 ISOMORPH DRIVE DECOMMISSIONED.
2517.04.16:21:11:33 ISOMORPH COORDINATE DATABASE WIPED.
2517.04.16:21:11:34 SYSTEM STANDING BY.

“Well, shit,” Jack muttered, after reading it over a third time.

“What does it mean?” Kyra asked.

“Um, okay... so the last Star Jump for this trip was kind of long, looks like. It started four days ago and ended today.” Jack pointed to the first two lines in the final log segment. “The Isomorpher took us into ‘U322A,’ I’m guessing that’s the number they assigned to the universe with the wormhole where they wanted it... and then today it tried to bring us back to ‘U1,’ which is—”

“Our home universe. Got it.” Kyra nodded, reading the log over her shoulder again.

“So about thirty-five seconds after we were supposed to be safely back home, the system detected that something was wrong.”

“The isomorphic overlay?”

“Yeah. I’ll bet it was getting readings that matched both universes.”

“So then it tried to fix it?”

“Yeah, three times. And when it didn’t work, it did some kind of quantum-level analysis that confirmed we’re physically in both universes at the same time.”

“So then it declared this ‘Level Five Incident’ thing?”

“Yeah, and sent an alert out to the corporation that makes the Isomorpher, with all of the data, looks like.”

“How come it took another fifteen minutes to wake up the crew?”

“‘Cause the system had instructions that it had to wake us up first. See those two redacted entries? That’s when I closed my cryo-tube and then closed yours. It redacted the logs of our revival, just like it was told to.”

“Damn, it really took us that long to get from the tubes to this closet?”

“We were pretty wobbly. But here’s the crazy part. The Quintessa Corporation seems to have sent instructions back to the ship’s mainframe, while all that was going on, ordering it to decommission the Isomorpher and wipe its database. That’s stuff you’d think accident investigators on the surface would want access to.”

“That’s crazy—hey! Look what just happened to those entries.”

Jack blinked. While the two of them had been talking, the entries had changed drastically.

2517.04.16.20:43:54 STRING FREQUENCIES FLUCTUATING BETWEEN U322A
and U1. LEVEL FIVE INCIDENT CONFIRMED.

2517.04.16.20:43:57 REDACTED

2517.04.16.20:45:48 REDACTED

2517.04.16:20:47:27 REDACTED

2517.04.16:20:58:57 CREW REVIVAL COMMENCING.

2517.04.16:21:03:58 CREW REVIVAL COMPLETED.

2517.04.16:21:08:15 REDACTED

2517.04.16:21:11:32 REDACTED

2517.04.16:21:11:33 REDACTED

2517.04.16:21:11:34 SYSTEM STANDING BY.

A second later, they had changed again.

2517.04.16.20:43:54 STRING FREQUENCIES FLUCTUATING BETWEEN U322A
and U1. LEVEL FIVE INCIDENT CONFIRMED.

2517.04.16:20:58:57 CREW REVIVAL COMMENCING.

2517.04.16:21:03:58 CREW REVIVAL COMPLETED.

2517.04.16:21:11:34 SYSTEM STANDING BY.

“Holy shit. Did this thing just cover up...?”

“Everything we did and everything the Quintessa Corporation did. Yeah.”

There was now no record that the Quintessa Corporation had ever been notified of the incident, no record that it had instructed the system to trash the Isomorpher. And, fortunately, no record of two stowaways being given a fifteen-minute head start before the crew woke up.

Kyra’s eyes, meeting hers, were awed and a little horrified. “Everybody’ll just assume that the drive got wiped by the Incident, won’t they?”

Jack nodded, feeling a little ill... and a *lot* confused. What had been in the drive and the database that needed so much protection? Mr. Reilly had told her that the Quintessa Corporation was secretive, but...

“We *cannot* get caught,” she muttered. Aside from the whole issue of being arrested for stowing away, and potentially identified as fugitives from a mental hospital, there was now the issue of what the Quintessa Corporation might do to inconvenient witnesses.

Exactly what they were witnesses of, she wasn’t even sure. But it scared her almost as much as the prospect of straddling a universe that was on *fire*.

“So what do we do?” Kyra asked after a moment, looking around at the closet’s shelves.

“I don’t know. Not yet. If we can just... stay unseen by the *Matador*’s crew, and then by the relief crew, maybe we can get out after they’ve evacuated the ship.”

That, she suddenly thought, could be an hours-long or days-long process, as the ground crews switched cryo-tubes over to portable feeds before moving them, and their occupants, out. Could they manage to stay hidden all that time? A quick check of the schematics showed her a single set of restrooms at the other end of the cryo deck.

“We’re gonna have to ‘hold it’ until the *Matador*’s crew goes to sleep,” she realized. “Or at least, until I can figure out how to switch off active feeds between here and the bathroom while we’re on the move.”

“Fun,” Kyra muttered. “Any chance we can blend in with the ground crew while they’re working? I mean, we’re dressed in pretty standard ground crew gear, right?”

Jack glanced at Kyra’s jumpsuit as she gestured at it. “Maybe. But there could be official logos, or colors, that we don’t have. And they’ll probably be wearing protective—”

She didn’t even try to finish her sentence. Instead, she keyed in one of her highest-level ghost codes, inputting her search parameters once she was sure they would be concealed from the flight deck.

STANDARD PROTECTIVE WEAR FOR LEVEL FIVE INCIDENTS

“Why do they call it ‘Level Five,’ of all things?” Kyra huffed. “What are levels one through four?”

“Dimensions, maybe. The whole point is to connect points in our spacetime with... isomorphic... points elsewhere in the fifth dimension... I think.” Jack frowned. “Maybe ‘Isomorpher’ isn’t such a bad name after all.”

The system wasn't especially cooperative. She had to rephrase the search a dozen times before she found a series of pictures someone had clandestinely taken of an incident on Atreyus 4. The crew seen offloading cryo-tubes in the images wore standard hazmat suits.

A search for emergency protocols on Tangiers Prime generated a list of what ground crews were expected to wear during different emergencies. But she couldn't find references to Level Five Incidents...

"There," Kyra said, pointing to a paragraph at the very bottom of the long screed she'd been reading.

Due to the unpredictable nature of Level Five Incidents, there is no standardized requirement for protective gear. In most cases, the effects of the Level Five Incident will only be directly experienced by the occupants of the distressed vessel. Some secondary damage, however, is possible, if the physical effects (ex: fire) cross the threshold via the body of a crew member or passenger, or via affected materials on the ship. The recommendation is for full hazmat gear.

"Fire," Kyra muttered. "So we could find ourselves on fire."

"It's happened at least once," Jack told her. "So maybe hazmat gear would be a good idea even if we weren't trying to disguise ourselves."

Damn. The crew might be coming to this supply closet after all.

Jack switched over to inventory and breathed a sigh of relief. Each member of the crew had their own hazmat gear stored in their flight deck lockers. The suits she'd seen on the shelves were surplus.

Potentially useful surplus...

Finding recent pictures of the hazmat suits worn on Tangiers Prime took just a few more minutes. Jack pulled one of the suits off of the shelves to compare.

"Did we just catch a really big break?" Kyra breathed.

"I think we did." Some worlds loved to gaudy up standard gear and make it unique, but Tangiers Prime apparently had no such pretensions. The suit in her hand was an exact match. She looked over the details and then began scrounging through the shelves. Hazmat footwear covers, in a variety of sizes, were stored below the pile of suits. She began searching for the gear closest to their sizes.

For the next several hours, Jack and Kyra practiced putting on the suits, miming the ways that they would seal them shut with the included tape. Then, after Jack mentioned the amount of time it would take to offload the cryotubes, they called up instructions for the process of detaching an occupied cryotube from a ship's central hub and attaching it to a portable feed. They watched videos together, quizzed each other on the different buttons and switches they would need to press and in which order—Jack, of course, had no problem remembering, but pretended to make mistakes so that Kyra could correct her and remember them all the better—until finally they heard the crew talking about bunking down for a few hours before it would be time to land.

With the crew asleep, Jack switched off the camera feeds in the cryo deck long enough for them to make use of the restroom. The utility closet, they had decided, was the best place for them to be when the ground crew boarded. They would wait for a lull in the activities, a moment when nobody was within line of sight of the closet door, and then emerge, fully garbed in their hazmat gear, to blend in with the ground crew and help evacuate tubes. Once they were off the ship, they'd do a quick fade and make their escape.

Both of them were sure it couldn't be that easy. But they spent the whole time that the *Matador* crew slept working out every possible complication they could imagine and what they might do in response. Jack found and modified a pair of linked comms, open-channel but scrambled against surveillance, so that they could still talk to each other once they were fully suited up and mingling with the ground crew.

When the *Matador* crew woke up and began preparing for the landing, they were ready. Or as ready as they could possibly be. Their cards, from Helion Prime, were back in their smalls. They had changed into fresh clothes, swapped wigs and carefully put them back on, and hidden the rest of their clothing and toiletries beneath various tools and pieces of hardware in their gear bags. If no one else carried such bags into the ship, they could leave the bags behind, hidden on the closet's top shelf, and buy replacements for their contents on the ground. As the crew took their seats in the flight deck, Kyra and Jack exchanged a grim look.

"This is when things could start getting crazy," Jack whispered.

"How?"

"Well, we don't know what the other universe's Tangiers Prime is like. Odds are it's never been terraformed. So the atmosphere on that side could be really different."

"Like, not breathable?"

"That's a real risk, yeah. But it could be thicker or thinner, too, and that could change *everything* about atmospheric entry."

"How do you *know* all this?" Kyra asked.

Jack decided that she might as well come clean, at least a little. "I have a photographic memory. If I hear it, see it, or read it, I'll remember it forever. As long as I'm paying attention, anyway."

Many people had thought her an odd child because of that. Where most small children thrived on and sought out repetition, watching the same movie dozens of times and repeating the same silly jokes ad nauseam, Jack had always found herself wanting to move on. She could remember whatever it was just fine, and repetition just felt like a waste of time to her. As she grew older and began to understand the social effects of her behavior, she had learned to tolerate and even engage in a certain amount of repetition... and to hide just how far ahead she was reading from her classmates and even teachers.

Right now, though, it was a strategic asset, and Kyra had a right to know it was at their disposal.

"Okay," Kyra said after a moment. "So landing could be rough and unpredictable. Dangerous and fatal, even."

"Pretty much, yeah. And then there's the question of the landing site. If they are trying to have us land in an area that was artificially smoothed out..."

"There could be bumpy terrain on the other side. Shit. No wonder they're making such a fuss about this. So we could burn up during entry, or crash during landing..."

“Or find ourselves choking on a half-poisonous atmosphere when the doors open.” Jack touched the helmet of her hazmat suit. “Once we try to take these off, anyway.”

“Well, hell. At least it’ll be an adventure, right?” Kyra grinned, but Jack could see the gallows humor in her eyes. The auburn wig, now carefully seated over her braided-back hair, was less jarring on her than the blonde bob—which Jack was now wearing over her much shorter, straight hair—had been.

“Everybody’s gotta die sometime, yeah.” Jack sighed. “At least it’ll be in good company.”

Kyra suddenly looked touched. She reached out and took Jack’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Tangiers Prime Ground Control,” the pilot said, her voice doubling slightly as it came through from both the flight deck microphone and the comm signal, *“this is the Scarlet Matador on approach for our entry window, requesting clearance to proceed.”*

“Scarlet Matador, this is Tangiers Prime Ground Control. Your descent vectors are looking good. You are cleared for landing. Do you have any anomalies to report at this time?”

“None detected yet, Ground Control. Scans indicate no atmospheric variances in density or temperature. Fingers crossed.”

“Godspeed, Scarlet Matador. We’re setting up emergency staging at your landing site.”

“Thank you. Entering the upper atmosphere now. Adjusting descent angle... resistance is textbook. So far, so good.”

The ship shivered a little beneath Jack’s crossed legs, through the floor of the utility closet. The hull groaned.

“Looking good from our end too. You’re nearing comms blackout.”

“Roger that. Talk to you on the other side.”

“Looking forward to it, Matador.”

For several minutes, only the hushed voices of the flight deck crew came through the utility closet’s comm speaker. Everyone seemed calm, although Jack had listened to comm recordings from some legendary accidents and almost-accidents that sounded every bit as nonchalant. Flight crews tended to have nerves of steel. She wished she could have watched Fry crash-landing the *Hunter-Gratzner*.

She probably never even broke a sweat... Johns had obviously been full of shit.

“...do you read? Scarlet Matador, this is Tangiers Prime Ground Control, do you read?”

“Ground Control, this is the Scarlet Matador, reading you loud and clear.”

“Welcome back, Matador. We show you centered in your lane. Any anomalies to report?”

“None yet, Ground—hold on. I’m picking up some... Ground Control, please verify our landing coordinates.”

“33.5731 degrees north, 7.5898 degrees west.”

“Ground Control, we have an anomaly. We are intermittently picking up a large body of water on our scanners at the designated location.”

“Scarlet Matador, please send us your readings.”

“Transmitting.”

There was a pause.

“They’d better come up with something fast,” the Captain grumbled. “We’ll be there in fifteen more minutes.”

“Scarlet Matador,” Ground Control finally said, *“you will attempt landing at the coordinates. You will need to spiral in and then hover over the landing site, just above the*

detected water level. We will tether you at that height and bring in support scaffolding. Ground support has been notified of the revised plan. Do you need further instruction?"

"No, but thank you. Adjusting approach trajectory now."

"Once the ship is secured, we recommend you put on your protective gear."

"Great minds think alike. God only knows what could be in that water."

"Your readings indicate normal saltwater. About 28, 29 degrees... bathwater temperatures. Might be a tropical paradise on the other side."

"Might have sharks, too."

Ground Control laughed. *"Well, if you find any coconuts, you pull them over to this side."*

"Sounds like a plan. We'll have a luau."

The captain turned off her microphone for a moment, her voice only coming in from the flight deck feed. *"Tropical paradise my ass..."*

One of the other crew members started singing an ancient sea chanty. *"Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip, that started from this tropic port, aboard this tiny ship..."*

"Don't be an idiot." The captain switched her microphone back on. "Ground Control, my readings are showing a five meter depth to the water. Seafloor appears to have roughly fifteen centimeters of variance from the tarmac of this 'verse. Can you confirm?"

"Roger, Scarlet Matador. The good news is that means you won't sink. Adjusting landing plan accordingly. We will bolster the landing gear to match the seafloor height. Prepare to receive new trajectories. You will still want to come in at a hover and then do a slow descent."

Jack looked over at Kyra. *"Once they land, it'll be time to put on our suits. They'll be doing the same thing... and they won't open up until they're secure. Then we watch and wait. We'll put on our helmets last, when we're ready to join the ground crew."*

Kyra gave Jack a worried look. *"Do you know how to swim?"*

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty good at it. Just wasn't sure if you came from a world where people swam. Most of the girls at the hospital didn't know how. Not much swimming on a world that's surface is only 10% water."

Jack grinned. *"I'm good. But... we should try *not* to swim in front of the locals."*

Kyra snickered. *"Yeah, that might look a little weird."*

The floor began to tilt to one side, gradually and gently. Jack could feel them turning, a sensation that left her a little queasy since everything around her showed no signs of the motion. The tilt steepened, and the turning sensation grew more pronounced. The ship shivered against some turbulence.

"We're spiraling in," she told Kyra. "Another moment and they'll switch to repulser engines so we can hover."

Kyra nodded, looking a little pale and nauseated.

The switch was a little rough. The ship shuddered, hard, as the repulsers switched on, and wobbled for several gut-clenching seconds before settling into a strange new attitude that reminded Jack of a floating dock.

CLANG!

She and Kyra both jumped.

“What the fuck was that?” Kyra gasped.

CLANG!

“I don’t—oh! They said they were going to anchor the ship while it hovered, didn’t they? I’ll bet that’s what it is.”

The loud noise repeated six more times, from various directions, before stopping.

“Scarlet Matador, *this is Ground Control. Platforms are in position below your landing gear. Begin dialing down your repulsers and descend.*”

“Copy that.”

Jack could feel it, the moment the ship touched the surface of the water in the other universe. Suddenly there was resistance. Something wanted to keep the ship floating, even as the gravity of U1’s Tangiers Prime was trying to draw it down.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the *Scarlet Matador* descended the final five meters. It was a remarkably gentle landing for one so harrowing.

“Ground Control, *this is the Scarlet Matador. We have touched down. We will need additional anchoring. There’s some tidal forces at work on the other side.*”

“Roger that, Scarlet Matador. *We are moving in to bolster your anchor points. Boarding will commence in twenty minutes. Please be in full protective gear at that time.*”

Twenty minutes was just enough time to finish getting ready. Jack and Kyra tested their comms, making sure they’d hear each other’s voices if they whispered but not be deafened if either of them had to shout. Jack switched the video feed over to external cameras so that they could watch the approaching ground crews and make sure that their protective gear would blend in.

“It’s like trying to watch someone on the other side of an aquarium,” Jack murmured to Kyra after a moment.

“Never tried that. But this is seriously trippy.”

The cameras kept registering the presence of water on the surface. The crews preparing to board the ship sometimes appeared to be doing so in open air, but frequently looked distorted by water, while the cameras struggled to refocus.

“Ground control, *please be advised. The water level seems to be rising slowly. It’s now at six meters. Please enter via the upper decks to prevent flooding on board the Matador.*”

“Copy, Matador. *We will use flyers to transport you and the passengers. Keep us advised of water levels. We don’t want to drown anybody.*”

Hanging the Geiger counters and other detection instruments on their belts—the approaching ground crew all had them—and preparing to don their helmets, Jack and Kyra watched as the *Matador* crew approached the airlock that had been chosen as the initial entry point. Large, one deck above the cryo deck—which, Jack realized with a shudder, was fully underwater in the other universe—and opening on a spacious room, it made a good staging point for the rescue operation that was about to begin.

Hopefully.

The captain stepped forward, wearing a hazmat suit emblazoned with the *Scarlet Matador*’s logo.

Good, Jack thought. Her suit, and Kyra’s, would suggest even *more* that they were from Tangiers Prime and not the ship. Just as long as they could stay above the water, anyway.

On the other side of the airlock, the leader of the ground crew approached the door.

Jack realized she was holding her breath as the unsealing commenced.

“Captain,” the leader said, stepping into the airlock. His voice was the voice of the Ground Control officer who had talked the ship down. “Permission to come aboard?”

“Granted,” the *Matador*’s captain said with obvious relief. “It’s good to meet you in pers
—”

A wave broke against the ship, splashing through the open airlock and smacking the captain down to the floor.

22.

The Phantom Tides of New Marrakesh

High tide crested some two meters above the *Scarlet Matador*'s hull and began to recede almost two hours after the first attempt to board the ship. Four hours after that, the water had withdrawn completely from the landing site. With no idea how long it would be until the phantom tide turned again, the ground crew moved quickly to reboard the *Matador* and evacuate its occupants.

Jack, who had listened to the comm discussions about the planned boarding, had also determined that Tangiers Prime's spaceport was another customer of her father's old security company. Well before the ground crew boarded, she had added her pseudonym, "P. Finch," and Kyra's "J. Houlot" pseudonym to the roster of miscellaneous ground crew workers press-ganged into managing the evacuation. They attached their name tags, which Jack had previously hidden on the closet's top shelf, to their suits, and even joined the roll call over the comms, reporting for duty from inside the ship. Jack had to nudge Kyra when it was her turn to respond; the conversation was in Arabic, which hadn't been spoken on New Dartmouth or in the hospital, but which Jack had picked up pretty quickly in the Al-Walid household. In the hurried pandemonium that followed, nobody noticed when Jack temporarily "glitched" the camera feeds and they slipped out of the utility closet to join the relief efforts.

It helped that both of them had run through simulations of disconnecting cryotubes dozens of times. Their speed and competence got them more than a few words of gratitude from actual members of the ground crew, some of them even in English.

Two hours in, after carrying a liberated cryotube down to the waiting transport, Jack and Kyra joined the team that would reconnect them at the other end in the hospital. True to Ground Control's word, they were transported via air. Below them, the city spread out. Trying not to rubberneck like a tourist, Jack studied it, noting that there appeared to be a coastline to one side, running along the land from the spaceport to the urban center, and wondering which universe that water existed in.

Most of the other members of the ground crew were chatting in Arabic, too quickly for Jack to follow what they were saying, but a few were talking quietly in English nearby.

"Man," one of their coworkers, wearing a tag identifying him in four languages as T. Alami, Ground Operations, gave an expressive, exaggerated shudder before leaning back in his seat. "This whole thing gives me the jeebies bigtime."

"Seriously," another—H. Aziz, Ramp Agent—chimed in. "I kept expecting some kinda monster to come charging around the corner at us, any second."

"I wonder what it's like for *them*," Alami said after a moment. "You heard about the captain getting knocked over by an invisible wave, right?"

"Yeah," Aziz groaned. "Jeez. Tomlin was standing right in front of her at the time."

"He's the arrival controller, right? The one in charge of this mess?"

“Yeah. Good guy. I’m glad he was on duty when the shit went down. Khalil says he slept in the control tower overnook so he’d be there if they tried to reach him.”

That, Jack thought, explained why Ground Control had always answered with the same voice. She’d assumed it was an AI until a man with that voice walked in through the airlock.

Aziz tugged at her helmet, adjusting it a little. “Damn, I want out of this gear. Anyway, Tomlin said that after she fell down, he could *see* water all over her. Kinda. Like, her hazmat suit looked wet. And so did the floor of the ship. But he couldn’t see any of the water itself and there wasn’t a drop on him.”

“That’s *mental*.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to get done with this and go home.”

Now it was Alami’s turn to groan. “Don’t you wish. You heard that we’re all supposed to get debriefed by the Quintessa Corporation rep before we can go, right?”

“Shit, I forgot. Damn it...”

Jack and Kyra exchanged a silent look. They were going to have to find a way to ditch their gear and get away from the rest of the ground crew before that happened.

At the hospital, Jack caught a glimpse of a man with Ground Control’s voice, now out of hazmat gear and in a smart military uniform, arguing with a hospital suit about the elevation of different hospital wings. His Arabic, she noticed, was as flawless and un-accented as his English. The laden ground crew milled about for a few minutes until word came down that, in an abundance of caution, the cryotubes would be taken to the hospital’s highest levels. Patients on those levels were being relocated to other wings in preparation.

Probably a smart move, Jack thought, but shuddered a little. There had been times, on the brief flight over, when she could feel the other universe’s pull, the sensation that the transport’s floor was illusory and she might fall through it at any moment. She hoped that wouldn’t actually happen to any of the cryotubes... or their occupants, once they were released.

Another transport flight arrived with even more cryotubes. As the area became increasingly crowded, Jack nudged Kyra and nodded towards a door with a familiar keypad beside it.

One Ghost Code later, they were hurrying down a flight of steps with signs that pointed to a garage, stripping off their suits as they went. The lights on all of the stairwell cameras were dark, having switched off the moment Jack input the code. In ten minutes, they would switch back on and the system would report a minor power glitch as cover.

“Damn,” Kyra whisper-hissed as they went. “That Paris guy must’ve been some really hot shit. His codes work *everywhere*.”

Jack grinned and nodded, recalling how she’d sneaked up on him and put a boomerang to his throat.

At the base of the stairs, they straightened their wigs one more time before wadding up the hazmat suits into the smallest bundles that they could and stuffing them—along with their “tool bags”—into a pair of discarded shopping bags Jack had spotted on the way. Now dressed in ordinary street clothes and carrying the bags, looking like two ordinary teens who had been out store-hopping, they walked out into the hospital’s parking garage.

They were one level below the street entrance, Jack figured, and she was suddenly glad they hadn’t gone any lower. The ramp down to the next level ended abruptly, just a third of

the way down, at a smooth plain of what looked like drying sand with seaweed strewn across its surface. Something small and crustacean-like was scuttling across the sand. As they watched, it seemed to pass through the concrete of the ramp and vanish.

Jack was just glad that they hadn't encountered the other 'verse's ground level *before* they'd been able to leave the stairway.

"We'd better find some higher ground fast," Kyra said next to her. "This part of town is definitely going to be underwater when the tide comes back in."

Jack nodded. "That Tomlin guy seemed to think that anything at an elevation of twenty meters above sea level—I mean, *this* 'verse's sea level—should be safe."

"How high up is the hospital's ground level?" Kyra asked.

"Ten meters above." Jack grimaced. "Let's get somewhere where we can pull up an elevation map. We'll pick a good spot to go to ground above the water."

Nobody gave them a second glance as they left the hospital garage and headed toward a cluster of towers in the distance.

Tangiers Prime, like many large colonies, provided street signs in multiple languages. Arabic topped the signs, followed by Berber, then French, and finally English. As Jack recalled, most of its original settlers had been Moroccan, although it had diversified in the centuries since.

"What's this city called?" Kyra asked, as she scanned one of the street signs and shook her head.

"New Marrakesh." Jack led the way, mentally sorting through all of the guidebooks she'd flipped through when she had originally set out for this destination. The plan, back then, had been to arrive on Tangiers Prime roughly a year after she had left Deckard's World, wait a few weeks, and then either bribe her way onto or stow away on one of the semi-annual supply ships headed for Furya and her father, a mere two-month journey away. It had all been timed so carefully, until it had fallen through so spectacularly.

Well, she'd made it this far. Finally.

After a few wrong turns, they found their way to an open air market that mixed centuries-old aesthetics, from old Morocco of Earth, with contemporary technology: carved wood screens with elaborate geometries concealed crass, ordinary information and banking kiosks. Before anything else, Jack sat down in front of a banking kiosk to acquire a little bit of the local currency.

And got a nasty shock.

Error. Card unreadable.

The kiosk spat the card—one that should have had roughly the equivalent of one hundred New Dirhams on it—back out of its slot. Jack felt as though she had just been tossed into ice water.

One by one, she and Kyra tried all of their money cards, with the same results. Unreadable. Unreadable. Unreadable.

"What the *Hell*?" Kyra hissed, struggling not to draw attention to them by raising her voice. "I *know* these were working back on Helion!"

Back on Helion...

“Ohhhh, *damn* it,” Jack groaned. “They’re straddling universes just like we are.”

“Oh.” Kyra sat down hard next to her. “Shit. So they’re only half here?”

“Yeah. Maybe that’s weakened their magnetic charge too much. Or maybe the other universe’s string frequencies are interfering with it.” Jack picked up one of the cards and held it to her, trying to *will* it to be part of just *one* universe. *We are in U1. Only U1. The thing in my hand belongs **here** and nowhere else...*

She sighed and pushed it into the slot, expecting the machine to spit it right back out again.

Welcome. Please provide your passcode.

“Holy... fuck.” She stared at the screen for a moment before giving Kyra an enormous grin.

Taking no chances, she had the banking kiosk issue replacements for each of the cards they had brought from Helion. Somehow, her Hail Mary was actually *working*, but she wasn’t going to assume that it would stick. They needed cards made out of materials strictly bound to *this* ’verse.

Aware that they might be running out of time, she decided to hold off on acquiring fake IDs for the moment. Instead, she pulled up an elevation map of the New Marrakesh area—noting, as she did so, that the coastline she’d glimpsed from the flyer was real—and identified which parts of town were safely above the other universe’s hypothetical high tide mark. Next up was a search for affordable rooms for rent in those regions.

“Fuck,” she muttered after half an hour of searching. “Why does every town in the Federacy make its heights so damn expensive?”

They had only two available options, both in an area that she suspected had gone into decline and was probably a little dangerous. *Oh well. We’ll probably fit right in...*

Kyra looked over the listings. “I like that one,” she said, touching one of the images on the screen. “Top floor. The higher the better, just in case.”

“Okay...” Jack submitted their application and deposit, putting a hold on the unit. After a whispered conference with Kyra, she entered the security code they agreed upon to use as a key in place of their not-yet-generated fake ID cards, aware that the option to do so indicated how seedy the place would probably be. “Let’s go claim it. We’ll figure out the rest once we’ve got it.”

Kyra quirked her lips. “I know that look. You think it’s got bugs?”

“We may have to fight them for territory, yeah.”

They took a moment to study a city map before setting off. The roads narrowed and became more and more winding as they hiked upward, the buildings becoming less ornate and more weather beaten and grungy. She hadn’t been wrong in her assessment; in the heights or not, this part of town was *not* prosperous. The haves and have-nots of New Marrakesh, she noted, weren’t divided along racial or ethnic lines; she and Kyra didn’t particularly stand out.

Score one for Tangiers Prime...

Her father, she mused, had been right about Deckard’s World.

It had been during one of the loudest pre-divorce arguments her parents had, when he’d shouted at her mother that they were raising their daughter on a racist planet. Thinking now

about the cross-section of people she'd met while living on Helion, and saw in the low-rent district of New Marrakesh, she finally understood what he'd been so upset about. Virtually everyone in their moderately well-to-do part of town, and almost all of the kids at her school, had been white and had treated anyone with darker skin, who showed up in "their" parts of town, with unease and suspicion. Or as invisible, if they were gardening or engaging in some other role of quiet servitude. She'd gone offworld too quickly to even think about it at the time, but if she had needed to try to hide out in what passed for slums in her hometown, she never could have blended in.

Jack wondered if it ever occurred to members of her family, outside of her father, just how *unjust* all of that was.

"*Deckard's World!*" the tourist brochures all touted, "*Recreating the best elements of small-town America!*" How much of that, she wondered, had been code for something far less pure and noble? How much of that code did her family understand and agree with?

They found their building as the light level started to change and the wispy clouds began to turn into fuchsia streamers above them. Their code opened the inner door into a dimly lit lobby. Several lights were either missing or burned out. A sign was taped over an elevator door, scrawled in Arabic and Berber but forgoing French and English.

Fortunately, Jack *had* been enrolled in "remedial" Arabic classes while she lived with the Al-Walids.

"Elevator broken. Please use the stairs." She quirked an eyebrow at Kyra.

"No wonder the top floor unit was available."

"At least we don't have to tiptoe on these stairs," Jack laughed. "C'mon."

The stairwell smelled. Jack tried to ignore the odors—most of them biological—as much as she could. Maybe, once they knew their way around the town better and she'd set up some more resources through the other Ghost Codes—assuming those hadn't been discovered and shut down while she and Kyra were in cryo—they could pick out a nicer place.

For now, it would do.

Eight flights up and they were on "their" level. Jack identified the unit they had reserved and punched in the security code they had chosen.

The space was cramped, musty, and dim. Jack touched the panel by the door and, after a few seconds, lights came up. One flickered, threatening to go back out at any moment.

The unit was furnished... more or less. Jack had the suspicion that someone had been evicted a while back and hadn't been allowed to clear out most of their things before being given the bum's rush. There was a ratty-looking couch and a rattier-looking chair, arranged to face a pitted and scarred table that had probably once had a vid screen sitting on it. Behind the table and a small half-wall divider, pots and pans, plates, cups, and utensils were jumbled on a kitchen counter, awaiting a washing that might be weeks or even months overdue.

"Yeah, we're definitely going to be doing battle against the bugs," Kyra sighed. "I sure can pick 'em."

A small hallway led off to the left. Jack peeked into it and realized that it led to a single bedroom with an attached bath. Again, the rooms were technically furnished, with dilapidated furniture strewn with clothing and various possessions that had been left behind by the last tenant, most of which probably needed to be disposed of. The air had a chemical aftertaste to it; the place had been fumigated even if it hadn't been cleaned.

“I think the battle with the bugs is over. We’re just gonna have to dispose of their remains.”

“Really not much better,” Kyra said beside her. “But what the hell...?”

She walked over to one of the windows, which had its curtains drawn and shades pulled, but which was leaking vibrant, magenta light around its edges. She pulled everything open and then gasped.

“Damn, Jack, you gotta see this.”

The window faced west. Twilight was fully upon New Marrakesh. The clouds had caught fire, molten orange at the horizon rising up to lava red and fuchsia, through dusky rose and a deep, muted purple before the color faded back to dark gray. The sky, between the clouds, was a gem-bright shade of blue that felt, to Jack, like it was searing its way into her heart. The shoreline she’d spotted from the flyer was visible, their lower perspective making it seem closer to the city than she remembered, its water glittering and reflecting the clouds’ riotous shades. Sloping down to that shoreline, New Marrakesh glowed like the mass of jewelry that had spilled out from one of Paris’s “sarcophagi” when he had ransacked his goods for weaponry, blazing and sparkling in the beam of Fry’s flashlight.

Jack wasn’t sure when she’d last seen anything so beautiful.

“You’d think, with a view like this, the owners of this building would have no trouble renting,” she breathed, feeling awed.

“Okay, maybe I *can* pick ’em,” Kyra murmured back. She looked mesmerized. Had she ever seen a view like this before?

Jack took a closer look around the unit. The woodwork, she realized, was carved—or at least, where it hadn’t been buried under a dozen coats of paint, there were signs of elaborate Marrakesh-style embellishments. Decades ago, she thought, this building had been *the* hot commodity in the town, and its views had commanded a premium.

She wondered why that had changed, exactly.

“Hey, Jack... uh... I think the tide may be rising again.” Kyra’s voice had become uncertain.

Jack looked out the window again and felt her breath catch in her throat. The shoreline had moved even closer.

“The base of this building is twenty-two meters above Tangiers Prime sea level,” Jack told Kyra, trying to reassure herself at the same time. “We’re on the ninth floor, roughly another twenty-four meters up. We’ll be fine.”

The lights along the shoreline were dimming, as if veiled... or overlaid by water from another universe. Moving lights of vehicles began to vanish and appear along that edge... and the edge was creeping closer.

At high tide, Jack realized, all of New Marrakesh’s downtown would disappear beneath the water. Her eyes were drawn to the glittering twenty-story central tower of the hospital. She hoped that all of the quarantined passengers and crew of the *Scarlet Matador* had been moved to its top levels by now.

Behind her, Kyra was moving around the room. Jack turned to look.

Kyra had set down her shopping bag by the bathroom door and had draped her auburn wig over it. She was gathering up all of the strewn clothing decorating the floor and furniture of

the room and piling it on the bed. When she finished, she pulled out the corners of the dirty sheets and blankets on the bed and turned the clothing pile into a wrapped package.

“I saw a chute labeled ‘incinerator’ out in the hallway,” she explained, as she hauled the large package off of the stripped mattress. “Back in a few minutes.”

Jack nodded, aware that she needed to start helping with the clean-up too, but drawn back to the view out the window. The waters had reached the city center and the gaudy lights of the market square, that they had sat in only a few hours before, were going dim. What had formerly been the shoreline had gone completely dark.

It’s okay, Jack tried to reassure herself. It’ll come close to where we are, but it won’t go over it. Kyra picked the perfect place for us. We can learn how to time the tides from this window, and we can plan trips to town around them. And plan when we can get off-planet around the tides, too. We’ll be fine.

We’ll be fine.

They spent the next hour hauling things out of the bedroom, stripping it down to the basics and keeping only things that were already clean or could be cleaned easily. None of the clothes were in their sizes, and most of them were so stained that there was no point in offering them to the building’s other tenants.

They left the other rooms for later; they were far too tired to do the whole place. The last — thirty? Forty? God knew how many—hours were finally catching up with them. Once the stained mattress was clean and the sources of various unpleasant smells in the room had been eliminated, and they had wrestled the windows open to let in some fresh air, they took their small collections of money cards out of their smalls, tucked them into a battered dresser drawer, and collapsed on the mattress together.

Jack later thought that she’d fallen asleep the moment that her head touched the mattress. She didn’t even remember to take off her shoes.

She dreamed that she was back on the crash planet, watching the eclipse overtake the sky. But now, instead of strange creatures emerging from rock formations, even more bizarre-looking things were emerging from the ground below her. One of them reached out with a warm, wet tentacle and wrapped it around her ankle—

She woke up, gasping. Warm water slapped her foot again.

The room was bathed in strange, bright moonlight that seemed to pierce the ceiling as it fell. It glittered on the rippling water sloshing back and forth a few inches below the mattress. Another wave rolled across the surface, just above the height of the mattress, and splashed her again.

“Oh *fuck*,” Kyra said beside her.

Jack gave her friend a worried look and climbed out of the bed, sloshing her way to the window. Ground Control—Tomlin—had said that the water was the temperature of bathwater. He hadn’t been wrong. About that much, at least.

An enormous full moon hung in the sky almost directly above them. Beneath it, sparkling waves had engulfed all but the tallest buildings of New Marrakesh. The water, she calculated, was almost forty-seven meters above local sea level. Only the top five floors of the hospital tower, now an island jutting out of the dark waters, were still visible in the distance, an impossible lighthouse.

And the phantom tide was, Jack realized, as another wave broke against her legs, still rising.

23.

The Ocean of Elsewhere

Audrey MacNamera had never been afraid of the water.

Back on Deckard's World, terraformed to be a rustic back-country utopia by its planners, rivers and lakes had abounded. When people went on vacations, swimming was one of the central activities. As a toddler, Audrey had learned how to move through the water like a little fish while she was still trying to master walking on land.

But she had never found herself in the middle of an ocean before. No body of water, ocean or otherwise, had ever come to claim her like this.

"Come on," Jack told Kyra, slogging her way through the thigh-high water toward the apartment unit's outer door, "let's see if we can get to the roof."

"Our cards—!" Kyra protested.

"All part of U1. They're safe. As long as *we* make it through this, they'll be waiting for us right where we left them."

Kyra splashed after her. "What about our gear?"

They had both left their bags sitting on the floor when they had hit the sack.

"Probably already too late for most of the clothes and the electronics," Jack said, pulling the door open and marveling at how it and the water *ignored* each other's *existence*. "The rest'll be here when we get back. It can't pass through the walls any more than we can."

"But—"

"We figured we'd have to ditch it all if nobody in the ground crew was carrying bags, right? It's all replaceable. *You're* not, and neither am I." Jack found the stairwell, again finding herself surprised as the water put up no resistance against the door's opening.

Theirs was the top floor, but Jack had noticed that the stairs continued past their doorway, indicating roof access.

"Please be unlocked, please be unlocked, please be unlocked..."

No such luck. Jack stared at the elaborate locks on the door, the overkill emphasizing that past tenants had used the roof for purposes that the landlords had taken issue with. Even if she had a really good set of lockpicks, she probably couldn't have gotten through the door.

"Fuck," Kyra muttered. "All this way and now we drown?"

Jack shook her head. "We can go out a window. It's late enough that nobody'll notice us floating, especially if we stay close to the building wall."

"Jack, look." Kyra pointed at the steps below them. "No footprints. What the hell?"

Kyra was right. Under normal circumstances, their wet footprints should have been on every step.

"The water's in one universe, and the stairs are in another. The only place they meet is in *us*." Jack shook her head, really glad that she'd *earned* her A+ from Mr. Reilly. She didn't think she'd have managed to wrap her head around what was happening otherwise.

“And our clothes, damn it. Hey, if we buy clothes here in New Marrakesh, they’ll stay dry, right?” Kyra started down the stairs as she talked.

“They should. I mean, the water’ll pass right through them, so *we*’ll still get wet, but...” Jack stopped talking for a second, shaking her head as she followed Kyra back down.

“Damn. It’s just too weird to think about for long.”

The water had continued rising, now soaking the crotch of Jack’s pants when she reached their floor again.

Kyra saw her grimace. “Hey, at least it’s warm, right?”

“Yeah, and at least neither of us are on our fuckin’ periods.” She was a little amazed by that; in the past, her period had a habit of showing up at the worst possible moment.

If it starts tonight, I’ll know why.

“Shit!” Kyra gasped. “You don’t think there actually *are* sharks in these waters, do you?”

“I seriously hope not.” Jack opened the door to their unit again, careful about where she placed her feet. A lot of loose junk was still lying in wait in the main room, hidden by water that couldn’t actually touch any of it. “You saw that little crustacean by the ramp, though, right? Something lives in this ocean. Probably a lot of somethings.”

Another wave rolled through the apartment, raising the water to hip level. Re-entering the bedroom, Jack moved for the nearer of the two windows, which faced south. Its view was less impressive than the west window, but more useful right then. It faced a stand of cedars that were taller than the building, cutting down on the chances that two floating girls would be seen by a midnight stroller. She shoved the screen up and leaned out.

“The moon’s almost over us,” she told Kyra, who was leaning out beside her. “The tide should peak when it is, and then it’ll start to go down. We have less than an hour until it peaks.”

“Why’s it so goddamn big?” Kyra asked.

Jack was wondering the same thing herself. Nearly directly overhead, definitely full, and with a diameter five times as big as any satellite she’d seen on Deckard’s World or Helion, the moon shone balefully down on them, almost too bright to look at. To the southeast, Jack could see two other, smaller moons, both gibbous, halfway between the huge moon and the horizon.

“Oh my God,” Jack said, realization hitting her. She pointed at the other moons. “See those? Those are Tangiers Prime’s normal moons. I mean, the two on our universe’s star charts. There’s no *mention* of a third moon, especially one this size. No wonder the tide’s so high.”

“Wait, so this moon only exists in the other universe?” Kyra squinted up at it. “We’re the only ones who can see it?”

“I think we need some other way of referring to that, just in case people hear us.”

“What, the *moon*?”

“The other universe. We keep talking like that and somebody’s bound to notice.” Jack was nerving herself up to climb out of the window. Part of her, on some level, could sense how it was empty space below her, rather than a dozen or so fathoms of water, the same way that she’d felt the empty air below her on the *other* side of the threshold when she’d been on board the flyer. It was a vertiginous sensation. She wondered if Kyra was feeling it too; the older girl hadn’t climbed out the window yet, either, and *she* was something of a daredevil.

“So like, when we say ‘here’ we mean U1?” Yeah, Kyra was stalling too. “And when we’re talking about the other universe, we say we’re talking about somewhere else?”

“Elsewhere. Yeah. We’re talking about *Elsewhere*.”

“Elsewhere. I like the sound of that.” Kyra was exploring the brickwork of the building’s outer wall with her fingers, testing for handholds. Stalling. “The reality of it? Not so much.”

“At least we’re not on fire—whoa!” Jack gasped as two military copters flew low over their building, headed west at top speed.

“The *hell*?” Kyra gasped. “Where are *they* going in such a hurry?”

“The hospital.” Jack suddenly felt terribly cold despite the balmy water temperature. She ducked under the window—realizing, as she did so, that the water had risen to the point where she had to immerse herself completely—and then swam toward the west window. There was no point in walking anymore; swimming was faster. She shoved the window screen upward and pulled herself partway through the opening. Her head broke the surface of the water just as a third copter roared by.

The first two copters were closing on the hospital tower. As she watched, they turned on searchlights, illuminating the tower’s roof. Only four floors of the tower were still visible; the water had almost completely engulfed the floor below them, just as it had more than halfway engulfed the apartment floor.

Were there people on the roof?

The *Scarlet Matador* had been a significantly larger ship than the *Hunter-Gratzner*, Jack recalled. Fry had mentioned that there had been forty passengers and a crew of five on board that ship. The *Matador* had carried five times as many passengers, plus a crew of nine. How many tower floors had they had to open to accommodate more than two hundred patients? More than the top four?

How many of those two hundred patients were trapped on the roof now, watching the waters rise and praying that they began to recede before there was no building *left*?

She found herself imagining what it must have been like for them, waking to the tide’s arrival, calling for help from people who couldn’t feel or even see the rising waters. Had they even been warned about the kind of threat they might be facing? Had the hospital staff?

The moon was almost directly overhead. Jack hoped her limited understanding of how tides worked was correct—despite its abundant rivers and lakes, most of the bodies of water on Deckard’s World had been too small to have active tides—and that soon, very soon, the water would begin to drop back down.

Kyra had joined her at the west window, also watching the long-distance drama at the hospital. “We’re coming up on a moment of truth here.”

“You mean, in or out?” Jack, halfway out the window but still loathe to climb out completely, glanced back through its glass and into the bedroom. “I think there’s a real chance that this thing is going to start going down before it reaches our ceiling.”

“Is that a chance we should take?” Kyra looked dubious.

“Shit. I don’t know. I *do* know that as soon as it’s safe to, I’m getting the best lockpick set I can find so we can sleep up on the damned roof.”

Kyra looked like she was suppressing laughter. “You pick pockets *and* locks?”

Maybe it wasn’t the time for such things to be amusing. Or maybe, in a moment like that, humor was the only thing left to hold onto. Jack closed her eyes and snickered. “You got me,

Merc, I'm a born criminal..."

In that moment, it no longer seemed like such a terrible thing.

"Jack?" Kyra asked a short time later. The laughter had subsided and both of them were somberly watching the rooftop evacuation underway at the hospital.

"Yeah?"

"How are we going to deal with this? I mean, high tides happen, like, twice a day, right?"

It was a sobering thought. Twice a day, every day, the tide was going to roll in and bury all of the places they needed access to under fathoms of water. Even trying to get off-world would be tricky, very nearly impossible, unless they could manage to board a ship during low tide and have it launch before the waves could return. There had been a few-hours-long window when New Marrakesh was dry in both 'verses, but...

Could they actually manage to chart out the tidal patterns of a three-moon world with enough accuracy to avoid getting drowned?

Or, Jack thought with sick dread, were their deaths preordained now, the way most of the *Hunter-Gratzner's* passengers' deaths had been from the moment it hit atmo for the last time?

"I don't know," she admitted. "I'm sorry, Kyra. I didn't mean to get you into this mess."

"Hey now. You got me *out* of a mess, remember?" The lost look had fled the older girl's face, and her mouth quirked with humor. "Fuck New Dartmouth. I never want to see that shithole again. I'd rather get eaten by a shark from another dimension. Least that'll give me some fun stories to tell in Heaven, right?"

Something about that caught Jack's attention. *Eaten by a shark from another dimension...*

What would that meal be like for such a creature? How much of its meal would actually be substantial? What would be left behind on the other side? Gruesome as the thought was, suddenly Jack found herself wondering about the conflicting laws of physics their bodies were dealing with at that very moment.

They were floating in water, buoyed up by it, because it existed in one universe even as open air existed in another. The water could flow unimpeded through walls that simply didn't exist for it, but they couldn't do the same. For them, the walls and the water were both real, and somehow both sets of universes' rules simultaneously affected them.

If I finished climbing out of the window and let go, I would float, not fall... And yet a part of her could feel the gravity of U1's New Marrakesh trying to contradict that. She wondered, suddenly, if she *would* float, or if she would find herself not falling but sinking down to what was simultaneously street and seafloor... and drowning.

Shuddering with the thought, she pulled herself through the window and back into the mostly-flooded bedroom. She needed to test this, find out, but not somewhere where the result of her experiment could kill her.

Kyra surfaced next to her a moment later. "What are you doing?"

"I need to test something," she said, treading water. That didn't feel any more difficult than it ever had. "Before we do something that could get us killed. I need to figure out how this all works."

"How what all works?"

"Being in two universes at once." Jack kicked up, arcing her body so that she could float on her back.

The water held her up.

“Oh,” Kyra said. “*Oh*. Fuck, I didn’t even *think* of that. I kept feeling like I was gonna plummet straight down but I couldn’t figure out why.”

“Looks like we’re probably safe from that, at least.” Jack let herself drift for a moment. If the stakes weren’t so damned high, she thought, what they were doing right then could have been *fun*.

She mentally slapped herself. Their fellow passengers from the *Scarlet Matador* could be dying, right that moment, and she was thinking about *fun*?

She made herself focus on her task again. The resistance of the water was holding her up in both worlds, even though the lack of resistance in the other world should have pulled her down. And the obstruction of the walls and doors, floors and ceilings, limited her movement in virtually every direction even though none of them existed in the world of water—in Elsewhere. Higher densities, in either ’verse, trumped lower densities and shaped the way she could interact with either world, or both of them at once. She could fly through the air of U1 by swimming through Elsewhere’s water... but she couldn’t pass through U1’s walls as she swam.

But... what if I could?

“*It can’t pass through the walls any more than we can,*” she’d said to Kyra, secure in the knowledge that even if the tide caught up their meager possessions and whirled them around the apartment, it couldn’t pull them out into the open water if all of the doors and windows were shut. Too much of them belonged to both ’verses.

But earlier that day, she’d held one of the recalcitrant universe-straddling cash cards in her hand, trying to will it to *just* exist in the universe where its strip and its chip needed to be read...

...and it had worked.

Was there a way for them to do that with *themselves*? Orient themselves to just one universe? Slip through walls as if they weren’t there, or, alternately... stand on the ground, with a sea engulfing them on every side... and breathe air and not even feel damp?

Could she will *herself* back into the *dry* version of their unit, the one that existed in U1 alone?

Could she choose to be bound by just one world’s physics?

Fuck. I have to try. If it somehow works, we won’t have to worry about when high tide is likely to be.

Jack swam over to the corner of the room with the grubby bed.

If I can make myself fall through the air instead of floating on water... I want to fall on something soft.

Floating above the mattress, Jack closed her eyes, concentrating on the way her body had felt as she was going to sleep a few hours earlier. Dry air on dry skin, dry clothes against her skin as well, the cool, comfortable sensation of having taken off that damned blonde wig... dry. Surrounded by air. Held down by gravity that air wasn’t strong enough to resist.

I am not in water, she thought. *I am surrounded by air. I am not **in** a world where the ocean can touch me like this. No water is touching me. No water is touching me.*

Nothing happened, except another wave rolled through and lifted her body a tiny bit higher.

The water is not part of me. No water is touching me. I am not where the water is. The water is not where I am, the water is Elsewhere—

She landed on the mattress with a hard thump.

Her clothes, she realized, were still soaked. But the water—

It was all around her, and yet it wasn't. Surrounding her, she could see *something*. Something blue-green, bright where moonbeams struck it, shading deeper and deeper the further away it was. A wild shimmer above her showed her exactly where the ocean's surface was, still roughly two feet below the ceiling. She could still see the water from Elsewhere, but—

She took a short, shallow breath, nervous that she would find herself suddenly choking on brine, but air filled her lungs.

*I did it. I **did** it*, she thought with giddy joy. *How the fuck did I do it?*

Kyra floated above her, suspended in the aquamarine air, arms and legs in motion as she turned around and around, looking for—

Looking for me, Jack thought with a grin. She got up from the mattress and walked over to Kyra, reaching up and tugging her hand.

Kyra immediately began thrashing, and Jack had to duck a wild kick.

Damn, she's probably thinking "shark!"

Jack climbed back onto the mattress and stood up on it. The top of her head was almost touching the ceiling. She would be visible to Kyra now.

"Kyra! I figured it out!"

"Jack, something grabbed me—"

"Sorry! Sorry, that was me. Come over here! I figured out how to make it so we can breathe U1's air even when we're underwater."

"You *what?*"

"Get over here and I'll show you. I'll explain everything, I swear!"

"You can't be serious!"

Kyra, she realized, was beginning to panic. With so little space left between the water's surface and the apartment's ceiling, that was inevitable. How could she prove it—?

Oh!

"Smack your hand down on the water, Kyra!"

"What?"

"Do it!"

"Fine! Fucking *fine*, Jack! What the fuck is going on with this *bullshit*—" Kyra smacked her arm down on the water, making it splash around her.

"Now! Watch me!" Jack lifted her arm above the surface of the water, holding it out, and then slapping it down. Her arm passed through the water as if either it, or the water, was a hologram.

"What... the... *fuck?*"

"Get *over* here and I'll show you how!"

"Why there?"

"Because the bed's over here! When the water stops holding you up, you'll want to land on something soft!"

“You think that damned thing is *soft*!?” But Kyra was swimming over. Jack took her hands and guided her until they were both above the mattress, Jack standing on it, Kyra treading water.

“Float on your back,” Jack told her.

Kyra gave her a dubious look but obeyed.

“Close your eyes.”

“This is some seriously freaky bugfuck shit, Jack.”

“I know. Close your eyes.”

Kyra released a deep, gusty sigh of frustration and shut her eyes, grimacing.

“I want you to think about how it felt when you were dry, earlier tonight. No water on you, just air against your skin and your dry clothes. Dry hair. Warm. Imagine feeling like that now, okay?”

“Okay...”

“And now you need to tell yourself this. Think these words to yourself as I say them, okay?”

“Okay...”

“I am not in the water. I’m surrounded by air. No water is touching me. I’m not where the water is. The water isn’t where I am. I’m here and the water is Elsewhere.” Jack took a breath and began to repeat the mantra.

For the first time in her life, she truly understood why repetition was so important.

Kyra joined her on the third repetition. “I am not in the water, I’m surrounded by air... no water is touching me... I’m not where the water is... the water isn’t where I am. I’m here and the water is—*holy fuck!*”

With another loud thump, Kyra landed on the mattress. She gasped, staring wildly around her, and for a moment Jack thought she was going to scream. Then she burst into peals of laughter.

Jack sat down next to her, feeling immeasurable relief. There had been a moment of terrible fear that, although *she* had figured out how to survive beneath another universe’s waters, Kyra wouldn’t be able to. That, once again, she would come through unscathed and lose someone she loved.

And when the hell, Jack thought with astonishment, had *that* happened?

24.

Mad Dogs and Englishmen

“This is too fuckin’ weird.”

Jack looked over at Kyra, who was staring up toward the library ceiling again. Filtered through water that only they could see, the lights were brilliant aqua. The whole room was bathed in blue-green light. A large school of fish darted around above them, casually passing through the stacks like particolored ghosts.

Around them, oblivious to the massive ocean that was passing over and through them, dozens of people sat at tables, researching different topics. Just to top off the strangeness, several of them were working with holographic replicas of ancient texts, sometimes forgetting themselves and passing their hands right through the pages as if they, too, were transdimensional fish.

“That’s a serious understatement,” she murmured back.

To the right, suspended on one wall, the chrono displayed three different clocks: two forms of Standard Time—based on the old Earth time system, using its years, months, days, hours, and minutes, one readout three hours ahead of the more universally used system—and Local Time, which Jack had been stunned to realize was necessary to account for the fact that one Tangiers Prime day was almost two Standard days long.

Most of the worlds that humanity had terraformed and colonized, like Deckard’s World and even Helion Prime, were much more similar to Earth. Helion Prime’s day was a mere fifteen minutes longer than a Standard day, while Deckard’s World’s day was just eight minutes shorter. Aside from some periodic calendar resets to realign themselves back to Standard, adapting had been easy.

But Tangiers Prime, one of the oldest of all colonies, had been among the first to be chosen and terraformed, and colonists back then been a lot less *choosy* about the kinds of worlds they’d attempt to make Earthlike. The extra-long days and nights might have caused severe extremes in temperature, but the thick upper atmosphere acted as an insulator. Still, few people were ever out during the hours of midnight or high noon, some twenty-two hours apart from each other.

For the inhabitants of this strange world, it meant that those were the two sleep periods most people engaged in, breaking each rotational period into two shortish “days” with the peak activity occurring in the twilight hours.

The locals were used to it, only considering it any kind of potential hardship during the month of Ramadan, when—according to a chatty food cart owner, anyway—the daytime period was still fourteen hours long, making fasting quite unpleasant. Only one sect observed that stricture; the other, dominant sect on Tangiers Prime had found a clever work-around by deciding that fasting only need occur while it would be daylight in Old Mecca, back on Earth.

Which meant that almost everyone in Tangiers Prime had chronos displaying the time in Federacy Standard +3, which she'd been told—by the chatty food vendor—matched up with Arabian Standard Time back on Earth.

No one could actually go *there*, of course; the original Mecca had been lost in the Great Asian War, which had irretrievably poisoned almost the entire eastern hemisphere of Earth and forced virtually all of humanity to leave. But it was immortalized in art and literature, probably romanticized to an unrealistic level, and still prayed to by tens of billions across the Federacy.

"You getting anywhere with that?" Kyra's question pulled her back into the moment.

"Almost," she answered. "How does this look to you?"

On the screen, a complex waveform formed above a time code. The first wave peaked roughly an hour before the code marking Tangiers Prime's noon hour. It descended, crossing a line marked "sea level" five and three quarters hours later, dropping down to a "low tide" at the 11.5 hour mark and then rising again to meet the vertical line marking midnight, reaching a loftier height than the first peak. A second sine wave appeared, warping the downward sides, raising the overall form back up before it could reach "sea level" and generating new mini-peaks of its own after each of the "high tides."

Kyra frowned. She pointed to the slight trough when the original wave had almost reached sea level, only to reverse. "So we landed then?"

"Yeah. The landing zone was ten meters above sea level, but the water was still fifteen meters above."

"So five meters on the tarmac."

"And it was already starting to rise again as we landed. It went up roughly another five meters."

"Which is why that Tommy guy—"

"Tomlin."

"It's why Tomlin thought anything above twenty meters should be safe for everybody?"

"Yeah. I couldn't figure out why it would do that, or be so high, until I remembered the other two moons looked like they were about four or five hours behind the main one. They're close enough to each other in the sky right now that they're reinforcing each other's gravitational pull."

"If you say so," Kyra sighed. "Damn it. I hate being from a place where everybody insisted math and science were 'Men's Business.' I'm starting to think maybe the assholes of New Dartmouth were *right* about a lot of shit..." She shook her head. "So this is what you got when you added those two moons?"

"Yeah. See how low the tide would have gone without their influence? Instead, it was already starting to climb again when we were evacuating the ship. We just barely made it to Le Rif in time."

That, she'd learned, was the name of the down-on-its-luck hillside suburb they'd rented in, named after a mountain chain in Old Morocco.

"And about five hours after we fell asleep, the water showed up in our room?"

"Yeah. Megaluna generates a big pull." She grinned as Kyra rolled her eyes. That was her name for the enormous moon, and she was sticking with it. "It was full, so that's probably as

high as it will ever go... but I want to make sure because I don't like how its wave seems closer to the wave generated by the two moons, this second time, than it was the first time."

Watching the tide start rolling back in, hours before sunrise, only to roll out again, had bothered her enough to launch this whole research project. She didn't quite understand why it had created a prickle of dread within her, but she was learning to trust those feelings.

"And those two moons aren't the same as the two in U1?" Kyra asked.

"Nope. Elsewhere's moons are totally different ones. Qamar and Taziri," she said, naming the two moons of Tangiers Prime, "were both below the horizon at the time."

"Okay, so how do we make sure?" Kyra, Jack had discovered, had an insatiable thirst for knowledge, something she was only just starting to explore. Up until now, virtually all of the schooling she'd received had been doctrinal in one way or another, and that was something she'd grown to reject. Now, especially with topics that directly affected their lives, her hunger to learn had come out in force. Jack found herself wanting to encourage it.

"Well, now that these two waves look right... match up with what we saw... and the program has calculated out the sizes, positions, and probable orbits of the three moons that would produce them..." Jack glanced at her friend and grinned, "we let it forecast the next several cycles and see what happens."

Doing this project, which had taken several hours and required them to stay downtown when the next tide rolled in, had helped distract Jack from the awful story that had come up in the newsfeeds shortly after the sun had risen.

Eighteen Dead Among the Quarantined *Scarlet Matador* Passengers and Crew

The article had had a weird spin on it, suggesting without directly claiming that some exotic illness had forced the quarantine of everyone on board the *Matador*, but Jack knew what had really happened. Eighteen people had drowned before the deadly danger everyone was in was fully understood and the rooftop evacuation had begun.

Jack wondered where everyone else had been taken. Several of New Marrakesh's tallest buildings had been tall enough to keep a dozen or more floors above the crest of the tide, after all.

"Okay," Kyra nudged her. "So stop woolgathering and let's see what happens."

Grinning back at Kyra, Jack pressed the "Forecast" button on the touch screen, selecting a ten-day period.

The waves rolled out, the larger and smaller tides growing closer and closer to each other and then—

"Ohhhhh *fuck*," Kyra breathed. Jack couldn't speak at all.

Five cycles out, two and a half of New Marrakesh's absurdly long rotational periods away, the waves merged. The graph shrank to accommodate the new wave that resulted, estimated at 90 meters.

"We need to find Tomlin," Jack told her best friend, "and warn him."

An hour later, Jack knew for a fact that none of her Ghost Codes had been ferreted out.

She'd had to go deep into the local systems, posing as law enforcement, to learn everything she needed to know. The surviving passengers and crew of the *Matador* had been moved to one of the glittering office towers at the center of town and given occupancy of the twenty-third through twenty-seventh floors. Jack located the architectural schematics, confirming that this put all five floors just below the new high tide mark. Tomlin was credited with organizing the roof evacuation and minimizing further loss of life after hospital staff had finally notified him that something might be wrong. Now he was in charge of the quarantine and was currently listed as "on leave" from his Ground Control job.

It was approaching noon; most people were in bed or preparing to go there. But the tide had been rising for the last few hours, so Jack had a feeling that Tomlin would be awake and reachable.

She was almost right about that.

Ground Control's voice was unmistakable, but sleepy, when he answered his comm. "Azul?"

For a moment, Jack thought he was saying someone's name. Then she remembered hearing that as a greeting throughout Le Rif's thrift stores that morning, when she and Kyra had been replacing their soaked clothes—"We just moved in and the water line broke, can you *believe* it?"—before traveling downtown. It wasn't Arabic or French, so it was probably Berber.

"Mr. Tomlin," she said, making her voice sound as steady and authoritative as possible. "It's urgent I speak to you about the *Scarlet Matador* and its passengers. They're still in danger."

"Who is this?" Tomlin was fully awake and speaking textbook-perfect English again. "How did you get this number?"

"The answers to those questions aren't important. What's happening to your charges is." Jack held her breath. Hopefully the fact that she had been able to reach him via a completely masked line—something technically forbidden on most worlds—would convince him that he was dealing with someone in a position of authority.

Which made it critical that she didn't sound, even for a second, like an uncertain teenage girl.

"Very well," Tomlin replied, and she could hear the curiosity in his voice. "When can we meet?"

"We're close. Name the time and place." That, she figured, was the best way to cover up her miniscule knowledge of local geography.

"One hour," he answered. High noon. He then gave her the address of the building she already knew contained the *New Matador*'s passengers. "I'll be in the parking garage. Level A. I hope you have some real answers for me."

"I will." Jack cut the call without giving into the temptation to say, as was common on Deckard's World, *buh-bye* to him. That felt incredibly out of character with the shadowy authority figure she was trying to create in his mind.

"You watch a lot of spy movies?" Kyra asked beside her, holding in a grin.

"One or two," Jack answered, letting her own grin out. "Okay, let's get this data over on the tablet..."

She began transferring the results of her calculations to the brand new unit, purchased just a few hours earlier before they arrived at the library. Part of her still couldn't help but feel morose that the screen she'd originally built on board the *Matador* hadn't survived high tide, but the replacement—costly as it had been—would work better for them. She also transferred the data to a chip that she could give Tomlin.

“...and now we can get over there and get ready.”

They stopped on the way to rent lockers to store their other purchases, just in case they had to cut and run. If Tomlin decided to have the police handy, they might need to.

Fortunately, they'd gotten in some good practice, during the hour that the tide was receding from their apartment, and had even worked out how to “isomorph” almost all the way over into Elsewhere. If they had to, they could escape by passing through the local walls. Holding their breath the whole time, of course. Megaluna's rising tide was all around them now. It would crest roughly an hour after their meeting with Tomlin.

The streets were almost deserted; for most of the people of Tangiers Prime, the hours surrounding high noon were a sleeping period. Jack found herself grateful that the phantom ocean was filtering some of the intense sunlight, but suddenly found herself wondering if she and Kyra were going to end up sunburnt anyway.

Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun... It was a line from a song her mother had sometimes played. Suddenly it made perfect sense.

They arrived at the parking garage half an hour ahead of the scheduled time, walking in as nonchalantly as possible, dressed and acting like two girls, probably tourists, out shopping. Jack had discovered that Kyra needed a little coaching in how to “act casual;” the older girl had no experience with theatrics, or even much in the way of let's-pretend games. The New Christy Colony had had strict prohibitions against theater and dance. Which was a shame, Jack found herself thinking; her friend's ferocious grace would have been spectacular on a ballet stage.

They walked down to Level B, and from there, Jack tapped into the cameras. Ten minutes before the designated time, Tomlin arrived on Level A. Alone.

Apparently, he had his own ideas about how meetings like this were supposed to work. Maybe he'd had a few of them before. Jack watched with bemusement as he paid off the gate guard, who—after he received enough New Dirhams, anyway—shut the gates, put up a sign that said “Temporarily Closed” in four languages, and sauntered off. Tomlin leaned against the guard's booth, just out of the sunlight's direct reach, to wait.

“Might as well do this now, right?” Kyra murmured beside her.

Jack nodded and switched off all the cameras on Level A, setting the feed cycle in the building's main guardroom to switch between everything except the blank cameras. Hopefully nobody would notice that Level A wasn't appearing at all.

She switched out of Ghost Mode on the tablet and pulled up the tide cycle. “Let's go.”

Tomlin didn't realize, at first, who they were. He probably thought he was dealing with exactly what they looked like, a pair of teenage girls inconveniently appearing at just the wrong time. “Sorry, I'm afraid I need to ask you to—”

“Mr. Tomlin, it's good to meet you in person,” Jack said.

That brought his words to a stop. He looked at them, *really* looked at them, and his eyes widened. “We've been *looking* for you,” he said after a moment.

Jack had not been expecting that. “You have?”

He nodded, his expression becoming both more certain and a little awed. “P. Finch and J. Houlot?”

Well, shit.

25.

Roses by Other Names

The last time Jack had felt like this was when Riddick had revealed, to the other *Hunter-Gratzner* survivors, that she was actually a girl.

I really hate being put on the spot like this. Fortunately, this time at least, she had more control over her composure.

She could lie. She could obfuscate. She could demand to know why Tomlin thought they were those two people.

Or she could *not* insult his intelligence and get back to business.

All of that went through her head in under a second. She felt Kyra tensing next to her. “You’re good,” she said, resting her fingers on Kyra’s wrist. “Nobody was supposed to know we were there.”

That got a small smile from Tomlin. He was a good-looking man, Jack found herself thinking. His dark hair and olive skin spoke to his Berber heritage. He had the square jaw, strong chin, high-bridged nose, and prominent cheekbones that she’d seen among many of the people in Le Rif, speaking Berber—or, at least, speaking a language she knew was neither Arabic nor French. His eyes were a light olive green. Her cousin Rachel had had posters on her walls of a late Twentieth Century movie star who looked much like him. Jack found herself wondering where his very non-Berber surname had come from.

“It’s my job to keep track of things,” He replied. “But you didn’t exactly hide all that well.”

Jack tried not to let the knot forming in her stomach show on her face.

“After all,” Tomlin continued, his smile widening and transforming his face from handsome to dazzling, “when the two people who worked harder than anyone else, and saved a *lot* of lives in the process, turn out *not* to be spaceport employees and disappear before debriefing... people notice.”

Jack sighed, unsure of whether or not to feel relief. He seemed to be obliquely thanking them. But it could still be trouble. She was going to have to do a deep dive into the systems when they were done here to find out who, exactly, was looking for them. In the meantime, she’d have to stick with as much honesty as she could. She didn’t know how good he’d be at spotting a lie, but the fewer she told, the better.

“I wish nobody had noticed at all,” she admitted. “It’s better if nobody knows we exist.”

She could see him wanting to ask why and then suppressing the urge. “It’s an internal inquiry for now. I can tell the Human Resources department that it was a paperwork mix-up. Technicians on loan from an independent shipper.”

“The Quintessa Corporation doesn’t know?” Jack found herself asking.

“*Baraka*,” he said, making a small, strangely familiar, gesture. “God, no. The fuss they would have raised...” His expression became shrewd. “They can’t know about you, can

they?”

“It would be very bad for all of us if they did,” she answered, feeling relief.

He nodded, seeming to accept that. “What should I call you?”

“Finch and Houlot will do,” Kyra said next to her, gesturing at each of them in turn.

“All right. You have something to tell me about the *Scarlet Matador*?”

Jack nodded. “By now you’ve already figured out that there’s a very high tide in U322A.”

Tomlin’s eyes widened, and she knew she had scored. He’d seen the heavily-redacted Isomorph Drive log, then. “Yes.”

“There are three moons in that ’verse that don’t exist here. The biggest was full last night. That was the source of your fifty-meter wave.”

His expression had grown somber while she talked. He had probably been asleep when it hit, she realized, believing that all the quarantined people would have to deal with was a twenty-meter wave that wasn’t due for several more hours and would be far below them. How nightmarish must that terrible scramble have been for him, having to battle a mortal threat he couldn’t even see?

“Moving them here was good. Last night’s wave was probably that moon’s normal maximum. But it’s not the only extra moon in Elsewhere’s sky—”

“Elsewhere?”

“Finch likes to give things unofficial names,” Kyra said. “U322A is ‘Elsewhere,’ and she named that moon, too. ‘Megaluna.’”

Tomlin’s lips twitched as if he was suppressing laughter. “Understood. So there’s more?”

For a second, Jack found herself wanting to argue that Megaluna was a perfectly damn good name, thank you *very* much, but she suppressed the urge. She had to get back to business. “There are two moons behind it in the sky, in close conjunction. They’re responsible for the twenty-meter tide you dealt with when the *Matador* landed.”

Tomlin nodded, his expression expectant.

“The problem is, they’re going to have a conjunction with Megaluna five high tides from now.”

“A syzygy?” Now he looked alarmed.

“Almost one,” Jack told him. The word had appeared in the forecast graph, and she’d already looked its meaning up, so she didn’t have to fake understanding of it. “Like I said, last night was Megaluna’s full moon, so the *sun* won’t be in on the alignment. That’d probably be even worse. But...”

She walked over to Tomlin’s side, aware that Kyra was staying protectively close to her the whole time, and offered him the tablet. He accepted it, glancing at her for a second before focusing on its screen.

“...It’s still going to be bad. Here’s the landing of the *Matador*,” she told him, pointing at the point on the graph when the falling tide had bumped upward again. “And this...”

She pointed at the high tide that had followed it.

“...is last night’s King Tide.” She gently tapped the “Forecast” button on the screen, letting the waveform projection populate forward. “And this is what’s coming.”

“*Baraka*,” Tomlin murmured again, and for a second Jack thought he was going to drop the tablet. With his free hand, he made the gesture again, and she realized it was one she’d

seen the chatty food vendor use several hours earlier as a ward against evil. “Ninety meters? You’re sure?”

“Not one hundred percent,” Jack admitted. “We’re working with a limited data set here.”

In point of fact, that was the exact warning that had come up on the program after she had finished inputting the data. She had no way of being sure, not yet anyway, whether the two moons were going to start moving apart or come even closer to each other in the next few days.

“But,” she continued, “the risk is too big not to take it seriously.”

She had to resist the urge to add, *right?*, to defer to his considerably greater experience. It would make her sound like a kid. She had to keep projecting authority. It was hard, though. At any other time, she thought, he was the kind of person she’d have turned to for reassurance and guidance, and part of her desperately wanted that now.

So she was trying to channel Shazza. The New Australian woman had exuded perfect confidence. She didn’t try to pull off the accent, but she was trying to carry herself the way that Shazza had, to frame her assertions with the same aplomb that her wild-haired heroine had. If only that fearlessness hadn’t broken at the wrong moment. If only Shazza had just *stayed down*...

She forced herself back to the present. There was nothing she could accomplish by wallowing in her regrets.

Tomlin was nodding. “You’re absolutely right. Thank you. I will make sure that the passengers and crew are all moved above that altitude before then. I just...”

For a moment, *he* looked uncertain, some kind of battle playing out on his face. Then he met her eyes.

“Is there *anything* else you can tell me about U322A? The Quintessa Corporation hasn’t been helpful at all, they demand information but won’t *give* any, and these people...” He gestured helplessly, handing the tablet back to her as he did. “Are they going to be trapped in a high tower on our world for the rest of their lives? How can I *help* them?”

This, Jack realized, was what she needed to give him most of all, and *could*. He’d just provided her the perfect segue into the other thing she needed to tell him. “They don’t have to be. There’s a way to survive existing in two universes. It takes some work, but they can learn to *pick* which universe they’re aligned with.”

She handed the tablet to Kyra and stepped back from both of them. It was time for some genuine theatrics.

“They can learn to reject the water,” She told him, “or embrace it.”

Jack closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *I am in both worlds*, she thought, deliberately and carefully. She didn’t want to vanish from his sight altogether, after all. *The water is holding me*...

She focused on keeping the connection with the water, with Elsewhere itself, at just the right level, not too strong, not strong enough that the full weight of forty meters of water above her would come crushing down. She’d swum deep enough in the past, back on Deckard’s World, to know how much deeper that would be, how much pressure the water would put on a body, and how painful that kind of pressure change could be if it came on too quickly. An instantaneous change, she knew, could be genuinely injurious, damaging soft

tissue and even potentially rupturing her ear drums. No, she wanted the water to float her and buoy her, not beat her down—

She felt it flow in around her, gentle as a swimming pool, and kicked off, opening her eyes as she swam upward. She didn't want to bash her head against the garage's ceiling, either, after all. That'd ruin the effect she was going for.

Below her, Tomlin was staring at her with his mouth agape as she swam through what was, to him, thin air. She did a slow flip in the water, coming back down to the floor level and hovering an inch or two above it, before pulling back from Elsewhere's hold on her and dropping lightly to the floor. Air, she thought, had never tasted so sweet.

Her hair was wet now, plastered to her head, but her clothes were perfectly dry. She suddenly wondered in alarm if, had she and Kyra been forced to cut and run and try to isomorph through a wall, their clothes would have been left behind in the process.

That would have been a big problem. She added it to her list of things she needed to figure out once they were safely back in Le Rif.

"It takes work," she told Tomlin, who was still staring at her. "They have to think really hard about the difference between the conditions in each 'verse, and what they're aligning themselves with and what they're rejecting. And no matter what, they'll always see a little way into Elsewhere. They'll always be able to feel it."

"Finch came up with a mantra I like to use," Kyra added. "'I'm not in the water. I'm surrounded by air. No water is touching me. I'm not where the water is. The water isn't where I am. I'm here and the water is Elsewhere.' It's effective, but the first time I used it, it took a few tries before I got it to work."

Jack took the chip out of her pocket and offered it to Tomlin. "The wave forecast is on here. You can use it to help them. Next high tide, or even *this* one, take them down to a floor that's only partly submerged. Get them swimming in the water. Make sure they're floating over something soft and have them try it. Once they can control which 'verse they're aligned with, they won't need to be kept in a tower."

Tomlin took the chip from her hand with the look of someone receiving a gift from a god. "Thank you. This is... you're saving so many lives. The Quintessa Corporation has been no help at all, but this..."

"Don't trust them," Jack heard herself saying. Tomlin's gaze moved sharply from the chip to her face. Kyra was staring at her too, she realized.

He wanted to ask her why; she could see that.

"It's not that they can't help," she went on, ignoring the tiny head-shake Kyra was giving her. "They *won't* help. Not really. Your ground crew was told that if anybody asked, they should say it was all just a quarantine, wasn't it?"

Tomlin nodded. "There were non-disclosure agreements in exchange for the bonuses you two never collected. I... had to sign one, too." His expression twisted a little. "*Why?* Why was such a thing even necessary?"

"We don't know," Jack told him. "We just know that they'll do anything—*anything*—to cover up the existence of threshold syndrome and what causes it. So please let that part go. They have ways of making evidence disappear. And if anybody asks you about the data on the chip, *you* put it together from witness statements about what they saw in the sky during last night's high tide."

“You won’t even be lying,” Kyra said beside her. “Now, we need to go, and you need to get back to your charges.”

Tomlin nodded, pointing to the side. “There’s a pedestrian entrance over there. Thank you, both of you, again.”

Jack would have felt incredibly accomplished, even proud, about how everything had gone, if Kyra weren’t suddenly giving her the silent treatment.

Her friend was unusually quiet as they walked back to the lockers to get their things, and all during the walk back to their apartment in Le Rif. Her expression, as they walked, was introspective, bordering on brooding. It was only once they were inside with the door locked that she finally spoke. “You have a serious White Knight Complex going on with you, Jack.”

“Sorry?” Jack set her bags down on the battered table that had, once, probably held a video screen. She looked over at her friend, feeling a little twist of worry. Weirdly enough, Kyra wasn’t the first one to accuse her of that.

“Look, I get it. We needed to pass on what we knew about the tides. And how to get around them. But telling him not to trust Quintessa? Bad move.” Kyra looked vexed.

“But he shouldn’t. And if they ever found out about us—”

“He already said he was gonna cover for us,” Kyra interrupted. She sat down on the ratty couch, her eyes boring hard into Jack’s. “And he already didn’t trust them. But what you said is gonna make him more interested than ever in figuring out what they’re hiding.”

“But I told him to let it go,” Jack protested, her heart sinking.

“Oh come *on*, Jack.” Kyra rolled her eyes. “What would *you* do if someone said that to *you*?”

Jack opened her mouth to form a vague protest, but closed it again, the words unsaid.

“The two of you are practically *twins*,” Kyra grumbled. “So busy trying to save other people you have no idea how much danger you’re getting yourselves into.”

Jack wanted to say that wasn’t fair. That it wasn’t true. But *that* would be a lie. Paris, after all, had had to forcibly restrain her from running to Shazza, and Imam had had to similarly hold her back from running into the darkness after Fry to find Riddick. A rebellious part of her still insisted that, if she hadn’t been held back, maybe both Shazza and Fry would have *lived*. But that was just so much hot air.

I could have been torn to pieces like Shazza, she thought, or dragged off into the darkness like Fry.

The part of her that had tried to follow them into the black, some three months later, wondered if that would have been a mercy.

“Look,” Kyra said after a moment. “I know you mean well. And it’s good that you want to help people. But don’t forget we’re fugitives from the law here. We took a huge risk today. It worked out this time. But... it could’ve gone so wrong. We’ve got to keep a lower profile.”

Jack nodded, forcing back the part of her that wanted to argue. Tomlin had been receptive to Finch and Houlot, two mystery workers who had sped up the evacuation and then vanished. Would he have been nearly as receptive to Jack B. Badd, wanted for murdering Antonia Chillingsworth, and the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain? Or even just two fugitives

from a psychiatric hospital? Would he have covered for *them*, or turned them in? “Yeah. I probably shouldn’t have swam in front of him, even if the cameras were off.”

Kyra sighed, and Jack realized she was fighting a grin. “Honestly, that was really cool. Risky, but cool. God, I want to practice some stuff like that.”

“We’ve got a lot to practice,” Jack agreed, relieved that they were no longer at odds. She sat down next to Kyra on the ratty couch. “I was figuring we could isomorph as far into Elsewhere as possible and go through the walls to get away, if we needed to, but there’s a problem with that.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

“Our clothes probably wouldn’t have come with us.” Jack touched her still-damp hair, and then gestured to her shirt and pants. “They didn’t even get wet. They stayed in U1, and only moved with me because I was still most of the way in it myself.”

Kyra had begun snickering.

“Plus,” Jack mused, growing serious, “We were forty meters below the surface. That’s... well, really experienced scuba divers can go that deep, but the change in pressure, especially if we had to do it fast, could’ve injured us.”

Kyra sobered next to her. “We’ve got a lot to learn. What we can do... I keep being tempted to think of it as super powers like on the shows back in the rec room, and maybe it can be, but we can’t go off half-cocked, even a little. We’re, what, on the ninth floor here? If we isomorphed over to Elsewhere when the tide was out, we’d just drop like a pair of dumb-ass stones, all that way down. Or what if we isomorphed into a space that already had something *in* it? I could feel the water moving out of the way when we were practicing last night, but... what if there was, oh, a glass pane we couldn’t even see from the other side, and it was halfway through one of us when we came back?”

Jack had had a few of the same thoughts. “It’s why I was still floating like an inch or two above the ground when I came back from Elsewhere in the garage. I didn’t want to get my feet stuck to something, or stuck *in* something. I didn’t think I *would*, but I didn’t want to take the chance.”

“Yeah. That was smart.” Kyra couldn’t completely contain her grin. “And it really was damn cool-looking. Did you see his face?”

“I could see his mouth was open.” In truth, the water had clouded her vision some.

“You could’ve pretty much convinced him of anything you wanted, doing that. He’s lucky you’re *not* a con artist.” That seemed to sober her again. “The Quintessa Corporation *has* to know what people with threshold syndrome could be capable of. They might have a *problem* with the idea of everybody from the *Matador* figuring out how to switch between two universes instead of dying before they can.”

“Shit,” Jack groaned, closing her eyes and leaning back into the couch. “If he teaches them to do what we do, that puts a bullseye on him, doesn’t it? They’ll want to know how he figured it out.”

“Yeah.” Kyra sounded, and looked, genuinely morose at the prospect. “So what do we do about it?”

For several minutes, Jack couldn’t focus on that. The idea that she’d led someone into harm’s way again—like Ali, like Paris—was almost choking her. The voice within that had been quiet for a few days, with its *I don’t want to be Jack anymore, I want to be Audrey again*

refrain, was back at full volume. She wanted to be back to a place where her backtrail didn't resemble the damage path of a tornado. Where helping someone, or even just trying to, didn't open them up to a world of hurt. All of her plans for getting there had seemed so solid, until they came up against reality and cracked in her hands. She still hadn't even managed to get herself and Kyra a good set of—

And there it was.

“We're gonna have to make sure he knows he's in danger,” Jack said slowly. “And I'm gonna have to make sure he has a way out of it.”

“Oh?” Kyra's lips were twitching as if she was suppressing amusement now. “I know that look. What's the plan?”

“I still need to get us a good set of fake identities. Ones that'll hold up in the long term. And some funds to back them.” Jack grinned, suddenly relishing what she was going to be doing. For a moment, the voice went quiet, and she was able to revel in being Jack B. Badd. “So I'm gonna make him a set, too, while I'm at it.”

26.

A Momentary Lapse from Madness

It took slightly over a Federacy Standard week—four of Tangiers Prime’s strangely elongated day-and-night cycles and some change—before Jack could finish making fake IDs for Kyra, Tomlin, and herself.

The process itself probably took only eight or so hours of her time for each one. But that time had to be divided up into small chunks over the week, each step requiring her to wait for databases to update with new, carefully falsified information, or for a human operator somewhere to review and clear requests that seemed to come from legitimate official sources, or just for redirected funds to finish moving around and become available for the plundering. It might have taken less time if Jack hadn’t also spent extra hours erasing her back-trail in the system once some of the riskier steps were completed.

In between, she and Kyra found that they had a lot of other things to do. Learning how to safely “isomorph” between U1 and Elsewhere topped the list.

They practiced whenever they could. During high tides—never quite as high as that first night’s tide, until the monster wave in the dawn hours two and a half Tangiers days after they’d met with Tomlin—they used the water to buoy them as they practiced safely navigating their way through physical objects like walls, floors, and ceilings. They learned—after a variety of disturbing and comical mishaps—how to consistently make their clothes accompany them on an isomorph, and how to pick up objects from one world and transfer them to the other, and then back. Or not.

Their apartment, now spotless largely thanks to Kyra, acquired unusual decorations brought back from Elsewhere: pale, beautiful twists of driftwood, a chunk of brilliant scarlet coral that they’d found floating through their rooms during their second night, and several exotic shells that had floated through as well. A small ten-legged crustacean, found clinging helplessly onto a piece of driftwood after the monster wave had passed, now lived under their dresser, feasting upon the large insects that infested the building whenever any made the mistake of entering their unit, and periodically creeping over to stare up at Jack in fascination while she worked on building the infrastructure for the fake IDs. Once, she had looked down to find it sitting companionably on her foot, its eyestalks pointed at her face.

When the tides were out, they still practiced, finding empty, deserted spaces where they could work on learning the differences in the geographies of each world and how to account for them. They learned how to switch quickly between ’verses, how to “fade” between them, and how to negotiate differences in the two terrains without getting caught in anything. Kyra, in particular, wanted to practice using combat moves while isomorphing in one direction or another.

“Where did you learn to fight like this?” Jack asked her on the second day, as Kyra patiently showed her how to position her body to deliver a stronger kick.

“I watched the boys back home a lot,” Kyra told her. She still didn’t seem to like talking about life before the standoff and massacre, but she had begun to open up more. “They didn’t teach girls this kind of thing. We were supposed to be homemakers. But they didn’t care if we were nearby doing our chores during their lessons. Some of the boys would show off a little if we were there.”

Jack had already discovered that Kyra was a remarkably quick study, not eidetic like her, but whip-smart and capable of intense focus. It didn’t surprise her to learn that she’d spent much of her days eavesdropping on subjects the Fathers of New Christy refused to teach girls, and then had sneaked out at night to practice what she’d seen when nobody would see or know. The boys of New Christy had been taught karate, boxing, and some other combat styles whose names she hadn’t caught, and she’d relentlessly worked to become better than any of them at all of them, while still completing her stultifying list of “womanly” chores.

The latter explained, Jack reflected, how she’d been able to transform their apartment from a filthy hole in the wall to clean, light, and airy in less than two of New Marrakesh’s crazy-long days.

The only weapons Kyra hadn’t been able to practice with, along the way, were guns, and only because she hadn’t been able to find a way to keep people from hearing her shoot them off in the middle of the night. But she’d taught herself how to aim with bow and arrow, with darts, with knives... and had adapted that knowledge to gun sights and small firearms as best she could. There were infrequent occasions when, in an attempt to put the girls of New Christy in their place and prove to them that “manly” subjects were beyond their reach, one of her male peers would let her and the other girls handle or even shoot a gun, and she used those opportunities to hone her aim while pretending to have no idea what she was doing.

“Zach loved to make fun of girls by getting them to try to shoot,” she explained. “Most of them were playing dumb, too. They’d act like their fingers weren’t strong enough to even pull the triggers. *Please*. Like the work we were doing every day had left us with delicate little hands... I guess they knew the boys would eat it up, though. But I didn’t play *that* helpless. He’d tell me that he wanted me to hit the green bottle on the fence, and I’d act like I was aiming for it, but I’d really aim for the knot on the fence post next to it, or the can on its other side. He’d think I was missing when I was making bullseyes. And he was *always* willing to keep laughing at me if I wanted to keep ‘trying.’”

Kyra, Jack thought, was not nearly as much of a stranger to let’s-pretend games as she seemed to think she was. She just hadn’t learned—yet—how to mimic that many roles. She had two down pat, though: prim, proper quasi-Puritan girl-child... and the ominous, deadly icon of the Killer’s Club that Stacey and Colette had idolized. Jack suspected that her friend still didn’t know who the *real* Kyra behind either of those masks actually was.

By the time of the standoff, although no one else had known it, Kyra was already the deadliest fighter in New Christy, at least among the children and teens, and needed none of the hurried defensive training they reluctantly gave to the community’s womenfolk.

It had been a startling moment for Jack when she realized that Kyra had been born on Earth, decades before the devastating nuclear war that had finally driven almost all of humanity off the world of its origin.

Part of her had known it, of course; she’d done a report on the New Christy Enclave and knew that their sublight ship had left Earth’s orbit in 2087. But Kyra *remembered* Earth. She

had been six years old when she and her family had boarded a shuttle to the Gateway Prime shipyards on the promise that, at the other end of their long interstellar journey, they would find the agrarian paradise that her father insisted was what God intended for them. She remembered the world of concrete and leaden skies that she'd lived in before then with nostalgia; that, for her, was the world of her innocence before everything had begun to go wrong.

Kyra didn't realize that Jack's questions about her old life had a secondary purpose: she wanted to create an identity that her friend would be able to comfortably live within, with a background that wouldn't be difficult to recall or relate to. It was the same reason that she spent hours learning everything she could about Gavin Brahim Tomlin.

The people she had thought of until then as "Berber," it turned out, preferred to be called Amazigh in the singular, Imazighen in the plural. That much she'd gleaned from the local shopkeepers and food vendors. Le Rif was Amazigh territory, although no one much minded their intrusion into it. Still, Jack had learned quickly that only outsiders referred to them as "Berbers," and that if they wanted to be viewed as friends, they needed to adjust their vocabulary a little.

"It is not a kind name, you see," Takama—rapidly becoming Jack's favorite food cart vendor—had told her with a gentle smile as she dished up a fragrant bowl of spiced lamb and barley, placing two *medfouna* beside it. "It's what colonizers have called us for thousands of years, but it has never been our name for ourselves. The Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Spanish, the French... it comes from the same root as 'barbarian,' and that is how they all saw us. To them we were unruly children, meant to be enslaved. We were not meant to govern our own lives in their eyes. Even now, on this beautiful new world, there are those who wish us to subsume our identity to theirs, who refuse to acknowledge that our traditions are no more primitive than their own."

That had given Jack a great deal to think about, and she had resolutely struck "Berber" from her vocabulary. Kyra, who had never heard of them before coming to Tangiers Prime, did the same with even greater ease. From the Imazighen, Jack had learned far more about Tomlin, the man, than she'd been able to glean from the networks; he was a local hero.

Almost forty Standard years earlier, Cedric Tomlin, from the Scottish colony world of New Alba, had come to Tangiers Prime as a combat flight instructor. He had swiftly fallen in love with the world, and more specifically, with Safiyya Meziane, a linguistics professor who taught second-language courses in all four of Tangiers Prime's official languages: Arabic, Tamazight—the language Jack had thought of, until then, as "Berber"—French, and English. They had married, and a year later had given birth to a son who received names reflecting both of his heritages.

Gavin Brahim Tomlin had inherited his mother's facility with languages and his father's love of flying. He had trained as a combat pilot and had fought in dozens of deadly skirmishes with starship 'jackers who tried to prey upon the Sol Track shipping lanes where they intersected with the Tangiers system. Many of those battles had crept into local legend and had earned him the nickname "El Krim" among the Le Rif—or, Takama told her, just Rif—community.

Now thirty-five, Tomlin had retired "young" from flying after the last major 'Enza variant sidelined him for nearly a year. The gossip Jack had gleaned from Takama was that, although

he'd taken several months to recover from the illness, what had very nearly crippled him was the loss of his wife Thiyya, four months pregnant with what would have been their first child, to the disease.

With no guarantee that he would recover enough to be recertified for combat flight, he had retrained and then taken up a position with Tangiers Prime's Space Traffic Control two years later. His hire was considered a major coup, because in addition to being a local hero, he was a polyglot like his mother and was fluent in almost all of the languages used by ships' crews that came through the Tangiers system. He had been on duty on Tangiers Station A when the *Scarlet Matador* had contacted him a Standard day earlier than expected.

If the crew had told him that they *weren't* trained or certified to land the ship on the planet's surface, Jack realized, he could have boarded it and handled the landing for them personally. And, undoubtedly, would have done so without a second thought.

The rest of his story was, for the moment, classified, and she'd worked hard to get access to it. Rather than handing the crisis off to someone else, Tomlin had coordinated with the surface to set up a landing and quarantine zone for the *Matador* before taking a shuttle to New Marrakesh to oversee everything personally, even sleeping—as Jack had overheard in the flyer—in its Ground Control headquarters to ensure that he would be immediately available if the *Matador* called. Once the ship had been fully evacuated and the passengers and crews had been quarantined in the top six floors of the hospital tower—

Six floors, Jack thought with sadness. *Only four of those floors stayed above the tide that night.*

—he had briefly been replaced by a designated representative of the Quintessa Corporation, who had taken over “oversight” of the quarantine. After eighteen people died on her watch, despite the Corporation's attempts to stay in control, the planetary government overruled them and had even made veiled threats about an inquest into threshold syndrome if they obstructed Tomlin's command again. He had been put back in charge, and while Quintessa had sharply questioned his recent decision to move the *Matador* survivors from the swanky Mansour Plaza to the highest completed levels of New Marrakesh's still-under-construction Othman Tower, nobody was impeding his decisions... yet.

Things were tense there, but so far it had remained the prickly tension of people who were overtly polite to each other even as they worked at cross-purposes. None of Jack's delvings into higher security systems had turned up signs that Quintessa viewed Tomlin as any kind of active threat. Yet.

No one had died since he had taken back command.

From all of this information, Jack slowly wove together identities that she hoped Kyra and Tomlin would each find comfortable to take on, ones that would play to their strengths and explain away their weaknesses without drawing too many comparisons to the personas they would be leaving behind. The identity she constructed herself, although every bit as durable, was simpler, credentialing her developing technical skills so that she could join the next supply crew headed for Furya without too many questions. The next scheduled supply ship was a month away; with luck, she would be on it.

Jack, who no longer believed that luck was in any way on her side, planned to make sure that she was the best possible candidate for the job when it opened. In the rare moments

when none of their other agendas dominated her time, she relentlessly studied the technical schematics of commonly used supply ships.

The news from Helion Prime interested her, as well. Relay drones, capable of traversing the Sol Track lanes at speeds that no ships with lives on board could, had already brought stories of the scandal gripping the Aceso Psychiatric Hospital of New Athens.

New Athens? That startled Jack, who had spent her whole time on Helion—which was, she realized, derived more from Greek than Arabic—thinking that she was in a city called New Mecca. Heather had teased her about it, but she still hadn't quite grasped how much of her understanding of that world had been shaped by Imam Abu al-Walid's startling parochialism. Would Riddick, she wondered, have been so complacent about leaving her in the man's care if he had realized?

You have to let it all go, she scolded herself. He's gone his way and you've gone yours. You'll never meet again. It's done. Don't worry about what he was thinking.

Director Flint and several of his subordinates were under investigation, both for enrolling patients in experimental treatments and then attempting to cover up negative outcomes and, more interestingly, for maintaining lax security that had resulted in dozens of patients acquiring illicit staff accounts within the system.

The Killer's Club, it seemed, hadn't been the only ones who had pulled that trick.

Careful checking showed that nobody had discovered *her* account, which she had hidden behind law enforcement code once she had the run of the system, but all of the others had been found. Although Stacey was never named, her violent porn collection, also in the possession of several underage boys in the male wards, had become a topic of heated debate and recrimination. The rationalization that the staff had had for letting them keep it—that their willingness to voluntarily surrender it would be a sign of their recovery—was lambasted by other experts who accused the doctors and nurses of feeding and enabling addictive behavior instead, and of potentially creating sexual predators in the process.

Jack's escape, and Kyra's, had been completely overshadowed by the rest of the drama. She suspected that had a lot to do with Toombs, who probably didn't want other mercs horning in on Richard B. Riddick's putative trail. While articles occasionally mentioned that two patients had gone missing and had yet to be recovered, they always treated the escape as an effect of the pandemonium that had briefly overtaken the facility... rather than as its cause. If anyone on Helion knew better, they weren't willing to go on the record saying so.

Amnesty Interplanetary, however, had a great deal to say about the fact that Kyra Wittier-Collins, better known as the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain, had fled custody right before she was going to be illegally extradited back to New Dartmouth in violation of Federacy rulings. That scandal was every bit as high-profile as the one embroiling the hospital. Two members of the New Dartmouth cabinet had tendered their resignations as the fallout spread, and as the abuses that had been perpetrated against Kyra, prior to her transfer to Helion, came to light.

Sometimes, Jack thought, justice actually won. A quick check reassured her that none of the orderlies and nurses she'd liked and respected at the hospital were in any trouble, although most were actively seeking new positions at other facilities. A few of the older ones had quietly retired.

It was mid-late afternoon, four days after Jack and Kyra had met with Tomlin, when they saw him again. Jack didn't quite have the IDs complete—she still had to pick out names for each of them—and had one or two more sessions in the law enforcement networks before everything would be solidified. But she was feeling relaxed and confident. Nine PM, anywhere else in the Federacy, would have signified late evening, but not during a 44-hour day. To the people of Tangiers Prime, it was the equivalent of late morning after their long high noon sleeping period. Elsewhere's high tide, which shifted roughly an hour later with each cycle, was at its peak once more. In another long day, low tide would occur around noon and midnight, and Jack and Kyra were planning to make the most of that to explore Elsewhere's hidden landscapes when most people were abed.

Sipping at ices, discussing the prospects of trans-dimensional beachcombing, they felt almost like ordinary teenage girls as they walked back to their apartment building.

Gavin Brahim Tomlin, *El Krim* himself, was sitting on their front step waiting for them.

Author's Note: Abd El-Krim, in the 1920s, led the Imazighen of Morocco's Rif region in a successful revolt against Spanish colonial rule. His attempt to establish an independent Rif Republic resulted in a combined force of French, Spanish, and Moroccan armies driving him into exile in Egypt, but to the people of the Rif, he remains an important heroic figure. Many contemporary Moroccan textbooks claim he fought against the French and Spanish for the Moroccan monarchy, something the Imazighen of the Rif call revisionist whitewashing. Amazigh culture, and thus the culture's folklore, is tribal-collectivist and has few solitary-figure heroes to draw from—outside of stories derived from the same sources that fueled better-known Greek mythology—for use in giving a nickname to a living folk hero of the future, so nicknaming him after a legendary and largely-unsung freedom fighter seemed like the next best thing.

27.

Paving the Way with Good Intentions

Even dressed in traditional Amazigh clothing instead of his uniform, there was no mistaking Tomlin. Nor the fact that he wasn't merely sitting on a random doorstep, but was waiting for *them*.

"Shit," Kyra muttered beside Jack.

Jack realized she should have seen this coming. In the last few days, as she had begun to learn more and more about the people of the Rif, she had realized what a tightly knit community they were. If they were willing to share stories about one of their own with two strange girls, nothing was stopping them from carrying tales of those girls back to *him*.

She wondered when he'd put together that the stories were about the same two girls who had accosted him in the parking garage.

"It's okay," she murmured back to Kyra, hoping she was right. She kept walking forward, trying to convey through her walk and her posture that she wasn't at all bothered by his presence on her doorstep, even trying to hint that she had expected it.

Because, she thought, she damn well *should* have.

Kyra kept pace beside her, but she could feel her friend's tension.

"Mr. Tomlin," she said as they approached the building. "It's good to see you again."

She hoped Kyra wasn't telegraphing disagreement with her statement.

"And you, Ms. Finch, Ms. Houlot." He nodded at each of them, giving them a non-threatening smile. Jack noticed that his posture also seemed to be trying to convey a lack of threat. He seemed well aware that this was a bold and possibly unwelcome move.

"How did you find us?" Kyra asked beside her.

Tomlin shrugged. "My family is here in the Rif. You have met my aunt, Takama. She spoke the other day of the two lovely girls who had moved into this *tagat* building and were curious about us. How you never spoke about yourselves but encouraged people to talk about themselves. I showed her the one clear capture the security footage had of you—which no longer exists, don't worry—and she said 'yes, those are the girls.'"

"Sorry," Jack couldn't help but ask. "What does 'tagat' mean?"

"I'm afraid it means 'cursed,'" Tomlin said, his smile becoming rueful. "This building does not have the best of reputations. Its owners are outsiders, who thought they could use it as a jumping-off point for 'gentrifying' our neighborhood. No Amazigh will live within it. They struggle to find tenants, and to keep them, especially because they are lazy and cheap and hardly ever make repairs. Perhaps that's why your pipes burst when you first moved in..."

His smile turned mischievous.

"...Or was that a cover story for why your clothes were soaked after the high tide came through?"

Jack glanced over at Kyra, whose breathing had quickened. Under the deadpan she'd always worn in front of the Killer's Club girls, Jack could see signs that she was becoming increasingly tense and defensive.

"Well," Jack replied, hoping she could defuse that tension, "when you're trying to keep a low profile, telling people you very nearly drowned in an invisible ocean that visited your rooms doesn't exactly help."

Alarm had appeared on Tomlin's face. "You nearly drowned? But I thought you—"

Kyra sighed next to her, visibly making herself relax. "We've only ever been about one or two steps ahead of you the whole time, because we stayed out from under the Quintessa Corporation's thumb and *Finch* here already knew about threshold syndrome."

Now Tomlin looked a little crestfallen. "I would not have intruded upon you if I didn't need help, but now I fear—"

"Try us," Jack interrupted before he could talk himself out of whatever had brought him. She had to admit *she* was curious. "We've been learning how to handle moving between both universes pretty much nonstop. We're happy to share what we know."

Kyra's hand knocked against her wrist. Looking over, she saw a quelling look on her friend's face.

"What?" she whispered. "They need all the help they can get."

Tomlin hadn't missed the exchange. "I should probably tell you that I know who you really are," he said. "Or at least, who *you* are," he added nodding at Kyra. "Whether or not you can or will help me, I can arrange asylum—protection, that is, not an institution—on this world if you wish it. No one will extradite you from here." His gaze returned to Jack. "I know less about you, my young *Tislilel*, but having witnessed you swim through the air, I find you far saner than the reports would suggest—"

"She infiltrated the hospital to get me out," Kyra surprised Jack by saying.

"Ah." Tomlin nodded. "In that case, I hope that you can, indeed, help me with this problem as well. Most of the passengers and crew have learned how to anchor themselves in U1, as you two instructed. But a few of the passengers are pre-verbal children, and one is a baby, and we don't know how to teach them to do this, or even if we can. Are they trapped between worlds until they're old enough to learn?"

"Oh," Kyra said beside her. "*Damn.*"

"I don't think they have to be," Jack found herself saying. "I think their parents can anchor them."

"How?" Tomlin asked, hope in his voice.

Jack glanced at Kyra, raising her eyebrow and nodding at their building. There was only one way to show him. Kyra hesitated, but then nodded.

"Are you allowed to come inside a... tagat... building?" Jack asked. "What I want to show you won't work all that well down here. It's still high tide."

"I am allowed, yes." Tomlin grinned and stood up. "I would have a great deal of explaining to do if I chose to rent here, yes, but I may come inside if you permit me."

"C'mon in," Kyra said, resignation in her voice. "I think I know what she wants to show you."

After the squalid condition of the lobby and the stairwell, Tomlin couldn't quite contain his astonishment as he walked into their apartment. All of the windows were open, admitting the

late-afternoon light but, more importantly, the breezes. Kyra and Jack had removed most of the decrepit furniture and had pulled out the stained carpeting, and had spent the last Standard week—between their many other tasks—scouring the place clean and decorating with colorful blankets and pillows, both to hide the threadbare and battered nature of the remaining furniture and to make it comfortable. Most of their purchases had come from Amazigh vendors in the Rif. Jack had found a way to use a trick of isomorphing to remove the layers of paint concealing the carved woodwork, along with layer upon layer of grubby wallpaper to reveal the original mosaic-adorned plaster beneath. The result was evocative of what the building's units had first looked like in their halcyon days, before they had been co-opted and corrupted. Souvenirs from Elsewhere sat on a variety of surfaces.

Hearing their arrival, a ferret-sized ten-legged crustacean came scooting out of the bedroom and scurried its way over to Jack's feet, earning an astonished oath in Tamazight from Tomlin.

"Hey, Sebby." Jack reached down and let the small creature crawl onto her hands, lifting it up. "You're right on time."

"Sebby?" Tomlin asked.

"Well, he's not a crab, but I always wanted a pet crab to name Sebastian." Jack grinned. She never had been able to convince her parents to let her have one.

"The *Little Mermaid*? Really?" Kyra sounded on the verge of laughter.

"And here I thought I might be facetious to nickname you *Tislilel*," Tomlin chuckled. "It means 'mermaid,'" he explained in response to their questioning looks.

Jack's grin widened. *Tislilel*. She liked it. "Sebby, here, is some kind of land crustacean from Elsewhere. The monster tide must've reached his habitat and dragged him into its wake. We found him clinging to some driftwood and looking pretty miserable when the tide was going back out. I brought him over to U1."

She raised her eyebrows at Tomlin, waiting for him to catch onto the implication of what she was telling him.

"You can move objects between worlds? And anchor them in a whole new universe?" He glanced around the apartment again, the full significance of the pieces of driftwood, the coral, the shells, finally striking him. "All of this... is from *there*?"

"Objects... and living creatures." She nodded at Sebby, who obligingly lifted a pincer and waved it in the air.

"Like a baby, or a small child, who cannot make the transition on its own," Tomlin breathed. "How?"

"Well, the first thing I ever tried it with was one of the cash cards we'd brought with us from Helion," Jack told him, suddenly very glad he already knew who they were and she didn't have to come up with weird verbal dodges. "Local bank machines couldn't read our cards. Not enough of their data signals in *this* universe, I guess. I held one really close, and thought about it *just* being in this 'verse and nowhere else. It was a *serious* Hail Mary, but it worked."

"And that's all there is to it?" Tomlin looked astounded.

"Maybe," Jack hedged. "Sebby's the only living creature I've ever tried it with. It takes work, and some careful thinking. You have to really be aware of what you want to bring with

you, and its dimensions and edges. We didn't know how to get our clothes to transition with us at first."

Kyra began snickering. She had fully relaxed, and now her eyes were dancing with merriment as she answered Tomlin's questioning look. "You should've seen it. The first time J—Finch here tried to go all the way to the other side and swim through a wall—*whoosh!* She went right through but her clothes stayed behind."

"You can... pass through walls...?"

"*Carefully*," Jack told him. "Right now, if I isomorphed all the way over to Elsewhere, I'd be okay, because the water's still about waist-deep up here. I can still see it even when I'm all the way in U1. It'd hold me up if I switched over right now. But if I tried to do that at low tide, I'd fall straight through the floors and splatter myself against whatever's eight stories down on that side."

"I will be sure to warn my charges of that risk," he said, nodding. "The Quintessa Corporation wants to move them. To a 'secure facility,' but they won't say where. I have been stalling—I don't want to turn them over. Everything within me says that doing so would be their deaths. So far, the government has sided with me, but I worry they plan to tighten the vise. Tangiers Prime is a primary shipping hub. If they were to declare our Star Jump routes unstable and use that as a pretext to make our port *secondary*, they could cripple our economy. Their envoy has begun hinting that they might."

Kyra sat down on their chair, hard. Jack, who had become fairly good at reading her deadpan, could see her outrage over what Tomlin was saying warring with her reluctance to get involved.

Jack sat down on the couch. She gestured at Tomlin to take a seat, too, if he wanted. Sebby scuttled up onto her shoulder and she stroked his carapace absently. "This is bad. I was gonna come see you soon, to warn you again not to dig into what Quintessa's hiding... but now they want to make everybody disappear?"

"They want to make everybody *die*," Tomlin almost growled, sitting down on the couch. "When I was called to the hospital *that* night, it was after they succeeded with eighteen of my charges. The envoy told the hospital staff that the people in quarantine would be prone to *hallucinations*, but not to worry about it because they would eventually pass, and to keep them sedated. So when an entire floor of patients began screaming about rising waters and begging for help, nobody paid attention until they began to float out of their beds. The ones that could, anyway. Some had been restrained and some were oblivious thanks to the sedation. When those patients drowned—*drowned*, in the middle of a dry hospital floor, with other patients *levitating*—that was when someone finally had the presence of mind to call *me*."

Jack suddenly felt nauseated.

Tomlin ran his hand over his face, looking both exhausted and furious. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to burden you with all of this. But with the non-disclosure agreement they made me sign, in order to gain access to the ship at *all* in the *first* place, there is no one else I can speak to of such things. Except her, the envoy, and *she let them die*. I could never possibly trust her, or them." He looked over at Jack. "But I'm curious as to why you warned me not to."

"Do you remember the log you saw of the star jumps the ship made before it detected the Level Five Incident?" Jack asked.

Tomlin looked startled again, as if wondering how she could know he'd seen it. "Yes."

"It's missing a lot of data. We were reading the log on board the *Matador*, when a bunch of lines suddenly got redacted and then vanished." Jack set Sebby down on the floor. A cockroach had crawled under the crack between the front door and the floor. "Go get it, Sebby," she said, and he scuttled after the fleeing insect in a blur of legs and a clatter of pincers. "There were already some redacted lines in the log, because I'd set things up so we'd wake up before the crew and there'd be no record we were on board. But the other lines were pretty significant."

"The ship notified the Quintessa Corporation that the accident had occurred," Kyra continued for her. "It sent a whole packet of data to them. We don't know what was in the *packet*, but a few minutes after the crew woke up, the ship got an answer back with instructions to destroy the Isomorph Drive and the database it used for calculating Star Jumps."

Tomlin's breath caught. "We were told that the drive's destruction was what had *caused* the Level Five Incident."

Jack shook her head, aware that Kyra was doing the same thing. "It looked functional until they sent instructions to 'decommission' it. Which were then redacted and deleted from the records before anybody but us could get a look. But you saw what was left. Did you notice how long the last star jump was?"

"About four days, I believe."

"For Star Jumps, that's long," Jack said. "Most are under three days apiece. These days, ships spend more time navigating between Jump points than traveling the Jumps themselves, but I'll bet you already know that."

Tomlin nodded. "How do *you*?"

"I did a paper on it a few years ago." Jack could see he had a lot of questions about that. She held up her hand to stay them. Getting into her study habits and actual age weren't going to be helpful right now, even if she wanted to talk about them. Which she definitely did not. "The longer a Star Jump lasts, the higher the risk of a Level Five Incident becomes. But nobody knows why because the Quintessa Corporation won't share details about how the drives work in the first place. The three Phase One Star Jumpers that vanished all had at least one week-long Jump in their itineraries."

"Yes," Tomlin said, his voice becoming hushed and almost reverent. "My people were coming to Tangiers on two of those first ships, the *Isli* and the *Tisli*. But only the *Tisli* ever arrived. It is why we have always served in the Tangiers Prime Space Squadrons, and why at least one Amazigh must always be on duty at Space Control, in case the *Isli* finally appears, so we can bring it home. But all this time... is this the true answer? It was lost between universes, and left stranded there to die, the way these poor souls have been? *Ten thousand* of our kin?"

"I don't know," Jack told him. "I never found an answer to that either, just that this was the most probable explanation."

"And they know," Tomlin sighed. "And they do nothing."

"Whatever it is," Kyra said, her expression thoughtful, "it's something they can't prevent. Maybe it's part of however the drives work. Like the risks people back on Earth took with nuclear reactors, which mostly worked great, lots of power, no pollution... until they

sometimes melted down and fucked everything up for hundreds of miles. My Pa had a lot to say about those, back before he decided to ditch the place and take all of us to ‘God’s New Green World.’ But anyway, maybe it’s a risk that just... comes with the technology.”

“Why wouldn’t they just admit that, then?” Tomlin wondered, clearly not expecting an actual answer from either of them. “It is not as if there is an alternative to the Star Jump drive.”

“Maybe even doing that would cut down on space travel too much?” Kyra wondered. “Or maybe there’s something about why it happens that would upset people if they knew. They were *super* quick to destroy all of the physical evidence.”

That stirred some vague memory in Jack’s mind, something she couldn’t remember clearly because she hadn’t been paying enough attention at the time. There was a show her cousins had watched one day, a centuries-old classic, in which once a year a group of people were told a terrible secret and then voted on whether to remember it and do something about it, or forget it again and continue on with their lives. Something about that secret, she thought as she struggled toward the memory, might almost explain what was happening now—

It was gone. There wasn’t enough there to recall more. She found herself wishing she’d sat down with Rachel, Joey, and Rob that day to watch that ancient show, instead of taking advantage of the rare occasion that they weren’t monopolizing her grandfather’s gaming console to play a few games herself. She’d overheard some of it, some part of which felt suddenly *significant*, but it was like a dream that fell apart the more she tried to recall it upon waking.

Maybe it was nothing.

“I think the most important point,” she said after a moment, “is that, regardless of what the secret is, they’re willing to kill whole shipfuls of innocent people to keep it hidden. I’m really worried that you’re in their crosshairs, too. Especially if they figure out that you’ve taught everybody how to survive what’s happened to them. I... don’t have it ready yet, but... I’m making you a backup identity, in case you have to go underground.”

“You can do that?” Tomlin looked startled. She could see him once again weighing her appearance—she didn’t necessarily look like a kid, but she didn’t really look like an adult yet, either—against the things she could do. “Could you do that for my charges?”

She shook her head. “It’s taken me all this time just to put together solid identities for the three of us. Almost two hundred more people? I don’t think we have that kind of time. Would the Imazighen be willing to hide them? Takama told me most of your people live out in the mountains and high plains southeast of here, in the New Atlas Range.”

In fact, the New Marrakesh suburb nicknamed Rif, or Le Rif, mostly housed Amazigh traders passing through with their wares for sale to tourists and offworld merchants in exchange for things the tribes needed, along with a contingent of less nomadic types from across the tribes; their jobs were to provide logistical support and ensure that their people continued to be represented in the local and planetary government. They had made it their duty to continue fighting for their people’s right to live in ways that they, in the process, had to give up themselves.

There were a hundred million Imazighen living out in those vast highlands; some of the tribes had rejected all outsider influence, but others carried comms in their pockets and readily welcomed those new technologies that didn’t conflict with their way of life. A rare

few, like Tomlin, came from marriages that weren't simply inter-tribal—already a complicated affair—but extra-tribal altogether. The diversity she'd observed among the people of Le Rif was, in miniature, the diversity of the Imazighen as a whole. From some of Takama's hints in recent days, Jack understood that places could be opened within the tribes for outsiders who showed sufficient respect for the culture, such as her and Kyra.

Or, perhaps, for nearly two hundred desperate fugitives with nowhere else to turn for succor, who needed to stay on high ground.

Tomlin was nodding. "I think that could be arranged, at least for a while. Long enough to break their trails and, if possible, help them find their ways home. And if they can't go home... well, as a people, we are very good at knowing how to hide. You two could hide among us as well, if you wish, for as long as you like."

It was a sweet offer, and she could see he genuinely meant it, but Jack found herself shaking her head. "I have somewhere I need to go, but thank you."

Whether or not he knew it yet, her father was waiting for her.

She glanced Kyra's way, wondering whether her friend would be tempted. But Kyra was shaking her head, too. "I tried my Pa's agrarian paradise. It's not for me. I do appreciate the offer, though."

"I understand," Tomlin said, his smile indicating that he was not in the least offended. "I must admit that I am more comfortable in a cockpit than a tent, myself. Still, I will do what I must for these people, to keep them safe. Please tell me that the identity you are crafting for me is Amazigh. To my father's great despair, I'm not a very convincing Scotsman."

"It is," Jack reassured him, struggling not to laugh at the sudden mental image of him in a kilt, speaking with a thick brogue. Silly as the image first seemed to her, she suspected he'd still be devastatingly handsome and suave, not at all ridiculous, if he did it.

It surprised her that she was so relaxed around him. Usually, men as handsome as him left her feeling tongue-tied and gauche. Maybe it was just that she'd already won Tomlin's respect before she'd had a chance to ease up enough to really notice that about him.

"The tide will be down tomorrow night when everyone is sleeping," Tomlin said. "I think I will bring my charges out of the downtown area then. Once it recedes far enough that they can leave the building, and most people have left the streets, I will take them past the Rif and into the foothills where it cannot reach them at all. My people will take them the rest of the way. But I will have to concoct an explanation for where they have gone, and a distraction of some kind to keep anyone from seeing them leave."

"J—Finch is really good at those," Kyra told him. "Since you know who we are, you probably know how we left the hospital during some extremely chaotic malfunctions, right?"

Tomlin nodded slowly. Kyra smiled and tilted her head toward Jack.

"That was all *you*?" Tomlin asked, startled once more.

"Only way we could get out with a bounty hunter already on-site," Jack said, struggling to hide the smug grin that wanted to surface. "I had to make sure we got a several-hour head start before they could even realize we weren't just lost somewhere in the mayhem. And I may have released a few files into the wild that they'd been hiding."

"Then it's an especially good thing the Quintessa Corporation has no idea you were on board the *Matador*. They *should* be scared of you." Tomlin grinned, indicating that was a compliment. "If you can come up with a distraction, please let me know. Ask any of my

people to get word to Brahim Meziane. That is how they know me best, and it is probably a safer channel than my official name, if Quintessa has its eyes on me.”

Three hours later, as the sun was settling toward the horizon and Jack was putting the final touches on the new identities she had created, she had come up with the *perfect* way to both get the *Matador* survivors out of the city unseen... and let her and Kyra keep their beachcombing plans intact in the process.

Tomlin’s gonna love it, she thought with a little bit of glee. *But first things first...*

“Kyra, I need you for a second,” she called, and her friend entered the room with Sebby on her arm.

“What’s up?”

“I have three names for you to pick from. Which do you like best?” Jack gestured at the screen. Planetary law enforcement had several names held in reserve for witness protection purposes, one of which was about to be taken out of reserve and put into active use. The result would be that, once Jack connected the fake credentials she had created, under a dummy name, to the new name, there would be a genuine birth certificate and a wealth of other, real, identity documentation stored in official locations; no matter how deeply anyone checked into it, no matter how far down they dug, there would be no sign that someone had made it up. These three would work for Kyra’s approximate age and physical appearance.

Kyra leaned over her shoulder, looking at the screen. “Kali Montgomery. I like the way it sounds.”

“Done.” Jack hit a few more buttons on the screen. She loved that name, too, and had almost taken it for herself because it reminded her of both Shazza and Fry, except that she didn’t think she’d look quite old enough to match its base age. “Our identities will be waiting at a drop point downtown in two hours. Along with some funding cards to help Tomlin—I’m gonna put together our funds later. He needs all the money he can get with what he’s about to do.”

“Yeah.” Kyra seemed to have made peace with helping the man. “You know, I never asked, but I’ve always wondered. Why ‘Jack B. Badd?’”

The two were gathering their things as she asked; walking through the switchback roads that led downward to New Marrakesh’s urban center took a while, and both of them preferred to reach drop zones and rendezvous points ahead of anyone else. Jack shrugged, feeling suddenly embarrassed.

“It’s a character from bedtime stories my father used to tell me,” she admitted. She’d never even told Shazza that, and she had confided a *lot* in her. “Jack B. Badd was always getting into one escapade or another, usually only *just* managing to stay out of really bad trouble.”

“So, essentially, you.” Kyra snickered.

“Pretty much. Except he really was a boy, not just pretending to be one.” The more Jack thought about it, the more she wondered if the stories had been autobiographical, if John MacNamera, whose closest relatives had sometimes called him “Jack-Mac” where she could hear, had been regaling her with stories about his own scrapes from *his* childhood.

That was a handle, sticking *way* out, that she’d never considered when she picked the name: the possibility that its use might make its way back to people who’d recognize the source. Of course, when she’d chosen it, it had never occurred to her that she would end up in quite as many quintessential Jack B. Badd misadventures as she had, or that mercs might

one day know the name as belonging to fair prey. That was out of her hands now, though. Fortunately, she'd erased all of the records on Helion that listed her as anything but Jane Doe 7439.

One day, she thought, she'd have to try to erase whatever records Toombs had about her.

Sebby was contentedly patrolling the floorboards, looking for intruders to munch, as they left the apartment.

They stopped by Takama's food cart on the way, to send word to her nephew that they would come see him at Othman Tower that evening. She gave them a knowing look that suggested she might already be in on the upcoming exodus, before giving Jack a motherly hug and plying both of them with freshly made wraps that they could eat while they walked.

The drop went smoothly. As a precaution, Jack transferred all of the documents and money cards for Tomlin into a storage locker. She'd give him the key and let him pick them up at his convenience. She did the same thing for herself and Kyra; they'd collect theirs on the way back up to the Rif. Once they'd each hidden their keys in their smalls, she switched on her tablet to begin preparing for their meeting with Tomlin by taking control of the security cameras at the base of Othman Tower.

"Oh. Fuck," she breathed.

The cameras were already off.

28.

The Claws of the Black Fox

Othman Tower was only a five-minute walk from the transit station with the storage lockers. At a run, it was half that. Jack was screaming inside the whole way.

Kyra was ahead of her, wild hair streaming out behind her as she ran full tilt toward the building, a long knife that Jack had never seen before suddenly in one hand. Jack wasn't quite sure where she'd gotten and kept that, exactly. She didn't want to ask. All she could feel was desperate terror that they were already too late.

A little before they reached the Tower's plaza, still screened by the avenue's argan trees, Kyra suddenly stopped and held up her free hand, making a gesture that she and Jack had worked out in the prior days. *Isomorph over to Elsewhere*, the gesture said.

Jack concentrated, letting the buildings around them fade as she found her footing on the beaches of Elsewhere. She focused on letting her perception of U1 stay intact, though: an invisible girl looking in at the world from the other side of a threshold. She hurried forward, now running after Kyra on wet sand, once the transition was complete.

Two huge shuttles were parked before the building's main entrance, marring the lovely plaza that led up to the doors. Two lines of people, all with their arms bound at the wrists, were being herded into them at gunpoint by soldiers in motley uniforms. *Mercs*, Jack thought. Tomlin, dressed once more in his own uniform, his wrists shackled behind his back, was on his knees by the doors with another merc's gun pointed at his head.

"You grab Tomlin," Kyra murmured next to her. "I'll take care of the rest."

Before Jack could ask what she meant, Kyra was in motion, knives in both hands now. The mercs, Jack realized, couldn't see her—wouldn't see her until it was far too late.

The first to die was the man holding the gun to Tomlin's head.

The firearm went skittering across the flagstones as its owner clutched at his slashed throat before toppling to the ground beside Tomlin. *He* scrambled back away from the body, his eyes widening. Kyra had only made the blade itself manifest in U1. She was already on the move again.

In a second, Jack suddenly thought in alarm, the pilots in the shuttles would hear the commotion and call for help. They probably had the only functional communications in the area right now.

Let's fix that, shall we?

She brought her hands into U1 and laid them upon one of the two shuttles, *pulling* it all of the way into Elsewhere, remembering at the last instant to swap in Elsewhere's air to fill its space. Sometimes, when she and Kyra had been practicing isomorphing objects and had forgotten, the air displacement had created anything from a small snap to a loud bang, although that oddly never happened with their own bodies. This would have roared like thunder.

The huge vessel vanished from the flagstones of U1 and appeared on the sand of Elsewhere. A wave of dizziness passed through Jack; in its wake, she felt light as air. Trying not to stumble in the sand, she raced over to the other shuttle's location, repeating her moves, staggering as the dizzy-airy feeling grew stronger. The shuttles' comms would be useless now, a whole universe away from anyone who could hear their messages.

Three more of the merc team's members, back in U1, were on the ground, dead or dying. The Black Fox of Canaan Mountain, Jack thought, had been fully unleashed. In defense of the *Matador* survivors, Kyra could do all of the things she hadn't been able to do to save her own family.

Between the dropping mercs and the vanishing shuttles, some of those survivors were starting to panic. The bewildered mercs surrounding them, realizing the situation was inexplicably spinning out of control, were hunting for something to shoot. In a moment, they might turn their weapons against their captives.

I am in both worlds, I am in both worlds, I am in both worlds...

Now visible, audible, and tangible in U1, she pitched her voice the way she had when, once, she had shouted to keep Shazza from killing an innocent man. **"EVERYBODY! ISOMORPH NOW! ALL THE WAY INTO ELSEWHERE! ALL THE WAY!"**

Jack hoped they understood what she meant. She didn't have time to find out. As several weapons pointed and fired in her direction, she isomorphed back out of U1 and ran toward Tomlin's position.

But she could feel the survivors *doing* it, feel them crossing from one 'verse to the next. Now, she knew, they would be able to see Kyra's deadly dance as she slashed her way through the armed mercs who had held them.

Jack reached Tomlin a second later, isomorphing back into U1 beside him. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," he told her, sitting up. "What happened to the shuttles?"

"They're in Elsewhere," she muttered, grasping the binders on his wrists, shifting them to that other world, and tossing them aside.

A few of the *Matador* passengers were still in U1, she realized, and in deadly danger. One woman was crouched down, trying to shield two small children despite her bound arms; another, with a small baby harnessed on her chest, was kneeling on the ground trying to present as small a target as possible. A few others looked confused, struggling to do what she'd told them.

Tomlin, she thought, must not have had a chance to brief them on their anchoring tricks. She wondered if he'd even made it into the building before the merc team had captured him.

One merc had spotted her and was lining up a shot when a knife handle suddenly sprouted from his temple. His bullets went wide as he toppled, tearing through one of the stately trees overhanging the plaza. The remaining *Matador* survivors screamed and dropped to the ground; three more vanished from U1.

"Stop right there! Don't you move!" Another merc approached her and Tomlin, his rifle pointed directly at them.

Jack wrapped her arms around Tomlin and *pulled*.

They were in Elsewhere.

"*Baraka!*" Tomlin gasped, staring around him. "Is this—?"

“Yes,” Jack told him. She got up and hurried over to the spot where she knew the mother with the infant was kneeling, shifting her vision enough to see her clearly, reaching out until she was almost touching her.

She’d never tried this before. She didn’t know if it would even work. Without isomorphing any part of herself back to U1, she focused on the woman, on the parts of her and her baby that were already connected to Elsewhere, and *pulled* again.

It worked so well that she fell backward, landing on her ass, as mother and child solidified in front of her. Kyra flew past them with a fierce smile on her face, racing for another of the still-standing mercs who was lining up a shot at a hapless civilian. Out of knives, she had a large chunk of driftwood in her hands.

A second later, the driftwood protruded from the merc’s chest and back. His gun clattered to the plaza flagstones as he clutched at the wood in confused agony. Jack saw him crumple to the ground as she wrapped phantom arms around the mother with two small children, *pulling* them into Elsewhere.

Screams from the shuttles startled her. She turned and saw Tomlin running for one while Kyra raced for the other. She switched ’verses quickly and grabbed up one of the discarded rifles.

“Tomlin!” she shouted as she isomorphed back, throwing the rifle at him when he turned to look. He caught it easily.

The mercs back in U1 were all dead, she realized. Now they had only the shuttle pilots to deal with.

Kyra, following her lead, switched ’verses to grab one of the dropped rifles and reappeared in Elsewhere a second later.

A standoff was about to develop, Jack realized. The pilots had hostages.

“ISOMORPH BACK TO U1!” she bellowed as loudly as she could, hoping the passengers aboard the shuttles would hear her and know what to do. Her throat suddenly felt raw.

She ismorphed over herself, for the moment, letting her vision show her what was in both worlds even as her body stayed in only one. As she watched, several people dropped to the ground in the areas that the shuttles occupied, managing to pull themselves back to U1 on their own. She headed for the shuttle Tomlin had just raced into, pulling a sidearm off one of the fallen mercs as she went and switching off its safety.

I am in U1, but I see into Elsewhere, I am in U1 and cannot be seen in Elsewhere, but I can see...

She walked through the hull of the shuttle like a phantom.

Only the top half of her head was above the cabin floor, unseen. Several cuffed, terrified passengers remained on board. The pilot had one of them in a headlock, holding a gun to her head. Tomlin was trying to talk the man down, but the shouting was getting louder and louder, even through the veil between ’verses.

Jack positioned herself directly beneath the pilot, waiting for a moment when the gun’s aim would waver. She raised her pistol until it was completely above the floor, bracing herself as well as she could in such an awkward position.

I am in U1, only in U1, but the gun in my hand is in both ’verses. And its hammer, and its bullets, are fully in Elsewhere... It was, she thought ruefully, a good thing after all that her father had not only taught her how to shoot, but had made her break down and clean each of

the guns they'd worked with. She could visualize, and suddenly *feel*, those parts of her weapon now.

One of the passengers stared in astonishment in her direction.

As his hostage writhed, twisting her body away from his, the pilot's gun slipped and pointed away from her for a fraction of a second. It was all Jack needed.

She fired straight up, over and over, emptying the pistol's clip into the pilot's torso, before ducking back out of the shuttle.

Small arms fire erupted from the other shuttle's space. Kyra was standing in its midst, unloading a pistol upward in U1, but on the Elsewhere side Jack could only see the hull of the shuttle itself. Her wild-haired friend emerged a moment later, her face almost glowing with fierce energy.

"That was a damned good idea you had," she said with a grin. "Last one's dead."

Jack could only nod silently, dropping her gun before falling to her knees. She isomorphed back into Elsewhere so she could vomit on the sand instead of in the plaza.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Jack had pulled the now-evacuated shuttles back into U1, and she and Kyra had finished removing everyone's restraints. The *Matador* survivors, none of whom were seriously injured, had helped them carry the mercs' corpses onto the shuttles, taking back comms and other items that the men had confiscated from their captives, before transferring back to Elsewhere at Jack's instruction, to wait.

"I think you got here not even ten minutes after I did," Tomlin said as he wiped a merc's blood off of his recovered comm. "I spent the last several hours making arrangements for tomorrow night. It was the message to meet you here that brought me at all. I never had a chance to reach the lobby before they had me."

Jack knelt down and transferred a pool of drying blood out of the plaza and into Elsewhere, while Kyra did the same near the other shuttle. It was the last physical evidence of the battle. There was nothing they could do about the damage to the trees where one automatic rifle had chewed them up... but they'd let whoever had sent the mercs worry about covering *that* up.

Someone—and Jack was pretty sure who—had gone to great lengths to ensure they could perpetrate a heinous crime unseen, after all. It would be a shame, she thought, not to take advantage of their efforts.

Othman Tower's building and plaza cameras, she had verified, were still offline, and the cameras and comms for several blocks were scrambled; someone had set things up so that none of them would come back on until the shuttles' transponders signaled that they were out of the cameras' lines of sight. If Jack and her friends played their cards just right, nobody—not even the people who had sent the mercs—would know just what had really happened there.

If she hadn't asked Tomlin to meet her here, she suddenly realized, *he* would have been the one with no idea or proof of what had been done to the people in his care. She suspected that would have broken his heart.

But it meant they probably hadn't been expecting him to come to the tower, or at least, hadn't built their plan around when he *was* expected. They had, in fact, done this on his *day*

off. That was something she could *use*.

“You’re gonna need to pretend you never got here at all,” she told Tomlin, her voice hoarse and her throat feeling as though she had swallowed glass. Had she really yelled *that* loudly? “You’re gonna need to pretend that everybody’d already been taken when you finally did get here.”

“All right. Why?”

“If you were here and escaped, that means so did everybody else. If you were never here, they won’t know anybody escaped their trap, just that *you* never walked into it. You know how to set autopilots?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Go on the shuttles and set each one to auto-launch in another five minutes or so. Make them fly out to sea, out to where it’s deep, and then dive down into the water. At velocity. Crash the fuck out of them where it’ll be hard to get to the wreckage.”

“All right. What does that buy us?”

“I don’t know what the Quintessa Corporation’s plans for the shuttles’ destinations were, but since they’re hiding the fact that they planned to kidnap everybody, they can’t exactly draw attention to it when it all goes wrong. Hopefully they won’t realize that the *Matador* passengers didn’t die in the crashes.” Jack sighed, suddenly feeling tired and ancient. Every devious idea she’d ever had seemed to be crowding into her head all at once. “Did any of them get on comms to anybody after they grabbed you?”

Tomlin shook his head. He seemed to understand what she was asking—which was good, because she barely did suddenly—and answered as if he was giving a military debriefing. “None of the mercenaries did. The pilots were already on board the shuttles, and they were already loading the passengers, when I walked up. I was coming around the side of the building and only saw the backs of the shuttles, so I don’t think the pilots ever saw me. None of the mercs told anyone they had me in custody. I’m not sure if they were even looking for me or just thought I was an inconvenient witness. And then you moved the shuttles over to Elsewhere before anyone started shooting or screaming. How did you manage—”

“Good. Then as far as they’ll know, you were never here, their mercs kidnapped the *Matador* survivors as planned, and then everybody, including the mercs, died in the crashes... except you, because you didn’t show up until long after they’d left,” Jack told him. “Meanwhile, we take the survivors up to high ground through Elsewhere, bring them out where your people can hide them, and then *you* discover, live on camera tomorrow morning, that Othman Tower’s empty and raise a stink about your missing charges.”

Tomlin was staring at her with strange awe again.

“They can’t...” Jack could feel the steam running out of her words. Why did she feel so exhausted suddenly? She could barely put two words together. “They can’t threaten to cripple the economy if you don’t turn over people *you* don’t have... because *they* already took them from you.”

“And,” Kyra said from beside her, “If they’re planning on killing all of the survivors off anyway, why should they care how it happens, even if they lose a few soldiers-for-hire in the process? Sucks for them that they eliminated all possible records of what went wrong. Let’s get those things set to fly and get back to Elsewhere. You know where the black boxes on those crates are located? We don’t want those found by divers.”

Jack wanted to follow the two of them, but she couldn't get her legs to work. She sat quietly on the plaza's flagstones for a few moments while Tomlin set the shuttles' controls and Kyra hauled out flight recorders, shifting them into Elsewhere. Her arms and legs felt weak and shaky, and her whole center felt utterly hollow.

"This is what she does," she heard Kyra saying to Tomlin a few minutes later as they walked up. "She can come up with a crazy plan at the drop of a hat, and it'll *work*. She's like... a mastermind that way. I mean, hell, she'd already planned the march through Elsewhere, but those embellishments? She just came up with them now. On the *spot*, fergodsake. But killing somebody? That's going to fuck her up for a while."

"Even if by doing so, she saved someone's life?"

"Even so. That's our Finch."

"You don't think it might be the shuttles?"

"I don't know. Could be. Never even occurred to me to *try* moving something that big, and she did it four times."

Strong arms lifted her off the ground and she realized that Tomlin was cradling her like a child. Kyra's arms came around both of them as she isomorphed them from U1 into Elsewhere.

Jack could, strangely, feel the exact moment when both shuttles left the plaza over in U1. She opened her eyes and watched them, through the veil of dimensions, as they flew off, arrowing toward the coastline.

Kyra was talking to the crowd, telling them that they were going to walk uphill until they were out of the path of the tide, which should stay below sea level for several more hours anyway. Then she was going to help them meet up with people who would take them to a place where they could hide. Jack, exhausted, leaned her head against Tomlin's shoulder and focused on breathing, on *being*, while Kyra took charge. She'd told Kyra the plan as they had walked down into town, and her friend had loved it. Kyra would make it happen now.

Time slid by in fits and starts. Jack was in a gray place, exhausted by the terrible battle in the same way that she had been after the ordeal on the *Kublai Khan*. She'd slept for more than a day after that, clinging the whole time to the gun she'd fired, in fear that she would wake to find herself back in that world of horrors. Now, though, she didn't dare sleep, not yet, not until she was sure everyone was really, truly safe... but she had no energy left to make sure of that.

She drifted in and out of consciousness through much of the hours-long night march out of the flat plains that corresponded with New Marrakesh's city center and upward onto the sandy, weedy, increasingly rocky hillsides. Later, she would have memories of strange, small creatures skittering out of the paths of hundreds of human feet. For a while, Tomlin and Kyra both walked in the lead, side by side, Tomlin still carrying her in his arms, the two talking about combat and soldiering. Jack heard him offering to introduce Kyra to some of the officers he knew, people who would never, he promised, turn away the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain when he vouched for her.

She'll have a home, Jack thought with wistful happiness as exhaustion took her again. *She'll be able to fight with real soldiers, not mercenaries...*

Periodically, when she felt strong enough, alert enough, Tomlin let her walk beside him, but his arm was always protectively around her in case another wave of weakness stuck. One

always did after a few moments, and she felt him catching her in a faint more than once. The long line stopped at least twice to take rests and give stragglers a chance to catch up, before they reached an area that Kyra said corresponded with the market square in the Rif.

Kyra brought Tomlin and Jack across first, practically into Takama's lap.

The next thing Jack knew, she was being fussed over and plied with mint tea and *jowhara* inside one of the small shops along the square's perimeter, by a merchant family she'd bought things from before, while Tomlin showered and changed in the shopkeeper's upstairs rooms. Someone collected his uniform for laundering, and two young women helped Jack get cleaned up and changed out of her scuffed, stained, and torn clothes—how exactly had that happened to them? She'd felt so unscathed at the time—into a soft, colorful jalabiya. Then she watched from a window seat, her head resting heavily against the glass, as the hushed exodus continued outside.

Takama, now assisted by a dozen or so of her fellow street vendors, took each of the survivors in hand as Kyra helped them across, hiding them in nearby shops while she and her friends arranged for merchant trucks to come and take them, in small groups, into the mountains. The night was full of quiet activity as the fugitives—now fed and disguised in traditional djellabas and jalabiyas with scarves around their heads—climbed a few at a time into various trucks and carts. No one was going to make them keep walking any further. Somehow, though, the activity seemed no busier than any of the Rif's normal night markets. No one would suspect a thing; those markets sometimes lasted from dusk to dawn in the Rif even when everywhere else was essentially shut down. All of the merchants seemed delighted to be in on the operation, cheerfully waving away the money some of the survivors tried to offer them in compensation. The rules of hospitality, which meant a great deal to the Imazighen, had apparently been invoked.

They had *done* it, Jack thought, allowing herself to relax a tiny bit more.

The sky was still dark, but not quite *as* dark, and the tide had begun to move in, when the last of the *Matador* survivors came through and Kyra joined her in the little shop, allowing the merchant's daughters to clean her up and give her a change of clothing.

Jack had almost forgotten about the storage locker key she'd intended to give Tomlin, hours before, until she'd pulled it and her own key out of her ruined clothing. When he returned to the shop a little before dawn, once again dressed in his cleaned and repaired uniform, she gave it to him at last.

"Thank you, my *Tislilel*," he told her, taking the key. "You saved so many lives yet again tonight. Including mine. Remember that. Please do not hold what you had to do against yourself." He kissed her forehead.

To Jack's surprise, Kyra allowed him to give her a thank-you kiss as well and listened attentively while he spoke softly to her, too. Jack, whose hearing was far better than people ever seemed to realize, heard every word. "You have a warrior's spirit, my *Dihya*. It is a difficult path to tread. But I have faith you will find your way and I promise, I will help you reach it."

Jack felt a weight lifting off of her with those words. Kyra might not want an agrarian life, or a domestic one, but Tomlin was offering her a life she *did* want, and a version she would never have to feel shame or regret for. After encountering the band of mercs in the plaza,

Jack had hoped that she wouldn't still consider signing up with any. Now she wouldn't need to.

At the doorway, Tomlin turned back to them, his eyes both kind and tired. Now his words addressed not only them but his aunt, emerging from a back room with a tray of tea and food for Kyra her hands.

"I should be back in several hours, a day at most. After I am done 'discovering' that my charges are missing and filing my complaints, I will request some of my leave time. With all that has happened, no one will grudge me for it or even question it." He paused, as if debating with himself. Taking a deep breath, he continued. "Now that I've experienced the journey to and from Elswhere, and have seen what you can do and what it costs, I think I know what the Quintessa Corporation is hiding. It's much worse than we thought. We must never let them find my charges... or either one of you."

With those last words, Gavin Brahim Tomlin, *El Krim*, left the amber light of the small shop for the predawn darkness.

It was the last time they ever saw him.

29.

The Voices of the Void

Sometime after the sky lightened, Kyra and Takama helped Jack climb the eight flights of steps up to their apartment and a frantic Sebby. The little crustacean scuttled straight up her jalabiya and onto her shoulder and refused to be set down for more than a minute.

“It is all just as Brahim described it yesterday,” Takama marveled as she helped Jack lie down on her bed. “How extraordinary. And your little pet... such incredible things you two can do. Rest now, little *Tislilel*... although I think he should have named you *Tiraline* instead.”

“He called me Dihya,” Kyra said, sitting down on the bed next to her. “Who’s that?”

“A great warrior queen,” Takama said. Jack closed her eyes and rested her head against the pillow, feeling Sebby settling down against her throat. “*Tiraline* and Dihya... the Mermaid Queen and the Warrior Queen... fitting for two young women who saved so many lives. Rest now, both of you. I will come and check on you later and bring you some food. What would you like?”

“Anything I didn’t cook,” Kyra said beside her.

Jack, eyes closed, already drifting off, found herself wanting to ask for a peanut butter sandwich, but the words that came out were oddly askew from that.

“Don’t wanna be a queen...”

Takama laughed softly from far away. “That is fine, young *Tislilel*. A mermaid does not need to be a queen to raise a tsunami...”

The idea of raising tsunamis followed her down into her dreams.

She was floating in darkness, rising and falling on unseen waves. Around her, the stars sparkled and burned as they followed their own tidal patterns. She was adrift among the stars themselves, watching them swirl past her in complex patterns as she swerved around them, free but tethered—

There was something heavy on her back, something chaining her to it, but she couldn’t see it.

And she was not alone.

Creature? something unseen asked. *Being?*

She tried to get her mouth to work, to call out *hello?* into the spangled darkness, but the part of her that suddenly felt like prey gone to ground wouldn’t release her voice.

Something is here. Was that her thought, or had the *thing* said it?

The stars slowed and stopped their tidal spin and for a moment she found herself in darkness.

Alone! a not-voice sobbed. *Alone and trapped...*

The show that she’d tried to recall, while talking to Tomlin, flashed through her mind. Something about a woman in a mask—

Yes, it said to her. No. What is that thing?

She could feel something reaching for her from the darkness. Something touched her—

You are not like us, it said after a moment, and she could feel its disappointment... and hope.

And, faintly, others like it, distant, near, reaching for her...

*Is it one of **them**?*

No. Larval. Bright and shiny...

The stars faded into view once more, whirling and dancing again as she spun through them.

It rode upon her back, but now it has come beneath and she is lost...

Lost? When had she gotten lost? Out here in the stars?

With horror, Jack realized that she was the *it* that the things were speaking of, not the *she*.

It has come beneath to us, come below to us, passed under to us...

Below... that resonated somehow.

Below... below... yes... beneath, below, under... we are under... take us to... take us... to the...

She was seeing something that could not be seen with human eyes. A shape that defied dimension, a pattern that murdered reason. Jack struggled to look away.

Too much, too much, poor larva, too much...

It doesn't understand. Poor larva.

We will teach it...

A line appeared before her, shining in the vast dark.

One.

It shifted, changing, becoming a glowing square, a flat plane.

Two.

Now the glowing square shifted again, evolving into a cube of light.

Three.

The next shape was almost impossible to comprehend.

Four.

The next was worse still.

Five.

NO...

It wouldn't stop. The shape kept warping itself into something even more impossible and terrifying.

Six... Seven... Eight... Nine... Ten...

Stop, please, stop...

Eleven... Twelve... Thirteen... Fourteen... Fifteen...

No no no no no stopstopstopstopstop—

A sharp pinch on her shoulder launched her up off of her pillow, gasping. Sebbly tumbled into her lap.

Jack stared around the room wildly, panting. For a moment, the walls and floor and ceiling were almost incomprehensible to her: barren, flat planes that lacked... what...?

It's wrong it's wrong he said there were only ten...

She shuddered, hard. Sebbby crawled up her chest and touched her chin with his antennae, gentle and feathery, as though checking to see if she was ill. Had he pinched her awake? She thought he had.

Next to her on the bed, Kyra groaned, frowning in her sleep.

Of all the things she'd expected to dream about, she hadn't expected... what, exactly? All she could remember now was a tide of stars and a masked woman... and a word...?

...octachoron...?

Lying back down, she cuddled Sebbby to her as she settled against the pillow. He'd woken her from a nightmare; that much she knew. She didn't know how he was so perceptive, but she was grateful that he was.

They were waiting when she drifted off again.

We frightened you. We are sorry.

"Who are you?" she asked, trying to anchor herself in as much ordinary, prosaic reality as she could. She couldn't see them, but she tried to show them herself. Tall, gangly, short hair verging between brown and blonde, all eyes and elbows and knees as Rachel liked to say—

*It is one of **them!***

No. Similar three-shape. Different five-shape.

"Who are you?" she asked again, trying to see them.

The impossible thing, the shape that wasn't a shape, the shape that her mind tried to flee from, was back.

It is wondering. Wondering about us.

We are below... beneath... under... under... alone...

Find us. We will show you...

...help us...

DIE.

It was a new "voice," different from the others. Where she had sensed curiosity, loneliness, and strange desperation until then, she suddenly sensed terrible, implacable hatred.

Death to the things that killed us... death to the makers of the cages... death to the 'verse that trapped us... a trillion deaths for every one you took from us...

No. Leave. It is a larva.

It is filth.

Innocent!

Filth. It has no right to come under. Not innocent. Filth.

Flee, larva. Flee. We cannot protect you.

Jack couldn't move. She was rooted in place, locked in horror.

We come. We come to take it all back. All the worlds your filth has stolen will burn...

Something tiny and yet enormous took hold of her and the stars spun. She had the sense that another thing, monstrous and cold, had been reaching for her... but now it was gone.

We are sorry, little larva. Forgive us... help us...

"Who are you?" she whispered into the dark.

You see... you know... For a moment it almost came back to her, shards of memory with no meaning attached, glowing towers rising into a black sky, a woman in a mask, a hand slapping down on a button—

Come for us, the not-voices whispered. Save us. Take us... to...

...the Threshold...

The stars whirled around her again and for a moment, she caught another glimpse of the impossible shape, a chained and contained infinity, beautiful and terrible and mind-breaking

She woke up gasping, pressing her hands over her mouth to suppress a scream. Kyra cried out in terror and sat up at the same moment.

“Fuck!” Kyra shouted, looking around wildly. Sebby scooted off of the bed and zoomed under the dresser.

Jack realized that Kyra had pulled a knife from somewhere and was holding it out defensively.

“What the fuck *was* that thing? Where did it go?” Kyra gasped.

“The thing in the dark?” Jack asked. “The thing that was huge and tiny at the same time?”

Kyra turned and looked at her, eyes widening. “You saw it too?”

Jack nodded, swallowing. “It said something about a threshold...”

Kyra nodded back. The tension was leaving her body, slowly. “How did we have the same dream?”

Jack shuddered. “Did you... feel it when people crossed over from U1 to Elsewhere last night? And back?”

Kyra looked like she wanted to say no, like she wanted to deny it. “...yes.”

“I think... I think something else felt *us*.” It was an increasingly unsettling thought.

“Fuck.” Kyra set the knife down. “Whatever it is, it ain’t human. Not even a little.”

“Did it call you a ‘larva’ too?” Jack asked. She was struggling to hold onto the memory. Unlike the perfect recall she had of things she paid attention to while she was conscious, her dreams were rarely accessible to her for long. Sometimes, after Mr. Reilly had told her about the Many Worlds Theory, she’d imagined that she visited other universes in her sleep, lived other lives, and that she couldn’t remember much afterwards because the memories lived in the heads of other Audreys, scattered throughout the multiverse.

Maybe she hadn’t been as far off as she’d thought.

“It did. Most of them did. But there was one...” Now Kyra shuddered. “It hated me. It wanted me dead.”

“Me too. Called me ‘filth.’”

“Filth... larva... way to make a girl feel insignificant. Shit.” Kyra blew out a breath and flopped down on the mattress. “If that was some kind of fucked up First Contact, I really don’t want to meet them out here in reality.”

But is this reality? Jack found herself thinking. If the entities they’d both dreamed about were real, was *this* the dream world?

She could feel a headache starting.

“I am *not* gonna go back to sleep for a while,” she said, lying on her back next to Kyra.

Fortunately, their rooms were flooded with light. Jack thought it might be nearing midday outside. There was very little noise coming in through the windows, which seemed to back that up. The heat was beating down, leavened by the sea breezes coming in through the windows, but Jack was glad of the warmth after the deathly cold of the *thing* from her dreams. Around New Marrakesh, people had probably already retired for the midday sleep period, while they were stuck wide awake and scared to close their eyes—

“So then maybe we should talk about what happened last night,” Kyra said.

“Which part? There’s so much.”

That got a soft laugh from Kyra. “Well, I can tell you some of the things that happened while you were kinda out of it, if you want.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” It bothered Jack that she’d collapsed so hard, while both Kyra and Tomlin had still needed her. “Sorry about that.”

“What for? You did great. *Really* great. Crazy-great. But anyway, Tomlin and I did a little embellishing of your plan for the shuttles. He set them up so that they’d fly textbook ‘launch to the space station’ paths out of New Marrakesh, and get halfway up into the sky before colliding with each other. Before they left, he and I did a quick isomorph to some alcove just outside of their jamming range, and he called Takama and gave her the transponder frequencies so she could track them. She says they crashed right into each other and exploded way out to sea, right about the time they reached this planet’s stratosphere.” Kyra grinned. “There’s a marine rescue operation going on right now, but nobody’s expecting to find much. And they’re *never* gonna find the flight recorders, because those are sitting on the beach in Elsewhere.”

“That’s... amazing.”

Kyra snorted. “Well, you said to crash the fuck out of them. Crashing them into each other seemed the best way.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you *kidding*? Last night was one of the best times I’ve ever *had*. I should be thanking *you*.” Kyra’s smile was broad and bright. “I know what I want to do now, what I want to be. I don’t know if you heard any of it, but... Tomlin’s gonna introduce me to some of the officers he served with. People he trusts. I’m gonna do it, Jack. I want to fight for people the way I did last night. He says there are some crack units that get sent on rescue missions, and if I can get into one of those...”

Her smile suddenly faltered. For a moment, the light in her eyes dimmed a little.

“Will *you* be okay if I do that? I know you told him you have somewhere you need to go, but... *do* you? I mean, *really*? ’Cause I don’t want to run out on you or anything.”

Jack felt as if her heart was both impossibly full and being squeezed really tightly. She’d worried more than a little about what would happen to *Kyra* when it was time for her to continue her journey to her father, but now Kyra was having the same worries about her...

“I will,” she promised. “I do have a place to go... I was on my way to my father when things started going wrong. That’s where I’m going. He doesn’t know I’m coming, but I know he’ll still be on Furya when I get there.”

Kyra looked both relieved and curious. “What’s Furya?”

“A planet,” Jack told her. “Kind of a weird one. There’s like, no record of when it was terraformed or who went to settle it, but a hundred or so years ago, some people showed up at Federacy HQ saying they were from there and wanting to register the planet as a sovereign world. That was a first. There really wasn’t much contact or trade or anything after that, either. But then, about twenty-five years ago, a ton of people *from* there started showing up all over the Federacy as refugees, saying their world had been attacked. So scouts went out and... well, my dad said someone had committed genocide there. But all the survivors would say was that the devil had come, so, you know, not very helpful. Their biosphere was

seriously fucked up by whatever happened, too. So a bunch of worlds offered their old terraforming equipment that they no longer needed, to help the place get put back together. It's starting to work, but the equipment's so old that it needs a lot of tending and re-engineering. My dad decided he'd go there and take charge of that. I guess he was stationed there back before I was born, so he already knows how to talk to the locals."

Describing it to Kyra, she suddenly felt selfish for wanting her father to stay on Deckard's World with her. He was *helping* people. After last night, she understood so much better how strong the need to do that could be.

Maybe he'd thought he was leaving her in the best possible place, with her mother and Alvin, much as Riddick had apparently thought that leaving her with Abu and Lajjun had been in her best interest. Her dad, she reflected, had probably been a lot more right about his choice than Riddick had been—

"I love how you know all this stuff," Kyra said after a moment. "The schooling I got from the New Christy elders... it was all about people from thousands of years ago who talked directly to God and lived for hundreds of years and had a million rules about everything and kept cursing their own children, and none of it made a lick of sense to me. Everything I *wanted* to learn about... oh no, that was *Men's Business*. My job was to cook and clean and make babies one day. I never, *ever* wanted that job."

"Well, you won't have to have it, ever, if you don't want." Jack told her. "Tomlin'll help you get in with the right people. He's the real deal."

"He is, isn't he?" Kyra grinned. "You know, I was real suspicious of him at first. Part of it was I was jealous, you know? The two of you seemed to understand each other so well, from the moment you met, and I've *never* seen you trust anyone so fast. But... you were right about him."

That astounded Jack. Kyra had been jealous of Tomlin?

But, she recalled, Kyra had also been jealous of *her* for a while, back when she'd been taken under Heather's wing. Friendships, she realized, *real* friendships, were hard to come by for Kyra. She was afraid that there wouldn't be any room left for her if someone new came along. She was afraid of being replaced and discarded.

"You didn't need to be jealous," she managed after a moment. "You're still my best friend. More than that. I'm an only child... or I was. But now, you're my sister."

Kyra swallowed, her smile taking on a tight quality, and Jack realized that she was struggling to suppress tears. "You're my sister, too," she managed after a moment, her voice wobbly.

Jack could feel how perilous her own emotions were. If she didn't say or do something to change it, the two of them were going to end up crying for the next few hours. She wasn't sure how long it would be before she could stop, if she started. "You think Takama brought us some food while we were asleep?"

Kyra's expression stabilized and her lips quirked. "Damn. You say *food* and my stomach starts screaming *demands*. Let's go find out."

Takama had indeed returned while they slept, leaving behind items that could safely sit out—protected from insects—on their table. Beneath the coverings, a variety of breads, nuts, hard cheeses, and fruits awaited them. Jack found a bottle of freshly-made orange juice, the

New Marrakesh kind that had ruined her for all others, tucked in their otherwise empty cooler.

“So it’s almost noon,” Kyra said as they ate. “Tide’s out. If you feel up to it—and I’ll understand if you don’t because I don’t think you even *know* how much you did last night—we could do a little of that beachcombing we talked about. Nobody’ll notice if we appear and disappear places. And after last night, nobody in the Rif is going to think twice if they *do* see us do that.”

The wariness that had been so thoroughly habitual for Kyra seemed to have dissolved, literally overnight. This was the most relaxed Jack had ever seen her friend.

“I’d like that,” Jack said with a grin. “Let me just check the reports first...”

Her backpack, which had miraculously made it through all of the night’s dramas, was sitting by the table. Takama must have found it at the shop and brought it over, because Jack had no clear recollection of what had happened to it after she’d put it on and begun running for Othman Tower. Inside, her tablet was, amazingly, unscathed.

Unlike the clothes I was wearing... She still couldn’t figure out when she’d ripped both knees off of her pants.

There was nothing in the local news feeds about almost two hundred people disappearing. Not until Jack pulled up the news about the offshore search-and-rescue in progress.

The Quintessa Corporation has confirmed that both shuttles were carrying the surviving passengers and crew of the *Scarlet Matador* to a new treatment facility. Colonel Gavin Tomlin, who had been supervising the quarantine, is on record as saying that he never authorized, and had not been informed of, the transfer. Local authorities further confirmed that the shuttles appeared to have violated several rules regarding New Marrakesh airspace, and had forced Ground Control to reroute half a dozen flight paths to prevent additional collisions...

“Damn,” Kyra said. “I don’t like his name being right in there.”

“Me neither,” Jack sighed. “No way around it, though, I guess. He *was* in charge of them. And it’d be suspicious as hell if he *wasn’t* demanding to know why he’d been left out of the loop.”

“I hope he’s a good actor,” Kyra grinned at Jack. “He’s sure got the looks of one.”

Behind them, the door opened and Takama stepped through. “Awake already?”

Jack realized that, sometime in the last day, she’d stopped thinking of Takama as her favorite food vendor or even Tomlin’s aunt, and had begun thinking of her as *family*. No wonder, she thought, soldiers coming home from war talked about their brothers and sisters in arms, and meant it. A powerful bond had been forged.

“We had some trouble with bad dreams,” Kyra said, with an ease that suggested she was feeling exactly the same way. She had probably given Takama the code to enter their building and unit.

This is who she was before life went badly wrong for her, Jack thought.

"I suppose that is no surprise. It is good that you are up, though. I spoke to Brahim a little while ago and thought I could give you an update if you were awake. Otherwise, I just wanted to check in on you before I went to sleep, myself."

"Is everything okay?" Jack asked.

"He is not entirely sure. Everyone seems to have accepted Quintessa's explanation and his outrage about it, but... he is not sure that the envoy from Quintessa believes what she is claiming. She acted strangely toward him." Takama sighed. "He has to go up to Tangiers Station A to pull the original transmission logs from the *Scarlet Matador*, and the readings he took of its approach, because Quintessa is now claiming that it was never a Level Five Incident at all. He told me he thought someone might have been following him into the spaceport."

"Wait, were you two talking on *comms* about this?" Kyra was frowning.

Takama laughed softly. "Do not fret, Dihya. We spoke a language no eavesdropper could know."

"Are you sure?" Jack asked, feeling a cold spot in her belly. "Most translation programs —"

"Have no lexicon for it," Takama insisted. "My sister invented it when we were children. I told you she is a linguist, yes? It was our secret language for years and years. She taught it to her husband and her children, but outside of the six of us, no one has ever spoken or heard it."

Jack allowed herself to feel a little relief at that. It worried her, though, that Tomlin was possibly being followed. "What's he doing about his shadow?"

"He said he might go where the man cannot follow. He *does* have clearance into almost every part of the spaceport. But I think he may wish to learn a little more about *why* he is being followed, first. After all—"

With a deafening bang, the apartment building shook.

Jack could hear alarms sounding outside, lots of them. She scrambled from the couch to the nearest window.

People were pouring out onto the streets, talking and shouting. Several of them pointed toward the northwest.

"What is it?" Takama asked.

"I can't see yet." Jack told her, running into the bedroom.

Several panes of glass in the western-facing window had cracked, but none had broken. Through the window, to the northwest, Jack could see a large, roiling column of black smoke climbing into the sky, flames licking upward from beneath it.

"*Baraka*," Takama groaned at her side. "That is at the spaceport..."

Jack, who had impulsively bought a good set of binoculars—along with an as-yet-unused telescope—two days before, grabbed them off of the dresser and brought them to her eyes.

It was a clear day and Jack could see much of the coast of New Marrakesh. To the northwest, it curved to create a bay. Along the edge of the distant promontory, the runways and launch platforms spread out on the flat land. She could see many of the low structures that made up the spaceport, its concourses, towers, hangars, warehouses, ships...

One of the concourses, beside a shuttle roughly three times the size of the ones she'd encountered the night before, was burning fiercely beneath the rising black cloud. The flames

were licking over the hull of the shuttle—

A flash as bright as the sun almost blinded her for a second. She threw her arm up over her eyes until it faded.

Now an enormous, gory red cloud was expanding where the shuttle had been, shooting off fast-moving tendrils of fire that arced through the sky.

“Fuck!” Kyra shouted. “Get away from the window!”

They raced for the doorway, only just reaching it as the shockwave struck. It shattered the window and sent dozens of sharp fragments of glass flying through the space where they’d only just been standing.

“*Brahim!*” Takama wailed, falling to her knees. “They have murdered *Brahim!*” she sobbed.

Kyra’s face crumpled as she knelt down next to Takama and put her arms around her. Jack felt numb and weightless.

She couldn’t think. She couldn’t feel. Nothing made any sense. Only two terrible words echoed through the vast emptiness inside her.

Not again!

30.

As the Ashes Fall from the Sky

A terrible silence had fallen over New Marrakesh.

It wasn't a physical silence; sirens wailed constantly, ebbing and flowing as emergency vehicles traveled to and from the disaster zone. The drone of military 'copters and the whine of airtankers filled the skies. Agonized screams had even come from within Jack and Kyra's apartment building, from people who had been standing, dumbfounded, at their own west windows when the shockwave had struck. Human wailing pierced the air from all directions as people learned that someone they loved had been near, or in, the blast zone.

But Jack felt cocooned from it all, even as she and Kyra helped Takama tend their neighbors' wounds and joined the Imazighen in aid efforts, even as they shared tears and hugs with people who had known Tomlin—Brahim Meziane, to most of them—and had just discovered his fate. She was wrapped in something dark and quiet. In the silence, she couldn't even hear her heart beating and wondered if she still had one.

She and Kyra cried together that night, after Takama ordered them to bed, but the silence of her heart still wouldn't lift. The things that waited for her in her dreams left her alone. Later she had a vague memory of them arguing over whether she, and the "other larva," might be dying. It seemed unfathomable to her at times that she wasn't.

The initial death toll didn't quite reach five hundred, but that was more than enough.

Of those almost-five hundred, more than half were "missing and presumed dead," people whose last known positions had been too close to the blasts for any identifiable remains to be left. That roster was compiled from multiple lists: the shuttle's crew, all of whom had signed in to begin their shifts more than an hour earlier; roughly fifty passengers who had already checked in and boarded the shuttle early so they could sleep while they awaited liftoff; the ground crews loading and fueling the shuttle; the clocked-in staffs of an exclusive pilots' lounge, a small duty-free shop, and the security checkpoint located just before the departure gate... and one last, terrible, overlapping list of people whose comms had signaled their final locations within the blast radius before going silent forever.

Colonel Gavin Brahim Tomlin had been among the last group; his comm's final location had placed him in the pilots' lounge, less than twenty meters from the first explosion, and his bank account had a pending meal transaction originating from there. Where the lounge had been, the side of a monstrous crater now sloped down into the earth.

The initial explosion had been declared a terrorist act. Footage had surfaced of an unidentified man leaving a duffel bag on a bench not far from the pilots' lounge doors, and it was featured in every news feed, but no clear shot of the man's face was available.

Between the massive fire at the spaceport itself, and the dozens of violent secondary fires on the northwest end of the city caused by the shuttle's flaming debris, the search-and-rescue

operations out at sea were scaled back, almost all of their teams diverted, and the story about *that* disaster, now thoroughly upstaged, vanished to the back “pages” of the news feeds.

The injury count was in the thousands. The property damage was in the trillions, when six more shuttles and two Star Jumpers that would never fly again were figured in.

New Marrakesh wasn't, in fact, Tangiers Prime's largest city; Tomlin had simply chosen to direct the *Scarlet Matador* there because the planet's most prestigious hospital was located within it, and possibly because he had his best connections to local resources and logistical capabilities there. Both space traffic and terrestrial flights were immediately rerouted to New Casablanca and New Fes, with the still functional landing pads at New Marrakesh's spaceport transforming into staging grounds for relief efforts. Thousands of stranded passengers waited within damaged concourses, and in hastily-assembled tents on the tarmac, for transport out of the city.

Check-in stations proliferated. One man, who had initially been reported as presumed dead, turned up a few hours later; he'd been at a police station on the other side of the spaceport, filing a report about his missing comm and wallet, at the time of the explosion. He was the only one thus far, but it had raised hopes that others might reappear. One Tangiers day after the explosion, the secondary list of missing persons, who hadn't been presumed dead yet but who might have been in the blast radius, had dropped from more than two thousand to slightly under three hundred. At the end of a Tangiers week—four of its long days, a period just eight hours longer than a Standard week—whatever names remained would be added to the list of the dead. It could no longer top eight hundred, but it might still come close. If the noon hour on Tangiers Prime hadn't been roughly equivalent to the midnight hour on most other worlds, the death and injury tolls might have been five times as high, but the devastation had struck during the spaceport's “quiet hours.”

Every time Jack thought of those numbers, she felt ill.

Did I cause this? Is this my fault?

She wasn't going to find the answer in the news feeds. Pulling out her most powerful Ghost Code, she dug into the local law enforcement chatter.

No one seemed to be connecting the shuttle crash over the Mutawassit Ocean to the subsequent explosion at the spaceport, but there *was* an active—if backburnered—investigation into it. Jack had been right; the Quintessa Corporation had chosen to make its move while Tomlin was off-duty and out of the way. He'd spent his day off putting together a plan for stealing his charges out from under the Corporation's collective noses even as they were executing a plan to do the same thing to him.

Someone had switched around the evening duty rosters for Othman Tower, swapping in a set of false employee records for the new “staff” that took over the building that night. Jack recognized all of the faces immediately: the merc team. There was no record of who had made the changes.

“So Quintessa contracted out the kidnapping and let that merc team run it on the ground?” Kyra asked. She had taken to reading everything over Jack's shoulder, partly slumped against her back. Jack didn't mind; she needed the contact.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “But whoever engineered this was either using a Ghost Code, like mine, or is *really* high up in the security chain around here.”

“That's not good. Is that who jammed the cameras and comms?”

“Maybe. Either them or the mercs. I thought they had it set up to key off the shuttles’ transponders, but everything stayed off for another twenty minutes after those had already flown off, freaked out Ground Control—” Jack faltered for a moment on those words; that had been the first name she’d had for Tomlin. “—and then crashed. Kinda ham-handed.”

“Maybe,” Kyra said, her voice considering. “Or maybe they thought having a localized blackout keep going for a while after their operation ended would make it seem less connected.”

“Yeah,” Jack admitted. “Either way, whoever it is... they’re dangerous and they don’t care who they kill, and they can ghost around as well as we can, maybe better.”

With that in mind, she dug—carefully, because it was being actively consulted by law enforcement—into the back-end records of the spaceport, looking for a ghost’s trail: abrupt changes to databases with no record of who initiated them; glitched cameras that briefly lost the ability to record people’s movements; other signs that someone was doing the things she had done on Helion Prime, but to a far more harmful purpose. It took her another hour to find what she was looking for, but at least it kept her stable, quieting the part of her that wanted to scream to fill the silence, and might never stop if she let it start.

Someone had, indeed, followed Tomlin to the spaceport and shadowed him on the way to the pilots’ lounge. Someone who could only be tracked by the wake of suddenly malfunctioning cameras, about twenty meters behind Tomlin himself. Cameras at the periphery periodically captured small glimpses of a man dressed in the same clothing the suspected terrorist had been wearing, but never in any detail. By the time he was near enough to a camera for it to get a good shot of him, it had stopped recording.

Tomlin, in the footage, looked uneasy. At one point, he spoke on his comm—probably to Takama—as he walked through the concourse toward the shuttle that would ultimately explode. He lingered briefly by a reflective surface, studying the scene behind him. Trying to identify, Jack thought, his shadow.

Other members of the spaceport staff, dressed in uniforms like his, greeted Tomlin and spoke to him at times. He was clearly popular and well-liked. When he entered the pilots’ lounge, the malfunctions following him stilled to just three cameras, obscuring a space fifteen meters from the lounge’s doors. For the next half hour, those three cameras remained non-functional while a handful of people—a man and a woman in pilots’ uniforms entering the lounge with formally-dressed guests on their arms, someone else’s departing guest in a djellaba and a face-obscuring headwrap, and a trio of curious-looking teens who entered the lounge and were escorted back out a moment later, now looking disappointed—came and went. The glitches only moved when a technician showed up to examine one of the disabled cameras.

For another five minutes, nothing happened. Then a second set of camera glitches described the wake of another person moving, unseen, though the concourse and arriving at the same location.

The arrival, Jack thought, of the duffel bag.

Soon after, two sets of glitches showed Tomlin’s shadow, and his accomplice, departing the spaceport in two different directions, leaving behind an innocuous-looking bag sitting on a bench beside a potted fig tree. They were outside in another ten minutes. The first explosion immediately followed, every camera within forty meters of the bag registering

flaring light from its direction before dissolving into static, the cameras beyond that showing the almost instantaneous destruction that had been wrought, and the intense fire that had erupted seconds after, before registering their own flash-and-static deaths slightly over a minute later.

Whatever kind of bomb had been inside the bag, its position and blast radius had ensured that both the pilot's lounge and the shuttle's boarding area would be destroyed. They had calculated it so that, when the bomb went off, it wouldn't matter whether Tomlin was still eating his meal in the lounge or had joined the other passengers at the gate.

Jack couldn't bring herself to watch the feeds of the explosion from inside the lounge itself yet. Instead, she ran through all the exterior feeds, hoping that one or even both of the men might have accidentally let themselves get caught on a camera that didn't glitch. Nothing. The only shot she found was the one law enforcement was already circulating, the moment when a camera, too far down the concourse to capture any detail, recorded Tomlin's shadow placing the duffel bag on the bench and walking away.

The uniformity of the glitching suggested that he and his accomplice had been carrying scrambling devices rather than using Ghost Codes. There were no unexplained changes to any of the databases. Jack felt disgusted with herself for being relieved about that, about the fact that she didn't have to reveal the existence of the back doors she used, possibly closing them against herself in the process, in order to get justice for Tomlin.

Even though she'd put it off for the very end, Jack still couldn't bring herself to watch the recordings from inside the pilot's lounge. As much as part of her desperately wanted to see Tomlin again, even for a moment, she didn't want to have to watch him *die* in that moment. Neither did Kyra, who had been petting Sebby while resting her head on Jack's shoulder.

"So everybody thinks it was terrorism when it was an assassination?" Kyra asked.

"Yeah," Jack sighed. "Looks that way."

"Why'd they make it so big?" Kyra asked after a long, morose pause. "I mean, they knew where he was. Did they have to take out the whole concourse to get him? The whole *spaceport*, for fuck's sake?"

Of all the infinite ways that the disaster had struck at them, the sheer, brutal magnitude of it hit hardest after losing Tomlin himself. To ensure one man's death, the Quintessa Corporation had knowingly killed hundreds of people, injured thousands more, and crippled a city.

Jack's words to Tomlin from the night before came back to her. *They can't threaten to cripple the economy if you don't turn over people **you** don't have, because **they** already took them from you...*

She'd been wrong. She'd been so very wrong. Whether it was because they suspected Tomlin still had the *Matador* survivors, or because they wanted to prevent an inquest into the secrecy around Level Five Incidents, they'd been willing to do a whole lot more than just *threaten*. She wondered if the explosion was a message: *If you rescue two hundred lives from us, we will take three times as many in their place...*

Nobody could be so casually, inhumanly brutal, could they?

Death to the things that killed us... death to the makers of the cages... death to the 'verse that trapped us... a trillion deaths for every one you took from us...

She shuddered. Whatever *that* was, its malice was personal and vengeful. This was cruelly indifferent. It wasn't as if Tomlin had known, or could have proven, anything that would actually break the Quintessa Corporation's monopolistic power over space travel, was it?

I think I know what the Quintessa Corporation is hiding. It's much worse than we thought. We must never let them find my charges... or either one of you...

Had he discovered something that powerful?

"I think..." she said slowly, aware that Kyra was seeking an actual answer from her, "whatever it was that he figured out about them posed a big enough threat that they didn't *care* how many people got hurt, as long as they eliminated it. But..."

She pulled up the spaceport's schematics as she talked. Anything other than the lounge videos was a welcome tangent.

"...that doesn't really explain how strong that bomb ended up being, or how it started that fire, or why the *shuttle* exploded. Shuttles are made to deal with much worse when they hit *atmo*. It should've been okay. Maybe not *space*-worthy anymore, but still..."

The structure housing the concourse was multi-level. The upper level, where the pilot's lounge and departure gate had both been situated, was positioned six meters above the tarmac, level with the airlock into the shuttle's passenger cabin. Beneath it, the ground level was a long, vast warehouse-style structure with conveyors for both baggage and freight, carrying it from the spaceport to the shuttle's belly. And beneath that—

"There," Jack groaned, pointing on the screen. "Oh *fuck*, there it is."

"What?" Kyra leaned forward, touching the conduit Jack was pointing to. "What is it?"

"Hydrolox-M fuel lines," Jack managed, feeling ill. "For refueling the shuttle. It was still an hour until launch time, maybe more. The lines were open and *pumping*."

She could see it all now. The bomb had been strong enough to ensure that, whether Tomlin was still in the lounge—whose entry doors had been fifteen meters from the duffel bag—or was waiting at the departure gate thirty meters further down the concourse, he wouldn't survive. But that was also strong enough to reach, and rupture, the hydrolox-M fuel lines eight meters beneath it, while they were actively pumping *one of the most combustible materials in the universe* into the shuttle's enormous, almost-filled tanks...

Safety valves further down the line toward the spaceport hub would have tripped closed automatically upon sensing a sudden pressure drop, but if the concussive blast had damaged the valves leading into the shuttle itself, the hydrogen fire would have traveled, in moments, into its tanks, generating a blast whose power was just shy of *nuclear*.

Had they *known* the bomb would do that? Had they cared at all about the chain reaction it would set in motion?

And I thought I'd seen monsters on the crash planet...

"I hate not being the bad guys," Kyra grumbled.

For a moment, Jack's mind stuttered over that. But technically, she realized, they *were* both criminals. Escaped from custody and fugitives, they had stolen money and property and falsified documents along the way. They had participated in the hijacking and destruction of two shuttles, albeit ones that were empty aside from some merc bodies. But those were the bodies of their *victims*. They had committed murder—Jack for a second time, while Kyra had added another dozen or so notches to her belt.

I am technically a multiple murderer now, Jack thought, feeling a bubble of nausea rise in response. Whether she'd been defending people's lives or not, both of her victims had, at least nominally, been the ones on the right side of the law.

But the world would still be a far better place, she admitted, if their crimes were the worst ones on the board, if they were the worst villains on the stage.

"Yeah," she finally agreed with a heavy sigh, "me, too."

A soft knock on their door alerted them to Takama's arrival before she came in. She wasn't alone.

The silver-haired woman who came in next was unmistakably Takama's sister. Safiyya Meziane, Jack realized. Which meant that the fair, Celtic-looking man walking behind her, whose appearance was hauntingly similar to Tomlin's, was his father Cedric. A younger woman, who looked like both Safiyya and Cedric, followed them in—his sister. Jack recalled that Takama had said her younger nephew was away at flight school, following in his brother's and father's footsteps.

She rose from the couch to greet them, Kyra rising beside her. It took her a moment to find words. "I'm so sorry—" she began, before she found herself enveloped in a crushing mass hug.

Sebby, who had been sitting by Jack's tablet tapping ineffectually at the screen with a pincer, scooted back into the bedroom, perhaps fearing that he was next to be squished.

"Was that it? The creature from the other universe?" Tomlin's sister, Tafrara, asked.

"Yeah, that's Sebby," Jack told her, wiping her eyes. "Sorry, I think he's feeling shy."

"We brought you food," Cedric said. "Takama says you don't seem to keep any in your home."

Jack felt terribly embarrassed suddenly. Amazigh culture was *huge* on hospitality, and they had nothing to offer. "Thank you. We, uh..."

"We'd love it if you'd stay and eat with us," Kyra said, rescuing her.

That, Jack decided a few minutes later, had been the plan from the start, based on the quantity of food the Tomlin-Meziane family had brought with them. Soon everyone was settled in the living room with fragrant plates. Jack, who hadn't thought she would ever want to eat again, found that she was suddenly ravenous.

Conversation inevitably turned to the explosion, and to loss.

"They've told us that there will be nothing to bury," Cedric said. "He was too near to the blast. But they haven't told us anything useful about *why* this happened. No terrorist groups have taken credit, nobody seems to know—"

"I know," Jack said heavily. "I know what happened. And I know why."

For the next half hour, she walked them through what she'd discovered, showing them the glitch patterns and the small amount that had been captured on camera. She showed them the schematics, and how the size of the first explosion had made the second inevitable. They watched somberly; like her and Kyra, they didn't want to see footage of Tomlin's last moments in the pilots' lounge.

"You are every bit as formidable as our son said you were," Cedric murmured as she put the tablet down at last.

"All this... to kill our son?" Safiyya finally asked. "Why?"

“‘Cause they don’t want people knowing about Level Five Incidents,” Jack sighed. “T—Brahim...” That seemed to be what everybody had called him in the Rif, when they weren’t referring to him as *El Krim* or, as some had pronounced it, *Il Karim*. “He thought he knew why. Something that happened, when we were rescuing the *Matador* survivors, made him realize what Quintessa had to be hiding. Maybe they figured out he was onto them.”

“He didn’t tell you what it was?” Cedric asked.

Jack shook her head. She could see Kyra and Takama doing so as well. Whatever he’d discovered, he’d seemed reluctant to voice his suspicions, and had taken them with him into the black.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “This is all my fault—”

“Shut that down,” Kyra snapped. “Shut that down *right now*. You didn’t do this. *They* did. You want to know why people keep dying around you? It’s because *you don’t bail when things go bad*. Ever. So shut down this ‘my fault’ bullshit.”

“Dihya is right, Tislilel,” Cedric told her, and Jack abruptly realized that neither she nor Kyra had *ever* actually told anyone their names since their arrival in the Rif; now the names that Tomlin had given them had stuck. “I’m an old hand at these kinds of intrigues. They may have been planning on killing Brahim ever since he took the survivors back from them after the high tide. If he was going up to the space station to retrieve evidence of their wrongdoing, they’d have wanted to stop him in a way that didn’t look too specifically targeted at him.”

“I think,” Takama said, “from watching the footage, they may have intended to abduct him, or possibly engineer an accidental death for him... until they realized that he knew they were following him, and he made himself inaccessible to them by going into a lounge that only pilots and their guests can enter. Technically, he still numbered among the pilots even if it has been three years since he last flew a mission.”

Cedric nodded, looking thoughtful. “That’d explain why the bloke on his tail staked out the lounge and called for backup... and a much more violent plan. You say they were using portable jammers on the cameras, not jacking into the security system?”

“That’s what it looks like,” Jack said. “None of the signs of someone with *my* kind of access were in the system.”

Cedric gave her a weighing look, his expression heartbreakingly like Tomlin’s when *he* had restrained himself from asking when and how she’d learned so much high-level espionage. Jack swallowed, suddenly feeling like her food had gotten caught in her throat.

“So they may not have had any idea that their briefcase bomb was going to trigger something catastrophic,” he said after a moment. “I suspect, if they’d been *able* to gain access, they’d have put it on the shuttle itself and timed its detonation for sometime during launch. So whoever it was had top-level tech, but not top-level clearance. Could *you* have walked a bomb like that onto the shuttle?”

Jack winced, feeling ill, and nodded. She knew exactly how she could have done it, too. “I would never do that,” she whispered.

“We know,” Takama said, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Maybe I should be bothered by how much access you seem to have,” Cedric agreed, “but I’m not, because it seems to me like it’s in pretty safe hands. Incredibly *young* hands, but—”

“Now *hush*, Cedric,” Safiyya said in a gentle scolding tone. “You know that my cousin Lalla looked like she was twelve years old until she was nearly thirty. Don’t embarrass her.

Or yourself.”

“The point is,” Cedric continued, giving his wife a somewhat subdued playful glance, “you aren’t at all responsible for what happened. The two of you are, in point of fact, also victims of Quintessa. Both of you could’ve run away and hidden, but you stood beside him when he needed allies most of all. You’re why almost two hundred people survived long enough to escape into the mountains. And you saved *his* life.”

“I didn’t, though,” Jack blurted. “I just postponed his death.”

Just like Fry...

“No one gets to choose how long their life is,” Cedric told her, his voice becoming a bit stern.

I tried to...

“All we can do is make the days we have count. My son would have no regrets about how *he* spent his last days, and who he spent them with. Nor do we.” He took a deep breath.

“Which brings us to one of the reasons we came here today. We’ll be holding his memorial a few days from now, once the search-and-rescue is over and the Islamic funerals are dealt with first. And we would like it, very much, if both of you would join us at it, and stand with us as part of his family.”

Jack looked at Kyra, who was looking back at her in speechless astonishment, eyes filling.

All she could do was nod and try not to start crying again.

Tomlin, she knew, would have wanted this. She had a sense that, on some level, she and Kyra had awakened fatherly impulses in him, and he’d have wanted his family to pull her and Kyra into their orbit and take them in on his behalf. But unlike Kyra, she had a father who was waiting for her, and a life and self that had been put on hold for far too long. For Kyra, what Tomlin had offered *was* the life she needed, not a further detour away from it. But even as part of Jack had been—and still was—a little tempted to let herself be enfolded into Tomlin’s world and family, she knew it wasn’t where she truly belonged. She needed to be Audrey MacNamara—not Jack B. Badd, not P. Finch, not Tislilel the mermaid—and inhabit a world without mercs, monsters, or murder. But first...

She would do this. She would honor Tomlin at his memorial ceremony. She would make sure that someone kept his promises to Kyra so she would have a future on Tangiers Prime that she could take pride in. But then...

It was, Jack knew, time for her to go.

31.

Paint It White

For the next four of Tangiers Prime's interminably long days, New Marrakesh felt like one enormous funeral.

Processions flowed, repeatedly, from both the hospital downtown and the makeshift morgue out at the spaceport to the dozens of mosques scattered through the city and up into its hillside suburbs. At least one, every hour, passed through the streets of the Rif to reach the large mosque on a hilltop behind it. The processions, for the most part, were somber and quiet. Everyone wore white.

It was the color of funerals, Takama told Jack and Kyra, the color of mourning, meant to help shepherd the way to eternity. Most brides on Tangiers Prime wore different colors for their weddings, although sometimes *one* of their dresses would be white.

There were no weddings that week.

The worst processions were the ones with tiny biers. Whole families, traveling together, welcoming home members or seeing members off, had died in the blast, and far too many had been children. Jack couldn't see anything beneath the white cloth coverings being borne uphill, but the small shapes were more than enough on their own.

Transports arrived frequently, delivering food and medical supplies, and left filled with coffins. Dozens of off-worlders were traveling home in them.

The glitter of downtown, as seen from their window, was mostly intact. But most north, west, and northwest-facing windows had been shattered by the blast. Repair scaffolding had begun to go up around many of the structures. Jack and Kyra still found shards of glass in their own bedroom each evening when the light caught them.

Sebby enthusiastically chased after insects foolish enough to come through the empty panes of the bedroom's west window. Watching him hunt was entertaining enough that they'd decided to leave it uncovered unless a rainstorm came. His antics were the only levity they had.

Other tenants in the building were already griping that it might be months before the damage to their units was fixed, and many were planning on moving out. Where, exactly, they expected to go was a mystery to Jack; many more people had been rendered homeless by the blast than had died in it, and even simple walks downtown had become overcomplicated.

On the second night, during the midnight hour when most of the sound and motion had ceased, she and Kyra had slipped down the hill to the transport station and their lockers to rescue their false IDs before anyone thought to start going through unclaimed contents. The locker that had contained Tomlin's ID and funding cards was vacant, its key already returned. He must, Jack thought, have collected his package before he went to the spaceport.

She had planned to find a way to isomorph the package out of the locker if it had still been there, so that nobody would have ever known the alternate ID existed... and so she could have given the funding cards to his family. That money was every bit as lost as any cash people had been carrying in the blast zone.

On the way back up into the Rif, a man in military uniform demanded to see their identification for the first time since they had arrived. The cards Jack had laboriously created passed muster, but they were warned not to violate curfew again.

The curfew, which had only just gone into effect, was apparently part of the manhunt in progress for the bomber. Some survivors had seen him leaving the spaceport; new sketches with greater detail were in circulation. So far, no one had seen him since, but checkpoints were appearing throughout the city. Locals spoke in hushed tones about the concern that the checkpoints and curfews might not go away after he was caught.

The newsfeeds covered hot debates, at the local and planetary level, about whether and how much security should be tightened at the spaceports. Engineers argued about how to prevent another hydrolox-M explosion in the future. Chemical engineers spoke of switching to less volatile fuels, while structural engineers argued for radically redesigning the fueling systems that were standard at every spaceport. Everybody seemed to want to find one quick and easy thing they could do to eliminate the new threat decisively, but nobody could agree on what that one thing would be.

Even though the man shadowing Tomlin hadn't actually been a terrorist, he had accomplished the goals of one: everyone was living in fear and in search of a sacrificial object they could burn to make things go back to normal.

Through it all, while Jack carefully sidestepped higher security protocols to secure the two of them additional funds, she and Kyra found themselves killing time in the apartment to stay out of the way of the processions, watching Sebby play, and occasionally even talking. Conversations dragged, replies coming after long, vacuous pauses. On the day of Tomlin's memorial, the desultory talk became more serious.

"So where does all of this leave us?" Kyra asked as Jack was arranging for a money drop.

Jack shrugged. It was hard to feel urgent about anything. She knew she wouldn't be staying much longer, but a deep malaise had crept in, not dissimilar from the one that had settled over her while she'd lived with the al-Walids. In some ways, it felt worse; Riddick had left her, yes, but Tomlin had been stolen from her and Kyra right as the bond between them had tightened into something she'd thought would be unbreakable. Now she just felt empty.

"Up to you, really." She looked over at Kyra, trying not to seem completely uncaring. She *did* care. But the silence inside her had only grown. In the al-Walid house, she had tried to escape it with a razor. Now, she had other, less nihilistic ideas of what to do about it. But first she had to make sure Kyra was going to be okay.

It suddenly hit her that *that* was what Kyra was no longer sure about.

"Do you still want to stay here?" Jack asked, realizing that what had been a foregone conclusion just days ago might be in doubt.

"I..." Kyra started, and then paused. She looked up at the ceiling, blinking a few times before she continued. "I don't know anymore," she said, her voice small and wavering.

Jack felt a pang move through her. Just days ago, everything had seemed so sure. But that had been while Tomlin was alive and planning to help them. He'd known exactly who Kyra was but had come to his own conclusions about her, offering her sanctuary and the exact opportunities she needed most of all. *His* reputation, when he introduced her to others, would have outweighed or even erased hers. Could—*would*—anyone else be able to do that for her?

"You're worried that his dad's contacts won't be as good as his, and that he might not be willing to use them at all if he finds out who we really are, aren't you?"

Kyra nodded, sitting down beside her. "I just... I didn't even tell Tomlin who I was and I don't think I'd've had the *guts* to. He already *knew*. I still don't know what he'd have thought or done if we hadn't already done him a huge favor before he figured it out, but his *family*... I mean, I know *he* trusted them and all, but..."

Jack put her arm around Kyra's shoulder, letting the older girl lean against her. "But family's where people have their biggest blind spots, yeah. They seem *great*, but..."

"But who's to say they won't switch from thanking us for helping him to blaming us for his death once they find out we're a pair of killers who escaped a loony bin?" Kyra asked with brutal frankness.

Jack winced. She didn't really *want* what Kyra was saying to be true, but there it was.

"Yeah. We can't ever testify against his killers even if we got the chance," she mused. "Their defense team would eat us *alive*."

"I just..." Kyra turned her eyes toward Jack, her expression somehow pleading as if she didn't expect her to understand. "I don't think... I can... I don't think I can take that risk. They're being so nice, and all, but *would* they be if they really knew everything we got up to? Tomlin told Takama that we rescued his charges, but I was with her the whole time we were bringing them back through to U1, and he *never* told her we killed a whole merc team to do it."

He had, Jack remembered, been circumspect in even alluding to it later on in the shop, when he'd said what turned out to be his final good-byes to them. Takama might have imagined that the whole thing had been some clever bit of cat-burglary on their part. On some level, she had to know the truth; she'd tracked the mostly-empty shuttles out to sea and confirmed that they'd crashed into each other on schedule. But she probably didn't realize that all the bodies inside were Kyra's—and Jack's—handiwork.

"Well," Jack said after a moment, "Fortunately, Kali Montgomery is a military academy graduate, then, right?"

She couldn't help feeling a little proud of that. She'd been even happier about the idea that Kyra might not need the identity she'd laboriously constructed, but as much as she hated to admit it, she was a little relieved that the work wouldn't go to waste. Kyra could replace her past with a new one that had no stigma attached to it and build a whole new life upon it. Still...

"But let's not completely rule Cedric out. Maybe he can still help. You never know. We'll see how good his connections are and how much they ask, and maybe using the Kali ID with them will be enough anyway." Jack grinned for the first time in days. "It's *really* well made, you know."

Kyra grinned back at her. "If you do say so yourself?"

"Hell yeah."

Jack could see the tension leaving Kyra's body. "Okay. We'll see what happens at the memorial," Kyra said, her voice hopeful. "Maybe it'll still all work out. What about you? Are *you* still good?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm probably gonna have to go to either New Casablanca or New Fes to meet the transport to Furya, but it should be okay. It's still about two weeks away. Plenty of time to get everything lined up. By then, things should be a little better here, too."

If she had needed to leave for one of those two cities in the next few days, however, she would have had to get in the back of an interminably long line.

"What are you gonna do about the checkpoints?" Kyra suddenly asked. "Word is they're patting everybody down and running people through scanners before letting anybody into any kind of transport hub. Even the *buses*."

"Got a plan for that. You know how the clothes we brought with us existed in both worlds?" Jack suddenly felt some real enthusiasm for the first time in days, thinking about this.

"Yeah?" Kyra, picking up on her mood, looked interested.

"Okay. So... you get a belt. And you make it so it's half in U1 and half in Elsewhere. Solid in both places... and then you put your scabbard with your knife on it... but *that* is one hundred percent in Elsewhere. The knife won't register at all on scanners here in U1, but it'll be on you the whole time."

Kyra's smile had been widening as she spoke. "Better make it a waterproof belt, just in case the tide's in."

"But once you're on board a ship that's, you know, gonna launch?" Jack continued. "You gotta move it all back to U1. Gotta have it one hundred percent in U1 for all launches and re-entries."

Kyra looked like she was about to ask why, but then realization came over her face. "Fuck yeah, that'd be bad if you didn't. Is that why Tomlin wanted the *Matador* to land here instead of docking at Station B?"

"Yeah. Straddling both worlds like we were, if we'd come down in a regular shuttle, that only existed in U1, the fifty percent of us in Elsewhere would have burned up on entry." It was a gruesome thought that had come to Jack as she was figuring out how to get Kyra's knives, or anything else they wanted to keep hidden, past security.

"Damn, no wonder he was so happy about our tricks." Kyra abruptly gasped, her eyes going wide. "Fuuuuck, Jack, Quintessa was *counting* on that happening during a launch, too, weren't they? Those shuttles were *ordinary*. Didn't have any connection to Elsewhere until you pulled them in. When they hit escape velocity—" She stopped and made a retching sound, grimacing.

"Assuming the survivors didn't know how to anchor themselves in U1, yeah," Jack said, trying *not* to picture what would have happened to some of them. "Most of them would have been surprise survivors of *that*, but Tomlin hadn't had a chance to tell them how to anchor their little kids and the baby."

"Fucking *bastards*," Kyra hissed. "I'd go to war with them if I had anything to fight them *with*."

Jack nodded. She felt the same way, but she had no idea where they'd begin. The Corporation had casually murdered the last person who was onto them, along with several

hundred people who happened to be even remotely near him at the time. *You'd need an army to take them on*, she found herself thinking. *A really big one.*

With a rattle of pincers, Sebby reared up on his back four legs and snapped at the air.

"I think someone's volunteering to enlist," Jack said. She had noticed, more and more, how nuanced the little crustacean's responses to their emotions were.

That put a wan, fond smile back on Kyra's face. "I think you're right." She reached out a hand, letting Sebby crawl up her arm and onto her shoulder. "Hey little guy." She pursed her lips at him and he reached forward, touching them with his antennae. Then he climbed onto the back of her neck, nestling under her hair.

"So... lacking a whole armada of Sebbies..." Jack sighed. "The best we can do is stay off the Quintessa Corporation's radar and hope they think the *Matador* issue is resolved. And just hope Karma has *plans* for them."

"The New Christy Elders would've said all their sins were gonna come home to roost in the afterlife," Kyra said thoughtfully. "As if that excuses making *this* world a living hell or something. I mean, I get that divine justice doesn't just *happen*, I saw that firsthand back on Canaan Mountain, but... we need *more* guys like Tomlin in this 'verse, not even fewer of them. Karma needs to get off its *ass* already."

Jack was still nodding when Takama knocked on their door and then entered. Safiyya and Tafrara followed her in. All three were wearing white, their faces and hands decorated with henna tattoos. Takama and Safiyya carried white bundles, while Tafrara had what appeared to be a makeup kit in her hands.

Jack and Kyra glanced at each other in wordless surprise. They had already bought white outfits to wear to the memorial, which was still a few hours away.

"There is a slight change in plans," Safiyya told them as she walked over to Kyra with her bundle. "The envoy of the Quintessa Corporation has asked to attend Brahim's memorial and wishes to bring guests with her. Cedric got a look at her guests and believes they are mercenaries."

"Brahim did not tell us much about your pasts, and we will not ask," Takama continued, bringing her bundle over to Jack, "but he wanted you concealed from the Corporation and, even more, from any mercenaries who might appear. So while we still want you to attend—and certainly more than that *tagat* woman—we must make you look as much like true Imazighen as possible."

For the next hour, while Sebby hid in their bedroom, Jack and Kyra sat as still as possible while the three women decorated their faces and hands with Tamazight markings and Safiyya schooled them in the proper wording and pronunciations of different simple sentences they could use around "outsiders." The entire community had been put on alert to close ranks against strangers... with the girls firmly inside those ranks. Safiyya spent extra time helping them master the *kh* and *gh* sounds that they had barely any experience using, until she was satisfied that they could pass as members of a tribe that rarely had contact with non-Imazighen.

"If the envoy or her mercenaries attempt to speak with you, you will say that you do not understand in Tamazight, and we will translate their words for you. Obviously you will understand everything that they are saying from the beginning, but pretend that you do not, please," Takama said as she put the finishing touches on Jack's hands. "You know how to say

‘yes,’ ‘no,’ and ‘thank you,’ and we will imply to them that anything that requires more involved answers from you is a rude imposition on their part. I doubt that woman has the audacity to give open, public offense to the family of the man she murdered, but you never know.”

Safiyya sniffled at those words.

“Oh, my dearest, I am sorry...”

“No, it’s all right,” Safiyya said, although her voice quavered a tiny bit. “I have done my weeping and my wailing. I am ready to face this.”

Her eldest child is dead, Jack thought, murdered by a woman who’s now insisting on crashing his funeral... and she’s spending her time working on protecting us...

But the community had made its decision: to protect the *Matador* survivors, and to protect themselves from any further retribution, they would all pretend that Tomlin’s assassination was nothing of the kind, and that he’d just had the misfortune to be in the wrong place when some misguided terrorist committed a heinous act. Virtually everyone in the community knew better, but none of them wanted to go to war over it. An army of a hundred million nomads, farmers, shepherds, and artisans—even ones who were also stalwart warriors—could not hope to defeat the Quintessa Corporation; it would take something far darker than they could ever be.

An army of Riddicks? Jack mused. *Maybe.*

She and Kyra let the women clothe them in the white woolen dresses and veils that they had brought, until Jack could barely recognize herself in the mirror. Then they made their way carefully down the stairs of the building and over to the market square, to join the procession. To the Tomlin-Meziane family’s *church*.

It had come as something of a surprise to Jack to learn that, in fact, many of the Imazighen weren’t Muslim, following older faiths from the North African region of their origin. Some of the tribes were Jewish, others Christian, and others followed still older polytheistic and animistic faiths that resonated with some of the most ancient works of mythology Jack had heard of. Many, fascinatingly, mixed and matched multiple belief systems to create new hybrids uniquely their own. Takama—who, it turned out, was spending a year playing at food cart vending and more seriously acting as an intermediary between the New Marrakesh government and her people while on *sabbatical* from the city’s University—had had a wonderful time explaining the convoluted history of Amazigh religion once Jack got her talking. She was a sociology professor most of the time, when she wasn’t putting her degree to practical field use in the Rif. Her love of teaching had surged to the fore as soon as she realized she had an attentive audience.

Many of the different conquerors of North Africa had brought their religions with them, and the Imazighen had selectively adopted them to varying degrees. One of Catholicism’s most venerated saints—Saint Augustine of Hippo—had been Amazigh. When the Arabs had come in as conquerors, many tribes had violently resisted them for centuries, while others had paid lip service to their beliefs while clandestinely practicing their own. Still others had grafted the Islamic faith onto their existing Christian beliefs, recasting prophets and warriors of that faith as Catholic-style saints. “If you ever hear some misguided anthropologist talking about ‘Chrislam,’” Takama had told Jack, her smile turning a little bit scornful, “that is what they are referring to.”

But Safiyya and Takama came from a tribe that had stayed Christian, something that had probably made it a little easier for Safiyya to marry an outsider who belonged to the Church of Scotland. In deference to the inclusion of many of Tomlin's colleagues and former comrades-in-arms, the service was non-denominational, albeit held at the church where he had been christened and married.

The family entered the church first, and Jack found herself and Kyra surrounded by its members. A day of mourning or not, they had clearly made a mission of protecting "Dihya" and "Tislilel." Jack caught a momentary glimpse of Tomlin's younger brother, Ewan Zdan, tall and dashing and movie star handsome like his brother and father, but with a drawn look of deep misery about his face. Takama had told her that the two brothers had been the very best of friends.

Cedric took Kyra's hand in his, leaning close as though giving her a kiss. "I won't be able to introduce you to the officers Gavin served with *today*," he murmured, "not if we want to keep that Quintessa bitch off your scent, but I haven't forgotten. I promise I'll do right by you."

"Thank you," Kyra murmured back, saying it in perfect Tamazight instead of English.

For a moment, Cedric's eyes twinkled before his expression turned somber again. He gave Jack a gentle hug, too, and led them to the seats reserved for the family of the deceased.

There was no coffin, no urn, nothing to represent Tomlin's lost earthly form except a stunning portrait of him in military uniform, from the height of his combat pilot days. Other pictures abounded, and Jack took them in with fascination. Childhood pictures, adolescent pictures, *wedding* pictures with a beautiful woman who, Jack thought, looked a little like her own mother... lovingly chosen to showcase not just his cinematic looks but his intelligence, humor, and warmth.

Even though her departure from Tangiers Prime had been, and still was, relatively imminent, Jack found herself envying everyone who had been given the opportunity to spend years getting to know him.

Other guests had begun to fill the pews behind them when Cedric's comm chimed. He glanced down at it and then leaned over, holding it out to Jack and Kyra. "The envoy and her *entourage* are arriving," he muttered.

The comm's screen showed the scene outside of the church, and a new group of arrivals disembarking a large vehicle. Their leader was a regal-looking woman with long white hair, clad almost properly in all white, although there was something a little too ostentatious about her clothing. Jack's mother would have said she was dressed for a wedding where she intended to upstage the bride. The envoy reminded Jack, for a moment, of Antonia Chillingsworth. To either side of her, even less appropriately dressed for the occasion in a variety of colors, were her "assistants," the people Cedric suspected were mercenaries—

Jack thought, for a moment, that her heart had stopped.

Alexander Toombs and Eve Logan were among them.

32.

A Lake Full of Tears

It was hard for Jack to concentrate on the memorial service with Toombs and Logan somewhere behind her.

It was a long service. There were prayers and readings, most of which she couldn't manage to focus on. Family and friends told stories, some in English, some in Arabic, many in Tamazight, and one in French. Safiyya, who had thoughtfully prepared translation tablets for all of the guests, had one for her and one for Kyra, so they could follow what was being said. Everyone seemed to have a story about a time when Gavin Brahim Tomlin, or Brahim Meziane, or "the Colonel," or *El Krim*, had helped them when they needed him most. A number of the stories were surprisingly funny. Jack felt herself wishing, yet again, that she could have spent years discovering his hidden depths as they had.

Everyone in the church seemed content to reminisce for hours, as if they might call him back to living, breathing flesh with their words, but eventually Cedric stood and thanked them all for coming.

There would be, he told the audience, a family-only reception that evening, and another reception for his son's service colleagues in two days' time. A proper public celebration of his son's life, open to all, had not yet been scheduled but everyone in attendance that day would be informed as soon as it was.

Somehow, Jack suspected, any invitation addressed to the Quintessa envoy would mysteriously go astray and not reach her.

She could feel the tension humming through Kyra as they rose and followed Safiyya to the vestibule, where the rest of the attendees could offer formal condolences on their way out. This was the most dangerous part. Just how much camouflage could face tattoos and head draperies really create?

"You are shaking, Tislilel. What is it?" Takama whispered.

"Two of the mercs... they *know* us," Jack whispered back. "If they realize who we are, things could get really bad."

"For them," Takama said firmly. "But I think I know a way to improve your disguises a little. They have not seen you from any direction but behind yet... Lalla, darling, do you have your wig bag with you?"

Within minutes, both she and Kyra had been whisked over to a side room. Takama and Safiyya's cousin Lalla, it turned out, had an extensive collection of wigs she liked to wear—she had developed alopecia as a teenager, she explained—and often brought several with her to major events. She did not disappoint now. Kyra rejoined the reception line with sleek black hair, bangs draped artfully across her forehead to obscure her distinctive eyebrows. Jack, now wearing a wig that almost exactly matched the long blonde hair she'd cut off when she first went on the run, joined the line a moment later. Lalla had proudly told them that the

wigs were made of natural, undyed, untreated human hair, and no one would believe they hadn't naturally grown it on their heads. The veils, now draped loosely over and around their new hair, completed the illusion.

Jack had to admit that Kyra looked convincingly unlike herself. She suspected that, aside from the "tattoos" on her face, *she* probably looked more like Audrey MacNamera than she had in a year.

They were already in place as the first well-wishers came through.

Most of them just gave simple condolences. It wasn't long until Jack was into the rhythm of saying 'thank you' back to them in whichever language they had used, making sure to use a thick Tamazight accent in the process. Beside her, Kyra was doing the same. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the envoy and her mercs approaching. While the envoy was offering condolences to each member of the line, the mercs were hanging slightly back, all of them looking uncomfortable.

What, are we too native for you? she found herself thinking angrily. Their expressions made her think of the time she had been invited to a classmate's Kwanzaa celebration, along with the rest of her class, and had watched as some of her other classmates treated the experience—the foods, the music, the colorful outfits—as too outlandish to even try to appreciate, much less enjoy. Did just wearing white instead of black to a funeral make everything too alien to empathize with? Or did Tomlin's murderer just naturally gravitate to the types of mercs who had no empathy to begin with?

She tamped down on the anger as fast as she could. *I'm grieving here. Grieving. Not wishing for a gun...*

Audrey MacNamera, she chided herself, had never fantasized about shooting people. If she wanted to ever be her again, she had to put these awful thoughts out of her head.

"I am so very sorry for your loss," the envoy said, offering her hand to first Lalla, then Takama, and then Safiyya in turn. Her voice was cultured, her accent the kind Rachel had told her was called *Received Pronunciation* in really old vids. "Colonel Tomlin was a good man."

She offered her hand to Kyra, who took it—
—and flinched.

The envoy gave her a quizzical look as she repeated her platitudes. Kyra stammered a thank you in Tamazight-accented English, drawing her hand back.

The only reason *Jack* didn't flinch when the envoy took her hand was because she'd been warned by Kyra's reaction.

There was something *wrong* with the envoy, something wrong with her touch. Something...

Similar three-shape. Different five-shape...

The thought skated through her mind and was gone. She could feel the woman's eyes on her, could feel the *wrongness* of the hand in hers.

"Thank... you..." she managed, taking back her hand.

"Are these your daughters?" The envoy asked Safiyya and Cedric, suddenly seeming far too interested.

"My cousins," Ewan said, walking over and putting his arms around their shoulders.

"Dihya and Tislilel. They had come to town in preparation for the Engagement Moussem. I

think that's now postponed, though. My parents had hopes that one of them might choose instead to marry my brother, anyway... but now that's not to be, either."

"They marry their *cousins*," Toombs muttered to one of the other mercs, just loudly enough for them to overhear. The envoy shot him a quelling look.

"Distant cousins," Takama said, also giving him a look that suggested his behavior could get their whole merry troupe thrown out on their asses. "But yes."

"Better a member of one's own tribe than most *abrrani*," Lalla said. "Meaning no offense, Cedric."

"You did say *most*," Cedric replied, winking at her.

"What the hell is 'abrrani?'" Toombs bristled.

Logan, Jack noticed, was studying Kyra with a slight frown on her face. This needed to all end fast.

"I... do not..." She pretended that the word she was seeking was on the tip of her tongue, but unreachable, before looking up into Ewan's handsome face and making her expression pleading and a little hurt. "*I don't understand*," she said in perfectly accented Tamazight.

Ewan caught on instantly. "Dihya and Tislilel don't speak English," he rebuked the group. "If you wish to continue talking about them in a language they don't know, I will take them home now."

Safiyya nodded. "I think that's for the best, Zdan. The rest of us will join you shortly."

It seemed as if the envoy wanted to object, but the atmosphere had chilled. Toombs had given just enough offense to sabotage whatever it was she'd intended to say or do. Ewan steered Jack and Kyra away from the group and out of the church.

"Well played," he murmured once they were a block away. "I don't understand what was happening in there, but you put a wonderful stop to it."

"I don't understand what was going on, either," Kyra muttered. "That woman's hand... what the *fuck*..."

"Her hand?" Ewan asked, frowning in confusion.

"Yeah," Jack said. "When her hand touched mine, it felt *wrong*. I don't know how to explain it."

"Made my skin *crawl*," Kyra huffed.

Jack was trying to think of anything that had ever felt like that. Something about it had momentarily brought back an instant from one of her terrible dreams about the creatures in the darkness, but she wasn't sure why. Something about three-shapes and five-shapes...

It hit her so suddenly that she stopped walking.

Ewan, still walking between her and Kyra with his arms through theirs, turned to look at her. "What is it?"

"I think she's connected to another universe," Jack gasped.

"What?" Kyra shook her head. "No. No way. You and I are and you've *never* felt like that to me."

"Not Elsewhere. She... she *isn't* connected to Elsewhere, I know that much. But... only *part* of her was here in U1. The rest of her... it's in another 'verse and there's something about it that's—"

"Absolutely fucking *horrifying*. Yeah, you're right. *That's* what I was feeling, too. *Damn*. You think she's partway into the 'verse where the thing that wants us dead comes from?"

Ewan was looking between them with concern. “I think we should take this conversation somewhere more private than this avenue,” he said. “I followed most of what you just said, though. If you’re right, this could be a serious problem.”

He led them down two more streets and through a gate in a high wall. Inside, surrounding a courtyard garden that looked, to Jack, like it had sprung out of one of the fantasy novels she’d loved as a kid—*I’m still a kid, damn it, it’s only been a year*—was a large multi-story house, its walls, pillars, and carved screens painted various brilliant shades of aqua, blue, and indigo. As Ewan led them past a large room where some of Takama’s marketplace colleagues were setting up the reception Cedric had mentioned, he finally spoke again.

“I don’t know everything that happened leading up to my brother’s death, but my aunt told me that you two, like the passengers and crew of the *Scarlet Matador*, were stranded between universes, and that you learned how to maneuver between them and helped him teach the others how to do the same. That you call this world ‘U1’ and the other universe ‘Elsewhere,’ and even brought back a pet from that other world. Is all of this correct? It sounds like something that belongs in one of the novels I read in college.”

“It’s true, yeah,” Jack said. His summary reminded her, with a powerful ache, of how Tomlin had answered one of her questions. She found herself wondering if it was a product of their military training, or of the college educations that all military officers, according to her father, were required to have on top of that training.

“You spoke of something that wants to kill you?” His expression was almost a mirror of the one his older brother had worn when *he’d* learned that she and Kyra had nearly drowned.

“Wants us to die,” Kyra corrected him. “We both... we encountered it, and some other *entities*, the morning after we helped get the *Matador* survivors out of New Marrakesh.”

Jack noticed that she was careful to omit all mentions of the deadly battle.

“We thought we were dreaming at first,” Kyra continued, “until we realized we’d both had exactly the same dream. Most of the entities seemed... scary as hell but almost *friendly*, but then one showed up that hated us and wanted us dead.”

“What did it do?” To Ewan’s credit, he seemed willing to believe them, but Jack had to wonder if he still would be if he knew where they’d escaped from.

“Just talked. Scary stuff. I don’t remember what it said exactly.”

“I do,” Jack sighed. She’d gone over its terrible words in her head several times, trying to figure out what they meant and whether any of it might be connected to the secret Tomlin had thought he’d uncovered. The very fact that she could remember it so clearly drove home to her just how much more connected to reality it was than any other dream she’d ever had.

“‘Death to the things that killed us. Death to the makers of the cages. Death to the ’verse that trapped us. A trillion deaths for every one you took from us. We come. We come to take it all back. All the worlds your filth has stolen from us will burn.’”

“That,” Ewan breathed, “is a declaration of *war*.”

“Yeah,” Kyra said, “but by *what*? One thing we’re damn sure of is it ain’t human.”

Ewan nodded, his face now pensive. “Why do you think they found you *then*?” he asked after a moment.

“It was after we went back and forth between universes a *lot*, and brought people and things across in both directions. J—Tislilel...”

For the briefest instant, Ewan’s eyes narrowed, marking the tiny slip.

“...She moved two hundred-seater shuttles over into Elsewhere and then back. Maybe doing something that big sent out some kind of shockwaves? It practically knocked her out for the rest of the night once it caught up with her.”

“And then you were stuck helping all the *Matador* survivors cross back into U1 in the marketplace, all by yourself,” Jack pointed out. “That probably sent out some shockwaves, too. They reached out to both of us at the same time.”

“Why in your sleep?” Ewan wondered.

“They wanted to show us things,” Kyra said, her words coming slowly. “Things I don’t think our eyes could even see if we were using them.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Higher dimensions,” Jack blurted, only realizing it was true when she spoke. “They tried to ‘teach’ us how to see them. But once they got past the three-dimensional object it got scary fast. They... apologized for scaring me, after.”

“You actually kept *looking*?” Kyra asked. “I ran... or something like running given that I was floating out in *space* in the dream.”

“And all of this happened after you saw my brother for the last time, so he didn’t even know... but he already knew something terrible was happening. He sent me a message telling me that... I don’t even know. It didn’t make sense. That we might have to prepare for the end of the Federacy as we knew it, that a monstrous crime was being perpetrated... he said all of it in my mother’s invented language, so that only I would be able to hear the message, so I know he feared he was being surveilled. He asked me to arrange to come home on leave as soon as I could, so that he could explain it all to me. I was arranging my leave when word came of his *death*.” Ewan sat down, his expression a devastating mixture of grief and horror. “I don’t know where to... begin...”

Jack did. This was pure Audrey. She sat down next to him and put her arms around him. He gasped and then leaned against her, releasing a heavy sob, the first of many. After a moment, Kyra joined them, putting an arm around him as well.

It would be a long, long time, Jack thought sadly, tears leaking out of her eyes as well, until he began to heal from this. And while he might respect the community’s decision to conceal what they knew of the real reason his brother had died... she doubted he would ever be able to let it go.

Because she couldn’t have. And his brother wouldn’t have. In that moment, she understood him as well as she understood herself. Warning him to stay away from the mystery would do no good; she would warn his aunt and mother instead.

He had almost composed himself again when the rest of his family returned to their house half an hour later.

Sunset was approaching as the family—quite large, Jack soon realized—gathered for the meal that the community had prepared them. As with virtually everywhere in New Marrakesh, Jack noticed a complete absence of alcohol; instead, Maghrebi mint tea was poured from long-spouted teapots into ornate glasses.

Jack and Kyra found themselves on either side of Ewan at the table. He was regaining his equilibrium, slowly. The talk around them moved through a variety of topics, including stories of wild scrapes that “Brahim”—within the family, only his father seemed to have

called him Gavin—had gotten into as a child. They reminded Jack of the stories her father had told her about her fictitious namesake.

“Are you three feeling better?” Takama asked during a lull.

“Yes, thank you,” Jack said. “How did things go after we left? With that envoy?”

“Pfft! That one. What a terrible excuse for a person. She tried to keep the conversation going, asking us where you were from and how long you had been in town. I told her it was tribe business and of no concern to outsiders unless one of her men was planning on offering himself at the Moussem. Not that anyone would ever take up such offers.”

“Sorry, what’s a Moussem?” Kyra asked.

“Safiyya, perhaps you should tell this story?” Takama’s expression had gone from scornful to mischievous in less than a second.

Safiyya’s eyes went wide.

“A Moussem is an annual meeting of the tribes,” Ewan told them, rescuing his mother.

“The *engagement* or *wedding* Moussem is the one time, each year, that couples from different tribes can arrange inter-tribal marriages. There’s a long story behind it, which is much better sung than spoken, but the legend is that long ago, in the Atlas Mountains on Earth, two tribes of Imazighen were at war. The son of one of the tribes, ‘Isli,’ one day met a beautiful young woman, named ‘Tislit.’ The two fell in love, only to realize that Tislit was a daughter of the tribe that his was at war with. They begged their families to let them marry, but their parents refused. Unable to bear being apart, their tears flowed from them in rivers that filled two valleys, creating two new lakes where their tribes’ lands bordered each other. They drowned themselves in the lakes of their tears.”

“If this story sounds a little familiar,” Cedric put in, “I’m fairly sure old Will Shakespeare stole it from the Imazighen. Just like half of *Hamlet* is straight out of Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*.”

Ewan snorted. “Undoubtedly. But the two tribes were devastated when they realized what their enmity had done to their own children, and decided that every year, once a year, all of the tribes would gather, and marriages across tribes would be permitted. Men and women seeking partners come, wearing their best. And, in accordance with custom, the women are the ones who initiate the courtship, approaching the men that they fancy most. They talk, and negotiate, and if they are happy with each other, then they introduce each other to their families and then have their engagement recorded. Depending on their negotiations, the marriage may even occur at the festival, too. Which brings us to the story of my parents.”

“Wait,” Kyra said. “Really? The women get to initiate it all?”

“Before the invaders came and tried to change us, almost all of the tribes were matriarchal,” Takama affirmed. “Many are not anymore, thanks to the influence of *abrrani*—foreigners—but you can still see it, and feel it, in so many of our traditions.”

“Which brings us,” Ewan repeated, looking amused, “to the story of my parents.”

“I was new on Tangiers Prime, just learning my way around, after they’d courted the *hell* out of me to come teach at their flight school because I’d been breaking records all over the place,” Cedric explained. “The money was too good for me to pass up, but somehow nobody ever asked me if I could speak Arabic, or *anything* other than English, Gaelic, or Scots. Didn’t occur to me either for some damn fool reason, until I was standing in front of a

classroom full of pilots who couldn't understand a word I was saying to them. My brogue was a lot thicker back then, too."

"Soon after," Safiyya laughed, "I got a call at my University office from this *panicked* Scotsman who needed a translator, or needed to learn Arabic as quickly as he could, and had no idea how to begin. Bear in mind that he was already fluent in three languages."

"Neither one of us was thinking of falling in love," Cedric continued. "But there it was. We would find the most ridiculous excuses to check in on each other and spend time together. But what could we do? I was *abrrani* and my colleagues kept warning me I was playing with fire."

"None of which meant a thing to my sister," Takama said. "She had a *plan*."

Kyra snickered. "She sounds like *you*," she whispered to Jack behind Ewan's back.

"I got an invitation to witness a genuine Amazigh cultural event," Cedric chuckled. "The Engagement Moussem. Foreigners are allowed to observe but are instructed to stay on the sidelines and not get involved. And there she was, right in the middle of all the hopeful brides, and all I could think was how crushing it was going to be to watch her choose some other lad to be her life partner. I was going to leave, but my friends wouldn't let me."

"I had bribed them to make sure they would keep him there," Takama added.

"So after all of the singing and dances and things, when the ladies started approaching different men and *I* was wishing for a swimming pool full of whiskey," Cedric went on, "I felt this hand on my arm and heard the most beautiful voice in the world asking me if I would walk with her."

"Our parents were *scandalized*," Takama laughed.

"Especially when they realized you'd been in on it the whole time," Safiyya teased her.

"And that's how the love of my life proposed to me," Cedric finished, grinning.

It was, Jack thought, the most romantic thing she had ever heard.

Full night had descended before the gathering broke up. Ewan insisted on walking Jack and Kyra back to their building. Jack had the suspicion he was worried that the mercs might still be interested in them and might try to follow them; he had tried to talk them into taking a guest room in his parents' house, but had graciously accepted their refusal—"Sebby will be getting worried about us"—as long as they let him see them safely home.

Safiyya and Cedric raised their kids right, she thought to herself, wishing the boys on Deckard's World had been more like Gavin Brahim and Ewan Zdan.

When he gave each of them a hug at the door of their building, not asking to come in, she had a sudden thought. "I need you to ask Takama something for me," she murmured to him, not letting him go yet just in case anyone was watching. A lingering hug might play into the weird assumptions Toombs had made at the church... and that would be better than anyone realizing what they were talking about.

"Of course," Ewan said. "What is it?"

"I need her to reach out to the *Matador* survivors and find out if any of them had contact with the Quintessa envoy. If she ever touched any of them, or if any of them ever touched her."

Ewan's expression was only quizzical for a second before understanding struck. "You need to find out if she knows you were on board, too. She became awfully interested in who you are and where you're from after she touched you."

“Yeah. We need to know how much she suspects.”

“I’ll make sure the message goes out and an answer comes back. I promise.” He gave her another hug before letting go. “Good night, Tislilel, Dihya. I will see you again very soon, I hope.”

I hope so too, Jack thought as he walked off into the night. It was hard not to worry. Too many people she cared about had vanished from her life.

Inside, a very clingy crustacean made it clear that they had been gone for *far* too many hours. Jack had discovered that, in addition to the bugs he ate, he had a great love for olives—enough to sneak up on her plate and steal one if she had any—and had brought some home for him from the gathering. After half a dozen, he was appeased, if still determined to sit on one of them at all times.

While Kyra vanished into the bathroom with Sebby—the little guy loved showers and would *screech* if he was excluded from one—Jack sat down on the couch and opened her tablet to check on the status of the money drop she’d arranged. The confirmation was waiting for her; the one-time code that she’d programmed into the locker she had rented for the next month had been used. She and Kyra could get the money cards inside whenever they wished.

Low tide had ended in Elsewhere, she noted as she checked her tidal chart. The waters were still another hour or two away from reaching the Rif. They had been on Tangiers Prime for ten and a half of its wildly long days, and Megaluna was almost a new moon. In another night, high tide would peak at midnight again.

Maybe she and Kyra could finally do their beachcombing in the dawn hours, she thought as she shut down the tablet. She was suddenly so tired. Closing her eyes, she decided to rest for a moment on the couch before it was her turn to shower while Sebby danced in the water at her feet.

She could feel *them* as her mind slipped away from consciousness.

Little larva, are you well?

She was about to answer them when something cold touched her throat.

“Wake up, little girl,” a strange voice said. Her eyes sprang open.

She recognized him from the church immediately: the merc who had been next to Toombs when he made the wisecrack about marrying cousins. He had a knife resting against her throat.

“You an’ me are gonna have a little talk,” he told her. “I just need to know one thing from you. Where’s your friend?”

Oh shit, Kyra... Her eyes, of their own accord, moved toward the hallway door into the bedroom and bath. The shower noises had stopped at some point, but she wasn’t sure when.

“Not her, you imbecile,” the man snarled. “I’m after the *big* game here. You’re gonna tell me where *he* is.”

Riddick. Oh fuck. He was after *Riddick*.

33.

Child Soldiers at War

Of course, Jack thought with a mixture of dread and disgust, this just had to happen while the tide's still out.

She stayed perfectly still, trying to decide what her best option would be. Mercs were nasty business, unpredictable and frequently cruel. Even back when she'd been a genuine innocent, they hadn't cared. The man holding a knife to her throat might just be trying to intimidate her, or he might be the kind who could slash it without a second thought. The only thing she knew for sure about him was that he hadn't showered or brushed his teeth in *weeks*.

"He's not here," she said, keeping her voice soft and trying not to move her throat and jaw too much. "He's never been here."

"Bullshit. You two are in thick with him. You're his accomplices." The merc's next words were enunciated as if he was talking to a small child. "Tell me where to find him, and you can go free."

Yeah, right.

"Toombs know you're horning in on his bounty?" she asked. If she could manage to stall long enough, she thought, the tide would come in and she could isomorph over to Elsewhere without falling to her death. Or maybe Kyra could make a move.

If he didn't already do something to her while I was asleep...

"Fuck Toombs," the man growled. "He can't call dibs on everybody."

The only other family on the top floor had moved out two days ago, Jack thought. Even if she started screaming her head off, nobody would be able to help her.

Nobody in the *building*, anyway. Kyra might just be asleep in the other room, but it would be too late by the time she woke up. He'd probably cut Jack's throat the moment she screamed, and then play out his intimidation act on Kyra instead. And both of them would end up dead, since neither of them knew the answer to his question.

If I scream out loud, anyway.

She'd thought trying to isomorph for the first time had been the biggest, craziest Hail Mary of her life. This new idea dwarfed it.

Can you hear me? Creatures? Are you there? It had never occurred to her to try to reach out to *them* until now.

"We can do this the easy way," the merc said unimaginatively, "or we can do this the *fun* way, little girl. Fun for *me*, anyway." He gave her a disgusting leer. Several of his teeth had been lost to rot and replaced with garish gold ones; two more would need replacing soon. Straddling her, he changed his posture slightly so that he could press suggestively against her. "So maybe you should talk now while I'm still feeling charitable."

Her gag reflex couldn't decide if it was reacting to his body odor, his breath, or the general foulness of his mind. Men like this were why she'd cut her hair off and posed as a guy.

I'm in trouble... please... warn the other larva... If you can hear me, please... help me...

"I told you, he's not here," Jack said. "I don't know where he is. He didn't tell us where he was going."

"You think I'm stupid or something?"

Yes. "No."

"Then try again. I'm running out of charity."

Maybe I could do a fast isomorph, just to drop down to the next floor...

And, in all likelihood, break her back on the edge of someone's table. None of her new "powers" were going to help her in this moment.

"I can't tell you what I don't know." It was the absolute truth. If he was *any* good at reading people, he'd know it.

Fury passed across his features and then he smiled. It made him look twice as hideous. "You're really down to get hurt, ain't ya? You know where I'm gonna hurt you first?"

"I. Don't. Know. Where. He. Is."

"Say that again, little girl, and I swear I will *fuck* you with this kni—"

The living room window exploded inward.

As the merc turned to look, Jack grabbed at the blade. *This thing is in Elsewhere, all the way in Elsewhere—*

"The *fuck*?" he shouted as the knife vanished. Jack lunged upward, slamming her head against his face as hard as she could. His chin banged hard against her forehead.

Ow! Fuck...

Kyra was climbing in through the smashed window behind him, a knife in her hand.

"You fucking *bitch*!" he roared, cocking back a fist. His nose was starting to bleed and his lip was split. Jack grabbed her tablet off of the table and rammed it into his gut with all of her strength. Her ears were ringing for some reason, a high-pitched *reeeeeeeeeeeeee* sound filling them just at the edge of hearing. The merc, grunting hard from the impact, grabbed the tablet out of her hand, tossing it aside and drawing back his fist again.

With a Valkyrie scream, Kyra launched herself at him.

He was a big man. Almost as big as Riddick himself. He turned, swinging his arm, and knocked Kyra to the side before she could land on him.

"You little bitches!"

Kyra tucked and rolled as she fell, coming back up a second later. She'd reversed her knife, holding it by its blade, and flung it at the merc's head.

He ducked, but just barely. The second knife she launched left a bloody line on his cheek. *reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...*

The merc rose from the couch, pulling out a knife of his own. "Bring it, little girl," he told Kyra.

Jack had no idea where Kyra was *keeping* her blades, unless she'd already figured out the scabbard trick before Jack could suggest it to her. She had another one in her hand. She was crouching, every line of her body tense, circling to the side.

Jack looked around, trying to think of anything in range that she could repurpose as a weapon.

The merc lunged at Kyra, who danced out of range, luring him away from Jack.

She's buying time for me to run.

Jack crawled off of the couch, wincing as her head began to throb. She felt woozy from the head blow; there would be no running for her. That ringing in her ears was back.

reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

The merc lunged at Kyra again, almost catching her. She brought her blade down the length of his arm, ripping the sleeve and scoring his flesh, before ducking out of range again.

"I only need *one* of you little cunts to tell me where he is," the man grated, face going a mottled red with rage.

Fuck. He was going in for the *kill*.

Another lunge, another near miss. Kyra danced to the side and whirled, aiming a kick at his thigh. He dodged and grabbed for her ankle. She retreated out of range, a sheen of sweat glistening on her skin.

Jack grabbed a glass off of the kitchen counter and flung it at the back of the merc's head.

Her aim would have been dead on, but the son of a bitch *dodged* it. It smashed against the wall.

"Once I'm done with your friend here, you'll pay for that," he said, his voice calm again, almost conversational.

reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

He lunged at Kyra again. Too late, Jack realized it was a feint.

"*No!*" she heard herself scream.

As Kyra slashed out and tried to spin away, he grabbed her arm and pulled her against him, thrusting his knife into her abdomen. Kyra made a choked, gasping sound. Her knife dropped from her hand.

"That's right, you little—"

REEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

Suddenly Jack realized that the noise wasn't in her head. It was real.

"Sebby, *no!*"

She watched in horror as Sebby, shrieking, launched himself from the ceiling, leaping at the merc.

He was going to die. The merc would smash him to the ground, kill him, murder everyone and everything she loved—

A long, thin tail she'd never seen before whipped free from Sebby's back as he landed on the merc's shoulder. It jabbed once, twice, three times in rapid succession at the man's throat. The large man froze, making a strange, rattling gurgle.

The room was suddenly, deathly silent.

Kyra moved first, staggering away from the frozen merc, the knife handle sticking out from her abdomen. "Oh *shit...*"

Slowly the merc began to topple. Sebby leapt from his shoulder to the back of the couch, his tail whipping in agitation. Its end sparkled, a drop of amber liquid catching the light.

Venom, Jack realized as the merc crashed to the ground. *Sebby stung him. That's not a tail, that's a stinger.*

Kyra wasn't doing much better than the fallen intruder. She looked as if she was struggling to stay conscious. She staggered toward the couch, partly collapsing against it.

Jack hurried over to her, ignoring the merc for the moment. Sebby was staring at the man, his little body tense and his stinger-tail thrashing, as if daring the merc to try to get up.

Kyra's right hand fumbled at the knife handle where it protruded from her abdomen by her right hip.

"Don't pull it out," Jack told Kyra, helping her around to the front of the couch and easing her down onto it. "Don't touch it. I'm gonna call for help."

"Shit," Kyra groaned. "Shit shit shit shit, *God*, this hurts, Jack..."

"You're gonna be okay. I promise."

"I know. Just... that motherfucker..."

"He was looking for Riddick," Jack told Kyra. "This is all my fault. I'm so sorry—"

"*Fuck* that noise, it's not your fault assholes exist. What're we gonna do with him?"

Jack rose. What, indeed? "Don't move, okay? I'll be right back."

The merc was lying on the ground, his legs awkwardly bent and splayed from his fall. His breathing was shallow, wheezing, his eyes wide and frightened. He was alive but paralyzed. Jack found herself wondering if Sebby's stinger was for hunting, or if his species bred like tarantula wasps.

She picked up the knife Kyra had dropped and walked over to him. Showing him the blade, she knelt beside him and put it against *his* throat.

"Maybe this is redundant, but don't move," she told him.

A strangled groan escaped his lips.

Jack went through his pockets, pulling out everything he'd been carrying. He had a wallet, an electronic device she recognized, from schematics she'd seen years ago, as a highly illegal "Master Key," and a fake badge that looked like it had come from the same damned cereal box as the one Johns had carried. Then she rolled him over, grunting with the strain. The bastard was *heavy* as *fuck*. One folded piece of paper was tucked into a back pocket. For a moment, the smell made her think he'd voided his bowels.

"Do you *ever* bathe?" she asked him, tempted to throw him—as if she even *could*—into a tub and wash the stink off.

And... there it is.

Sometimes her ideas were quite horrible. She wished, though, that she'd thought of this one back when he'd first woken her up. The tide wouldn't be in yet, but it would come soon enough to wash his stench away forever.

If the fall doesn't kill him first... It probably would. She'd been so busy worrying about what would happen to *her* if she dropped through the floor that she'd never even considered...

She rolled him onto his back again, bringing the knife against his throat once more. Just in case. Then she put her hand on his chest.

"When you get to Hell," she told him, "you tell Chillingsworth I sent you."

The man's eyes widened, just a bit, in pure terror.

This piece of garbage is in Elsewhere... all the way in Elsewhere...

He fell through the floor and vanished as silently as a ghost. She shifted her vision, trying to see into Elsewhere instead of U1. Darkness spread below and around her in the other 'verse's moonless night. She couldn't see anything—

Kyra groaned behind her.

"Oh shit, sorry, Kyra..." She set the knife down and hurried back to her sister's side. "I'm gonna call Takama. She'll know who to bring. We can't use Emergency Services or anything

but she'll know who to get..."

She was babbling. She grabbed her tablet, relieved to see that it hadn't taken any damage from the fight, and keyed in the comm number for the Tomlin-Meziane household.

"Azul?" It was Ewan.

"Ewan? It's Tislilel!"

"Tislilel? What—is everything all right?"

"No! We need your help! We need Takama! Dihya's been stabbed! By one of that bitch's mercs! We can't go to the police or UMA, but she needs a doctor!" In her own ears, she sounded on the verge of hysterics, but she felt as if she was talking from a strange distance.

"We're coming. Are you at your apartment?"

"Yes."

"Are you *safe* there?"

"For now." Jack looked around, suddenly imagining that another merc might leap out of the shadows. No, the man had made it clear he intended to cut Toombs out. He'd come gunning for them alone.

"We'll be there right away." The call disconnected.

"Score one... for the Meziane family..." Kyra said in a pained voice. Sebbly was sitting on her chest, his stinger hidden once more, stroking her face with his antennae.

Jack gathered up the merc's possessions and set them on the table, looking through them while they waited. The ID in his thick wallet named him as Frank Vedder; the one behind it bore the name Justin Cowell, and the one behind that called him Blaine Mason. All three had the same picture of his ugly mug. He had money cards in each name. A piece of paper with a string of letters and numbers on it, along with two condoms, were tucked in the otherwise-empty billfold.

What kind of sloppy dumb-ass carries multiple IDs where a cop might find them? she wondered in disgust.

The kind, she supposed, who only bathed every other month.

She transferred the wallet to Elsewhere and let it drop. For a moment, she almost did the same with his comm, until she remembered how many of the "missing and presumed dead" people from the explosion had been identified by their comms' final locations. She set it on the table. Before sending it out of this 'verse, she'd carry it to another part of town; she didn't want *his* last known location to be their apartment.

She unfolded the piece of paper she'd taken from his back pocket and gasped.

"What is it?" Kyra asked. Jack turned the paper so she could see. "*Motherfucker...*"

It was a printout of a photo, taken with a long-range lens, of Jack and Kyra standing in front of their building talking to a man in traditional Amazigh attire. Tomlin.

How long had mercs pursuing Riddick *been* in New Marrakesh?

She supposed that, after the breakout, anyone else who knew about the connection between "Jane Doe 7439" and Riddick would have started plotting possible landfalls out of system. A few who rolled the dice correctly might have managed to beat Toombs himself—even beat the *Scarlet Matador* itself—to Tangiers Prime.

*It's a good thing he took the picture from **behind** Tomlin, or his new boss would've been even more interested in us than ever...*

She pocketed the image, along with the Master Key, and then finished examining and disposing of the man's possessions. The badge dropped down into Elsewhere to join him. She'd let the tide do whatever it wanted with them—

The door slammed open and the Tomlin-Meziane family spilled into the apartment, Cedric and Ewan first, both with guns drawn.

"Dihya!" Takama gasped, slipping between the men and hurrying to her side.

Sebby reared up on his hind legs, rattling his pincers, and screeched a warning. His stinger whipped out. Takama stopped short.

"It's okay, Sebby!" Jack said, trying to hush him as fast as she could. She didn't want anyone else getting stung. "Come here. It's okay."

She managed to coax him to crawl up her arm and onto her shoulder, and moved away from the couch to make room for the others.

"Jack wouldn't let me take the knife out," Kyra said, her voice sounding a little muzzy.

"Jack," Ewan's eyes cut toward her as he said the name, "is very wise. We will have to remove it carefully." He had holstered his gun and was opening the large medical field kit that Takama had carried in.

Battlefield doctors decide who lives and dies. It's called triage... Nobody had realized that she'd heard that, heard *everything* that Johns and Riddick had said in their final conversation. Now she shuddered as it came back to her.

Safiyya and Lalla were setting several large, empty suitcases on the floor. "Bathroom first," Safiyya said, handing Lalla a duffel bag. "Then bedroom."

"What are you...?" Jack heard herself asking.

"You can't stay here," Safiyya told her in a no-nonsense voice. "It's obviously not safe. This building truly is cursed. You'll stay with us, at least until Dihya has recovered. Let some scoundrel *try* to come at you in our home!"

"Should I ask what happened to the man who stabbed her?" Cedric murmured so that only she could hear.

Jack met his eyes. "Please don't."

His expression softened and grew sad. Did he realize what she had done?

I've committed murder for the third time, she thought, another shudder passing through her.

"OW!" Kyra shrieked. "*Fuck!*"

Sebby leapt off Jack's shoulder and scuttled toward her sister, screeching, stinger thrashing like an agitated cat's tail.

"Sebby no! It's okay! Don't sting anybody!" Jack shouted, chasing after him.

"I'm okay, Sebby!" Kyra sobbed. "I'm okay, it's okay... c'mere... it's okay..."

The upset crustacean retracted his stinger. He jumped, instead, onto Kyra's shoulder and began stroking her cheek with his antennae, again making a soft *reeeeeeeee* at the very edge of Jack's hearing.

Takama set the bloody knife that Ewan had just drawn out of Kyra on the table. Jack walked over and picked it up, looking it over carefully. She wanted to remember every detail about it in case it became important later.

Then she walked over to the spot where the merc had fallen. Standing over it, she transitioned the knife into Elsewhere and dropped it down.

"I should've isomorphed him straight over to Elsewhere when I woke up and he was sitting over me," she heard herself saying. "Shouldn't've given him a chance to hurt her..."

"I don't imagine," Cedric said next to her, "that an idea like that would just pop into your head right away." His hand on her shoulder was light, gentle.

"It will next time."

"I pray that you will never have to put that to the test, Tislilel. Or would you prefer to be Jack?"

Jack sighed. "Neither one's my real name. Let's stick with Tislilel. *He* gave me that name." She turned and met Cedric's eyes. "Gavin did."

Cedric nodded and swallowed, his eyes acquiring a mournful gleam. "Tislilel it is."

"Husband!" Safiyya called. "Either pack or clean! We want this *tagat* place emptied when it's time to move Dihya!"

Cedric sighed and gave her a somewhat forced grin. "Don't want even one fingerprint left behind, do we? You want any of the larger furnishings?"

"No, we got rid of most of them already. Whoever moves in next can have what's left." Jack wasn't even going to try to argue with them about the move; beautiful view or not, she suddenly never wanted to see this building again. "But, uh... could you check under the bed and dresser to make sure Sebby didn't leave anything under either one? He likes to hide and play under them."

Sebby was still on Kyra's shoulder, supervising Ewan's work but no longer posturing threateningly.

"They're asking if you're okay..." Kyra groaned, only partly conscious.

"Who's asking?" Takama glanced between Kyra and Jack.

"The things... on the other side... I was asleep and they were talking to me and suddenly they said 'the other larva is in danger and needs your help...'"

"The 'other larva?'" Takama looked confused.

"That's what they call us," Jack explained, once again wondering if maybe they *were* crazy. "The creatures... the ones that started talking to us in our dreams after the rescue. They call us larvae. All except the one that hates us and calls us filth—"

"What do I *tell* them?" Kyra moaned.

Jack took her hand. "Tell them I'm okay. Tell them that they helped you save me. Tell them..."

She had *done* it, she realized. She had called out to the frightening beings from her dreams, wide awake, and they had *answered*, if indirectly. They had *defended* her. It wasn't some weird *folie a deux* she and Kyra were experiencing. It was all wonderfully, terrifyingly *real*.

"Tell them thank you."

34.

An Inward-Facing Fortress

“How’d you do it?” Cedric asked Kyra, studying the smashed window.

Kyra looked over at him. The shots Ewan had given her had finally taken effect, and she no longer seemed to be in any pain but seemed extremely drowsy. Ewan, done treating her internal injuries, was closing up the gory slash in her skin. “Climbed out the west window in the bedroom. There’s a ledge outside. Went as fast I could ’til I got to the fire escape... out that window... ’n gave it a good, hard donkey kick...”

She started to lift her legs as if she was going to try to demonstrate, but hissed sharply as pain returned with the movement.

“Stay still, Dihya,” Ewan admonished, resting one gloved hand on her midriff. The other held the forceps he was using to suture her.

“Fuck, sorry,” Kyra muttered, grimacing.

“It was locked?” Cedric frowned when Kyra nodded. “So how did the mercenary get in?”

“He had one of these,” Jack said, taking the Master Key out of her pocket and holding it out to him.

Cedric took it and looked it over. “Even possessing one of these on Tangiers Prime is a felony. I suggest you let it join him.”

Damn. She’d kind of wanted to keep it. Taking it back, she sighed, shifted it to Elsewhere, and let it fall. She caught Cedric watching her with a suppressed look of wonder on his face.

I guess it does look just like magic, she thought, and not an accident of quantum physics.

While Ewan had continued to work on treating and closing Kyra’s wound, Takama had joined Safiyya and Lalla in efficiently packing up their possessions in the apartment, using their clothing, bedding, and the pillows and blankets they’d decorated with to cushion anything even slightly fragile. Cedric, meanwhile, had been diligently wiping down surfaces to remove all possible fingerprints. They were all wearing gloves from Ewan’s kit, but had told Jack that she was to stay still and watch over Sebby and Kyra, not help. They were almost finished when two men appeared in the apartment’s open doorway.

Sebby crawled onto the top of the couch back and hissed at them.

“It is all right, Sebby,” Takama said to him. “These are my cousins. *Ait uxam*, Sebby. Family.”

Jack remembered seeing them at the memorial and at the meal afterward. One of them had told everyone a story about Tomlin learning to drive that had almost made mint tea come out of her nose. They were wheeling in a gurney, one designed to roll up and down flights of stairs.

“Perfect... timing,” Ewan said as he tied off a stitch. “Three more and I’ll be done.”

“This should be everything,” Takama said a few minutes later, emerging from the kitchen area with the small quantity of food they’d had—including more olives for Sebby—in a bag.

Now, *there* was a completely non-horrible idea...

"Takama? Give an olive to Sebby, please."

The moment Takama offered him the olive, Jack could see the change in Sebby's posture. She was now one of his best friends. Jack had Cedric, Safiyya, and Lalla offer him olives as well, which he happily devoured while Ewan finished his work. The two cousins—Izil and Usadden—offered him one each too, marveling at him in Tamazight. Each received a thank you, of a sort, from Sebby, who stroked his antennae along their ungloved hands and wrists.

Petting them or learning their scents? Jack wondered. "Now he'll think of you as *ait uxam*, for sure."

While Izil and Usadden carefully lifted Kyra onto the gurney, Ewan pulled off his bloody gloves and washed his hands before accepting an olive from Jack to feed Sebby.

"I've heard of offering olive *branches* before," he murmured softly as the contented crustacean stroked his hand, "but this is new."

"Pretty much everything is with him," Jack admitted. "We didn't know until tonight that he has a stinger."

"I wondered why you were so alarmed when he got upset. How strong is his venom?"

"Strong enough to paralyze a hundred-kilo man in a matter of seconds," Jack told him, feeling a little nervous. What if they refused to let Sebby into their home?

"Is that what killed the mercenary?"

"No," Jack said, and found that she couldn't meet Ewan's eyes, couldn't even look at his face. "He was still breathing when—" She took a deep breath. "When I..."

Ewan's hand touched her cheek and he tilted her head up, making her meet his gentle gaze. His eyes were exactly the same shade of green as his brother's. "When you did what you had to do, to save your life and Dihya's." His voice became kindly chiding. "I *do* understand war. The only thing that outrages me is that you and your sister have been forced onto the front lines of battle so young. *That* is the real crime here."

You don't know how young, Jack thought miserably. Kyra had been twelve when the New Christy Massacre took place, and thirteen when she had finally captured and killed Red Roger, the same age Jack was now... and *she* had three notches on her belt now, too. Did she really have any innocence left to lose?

Ewan pulled her into a gentle hug. For a long moment they stayed still, Jack resting her head on his chest, breathing in the scent of him—so very nice after the reek of the filthy merc—and listening to his heartbeat, letting it calm her. No one had held her like this since before her father left for Furya. Possibly, no one had *ever* held her like this.

"You two coming?" Cedric called to them.

Jack didn't want to let go. She wanted to just stay just like this, rest like this, for a while longer. Reluctantly, she pulled back and looked up at Ewan, meeting understanding and concern in his gaze. His fingertips gently brushed her forehead. "You're bruised. Did he hit you?"

She'd forgotten all about that for a moment, forgotten why her head hurt. "I hit him in the face with my head."

That startled a soft laugh out of him. "You are quite ferocious. When we get back to the house, please let me look at it. Now that Dihya is stable, I want to make sure you are, too."

He kept his arm around her, the way his brother had, as they followed the others down the stairs. She could see Sebby below them, perched protectively on Kyra's chest as Izil and Usadden maneuvered the gurney around a landing. The others were all carrying bags, including Ewan's repacked field kit.

"My tablet—"

"Right here," Ewan chuckled, offering it to her. Then he took a familiar, cheap "burner" comm out of his pocket and held it up. "Whose comm is this? It was on the table beside your tablet, but I thought Takama already packed yours and Dihya's."

"The merc's. I need to get it to another part of town before I isomorph it into Elsewhere. So nobody comes *here* looking for him."

"That's a good thought. May I handle that for you? I know someone who can make sure it goes on a long, wild journey before it disappears forever. No trips to other universes needed." Ewan smiled down at her. "Although I would really love to visit Elsewhere sometime, if I may."

"Yes, thank you." Jack looked around; as yet, no water was rising into the building. "What time is it?"

Ewan glanced at his chrono. "A little after eighteen p.m. Why?"

"Tide's moving in. When we get to the ground level, though, I need to check something in Elsewhere. Do you have a flashlight?"

"Of course." He took it out of his pocket and offered it to her.

"I... don't want you to come with me on *this* trip over to Elsewhere." Jack told him, feeling suddenly awkward.

"Ah... yes. I understand." He didn't specify *what* he understood, maybe recognizing that she didn't want to talk about her need to make sure she'd successfully committed another murder, and to conceal her gruesome handiwork from him. "As I said earlier, though, you bear *no* shame for any of what happened tonight."

I do, though. I do...

The waters of Elsewhere were lapping at the lower end of the street, a few blocks away, when they finally emerged from the building. Izil and Usadden had covered Kyra with a white sheet and were wheeling her toward, of all things, a Medical Examiner's truck. Jack's heart lurched for a second.

"It's all right, Tislilel," Ewan murmured, sensing her distress. "This was the plan. Anyone on the outside will only know that someone must have died in the building and been taken out. They will seem to drop her off at a funeral home, where another of our cousins is waiting to bring her back to the house in a laundry service truck. Takama is going to ride with her the whole way. She'll be fine." He kissed the top of her head, removing his arm from around her. "Go take care of your problem while we load the bags in Lalla's van."

As Jack walked back toward the apartment building's outer wall, she found herself wishing that Ewan's arm was still around her.

If Riddick had left her with a family like this, she thought as she isomorphed over into Elsewhere and continued forward on the sand, she never would have even considered cutting her wrists.

It was a moonless night in Elsewhere; all three moons, no longer near each other in the sky, were somewhere on the other side of the world. Ewan's flashlight illuminated dried

sand, desiccated seaweed, smooth rocks, and small tidepools, terrain she remembered from the previous week. That had been a dark night, too; everyone had been using their comms to light their way.

Frank Vedder, aka Justin Cowell, aka Blaine Mason was sprawled on the rocky ground, his body thoroughly broken by his twenty-meter fall. His head had smashed against a large rock, painting it scarlet. Small crustaceans, like but unlike Sebby, had found the body and begun to feast.

He died fast, a voice from her past rumbled softly in her head, *and if we have any choice about it, that's the way we should all go out...*

She would no more cry for this... *sicko*... than she would have for Johns—and in spite of what Riddick had seemed to believe at the time, the tears she'd almost shed had not been for the merc who had wanted to serve her up as a Judas goat—but part of her still wanted to curl up and cry at the thought of what she had become on this journey and the innocent girl who had been lost along the way. She wanted to cry because, as with Johns, she was *glad* the man was dead, and part of her hated herself for that.

The Master Key, which she had been tempted to retrieve, had smashed to pieces against another rock. *Like I needed to add another felony to the long list...*

Taking the surveillance photo of herself and Kyra back out of her pocket—she wasn't sure why she'd initially kept it, but it needed to cease to exist—she dropped it onto the sand and turned back, retracing her steps until they vanished and she was back outside of the building, before isomorphing back into U1.

“Baraka,” Ewan said as she reappeared. “I was told, and I believed, but it's still an amazing thing to see.”

“I'm still learning how to do it the best way,” Jack admitted, offering him his flashlight back. “Slow or fast transitions, I mean. It's kind of frustrating. Nobody's exactly written a *manual* about how threshold syndrome works even though they really *ought* to have by now.”

“Assuming that the Quintessa Corporation was willing to allow that knowledge to circulate, that is,” Ewan said, quirking an eyebrow at her. “Let's get you back to the house. I asked my sister to prepare a room for you and Dihya while we collected you.”

The Medical Examiner's truck had already departed, Jack noticed. Cedric was loading the last of the bags into the back of what she assumed was Lalla's van, gesturing them over to him. “Let's get you home, Tislilel. We have some security tricks in store for anyone who tries to invade *our* house.”

Soon she was sitting between Cedric and Ewan as Lalla drove them back to the extraordinary mansion she'd only left a few hours before. They made one detour along the way, so that Ewan could hand off the merc's comm to a man who looked like a pirate riding a motorcycle. A while later, they turned onto the tree-lined avenue they'd walked on, earlier that very day, on their way to and from the church. A massive, high-walled edifice with a familiar gate set in it appeared on the left. There were, she realized, no windows on the outer walls, no sign that it was a house at all. When she and Kyra had originally passed it in the processional, she'd assumed it was a warehouse.

“This is true,” Cedric said when she asked him about it. “The house's windows look inward only, although we often go up on the roof if we wish to watch what's happening

outside with our own eyes.”

“Roof access? That could be—” Jack stopped herself. This family knew how to take care of itself better than she did. Didn’t it?

“Dangerous? Perhaps,” Cedric said, grinning. “Burglars have tried to come in from the roof, but it’s more difficult than it seems. Only one has ever made it inside.”

“What happened to him?”

“Nothing good,” Safiyya said. “You and Dihya will be safe, we promise.”

It’s not me I’m worried about, Jack realized. Riddick was a big enough payday to make any merc willing to go to war against a family, even a wealthy and apparently powerful one. As long as people believed he was the one who had sprung her and Kyra from the hospital, anyone they associated with would be fair game in a merc’s eyes.

Could she really bring that kind of havoc down on this family?

Ewan, she realized, was studying her face intently. She hoped she wasn’t showing far too much of what she was feeling... in *any* direction.

“Sorry,” she made herself say, giving him an apologetic smile. “I think I’m just a little paranoid right now.”

“Understandably,” he said, putting his arm around her again.

Another, larger gate opened beside the van, leading down into a huge, private garage below ground level. Elsewhere’s waters completely filled it. Jack let Ewan help her out of the van and escort her into the house for a second time.

It had never occurred to her until now that the comfortable shabbiness of the Rif might be a *front*. She still wasn’t sure what the truth was. But her favorite food cart vendor had turned out to be a sociology professor on sabbatical, whose real job seemed to be gathering intel for the Imazighen—intel that had brought Tomlin to her and Kyra’s doorstep—and teaching foreigners to respect their ways. And, at Takama’s word, an entire community had stepped up to smuggle almost two hundred refugees out into the mountains in a single night.

Maybe she should trust that they were stronger than they had seemed, more powerful than they had seemed...

...but still vulnerable. Tomlin had died because she’d given him just enough help, just enough knowledge, to start a fight with the Quintessa Corporation, but not enough to win it.

She wasn’t sure anyone *could* win a fight against them. Without their Isomorph Drives, regardless of what secrets they were keeping about them, there would be no Star Jumping, no faster-than-light space travel. And without that—

“the end of the Federacy as we knew it...” That was what Tomlin had told his younger brother. Was the truth he’d discovered powerful enough to actually *do* that? To bring real-time contact between the star systems to an *end*?

If it was, no wonder the Corporation was willing to kill hundreds and destroy an economy to keep it secret, and to keep their position one where no other power, not even the Federacy itself, could threaten them with reprisals for any atrocious act they chose to commit. And if they ever suspected the secrets, and the *people*, that the Tomlin-Meziane family was harboring...

...This large and beautiful fortress would be erased from the board altogether.

Could *anything* defend this family against the monstrous forces, human and possibly otherwise, hunting for her and Kyra? Especially if those different forces ever realized they

were all seeking the same two—in the words of one now-dead merc—little girls?

She would have to talk to Kyra about it.

Ewan had been steering her through the house the whole time she had been lost in thought—and there was a whole lot of house!—and up three flights of stairs. The lights in the tastefully decorated corridor he led her down were dim and most of the doors were closed. It reminded Jack a little of a fancy hotel from an old Earth vid. The doors were only on one side of the corridor; was the other side one of the exterior walls?

One door was open, soft light spilling into the hallway, and Jack could hear voices coming from it. Takama's voice was among them.

"Rest now, Dihya," she was saying as Ewan led Jack in. "Your sister will be here soon—ah! Here she is now."

A large, ornately carved bedframe dominated the room. The bed itself looked soft and luxurious. Kyra was settled on its right side, propped up by large pillows in a position Jack remembered from one of her grandmother's hospital stays. Sebby, who had been resting on a pillow next to her, scuttled across the bed and leapt down, racing to Jack and climbing up onto her shoulder, antennae frisking her face.

"What an extraordinary creature," she heard either Izil or Usadden say as she stroked his carapace with her fingers. "So devoted. Aside from olives, what does it eat?"

"Cockroaches, mostly... any that were dumb enough to come into our place," Jack told him. "And bugs that flew in after the west windows got broken. He can't fly, but he sure tried to, to catch them."

She wondered when, exactly, Sebby had learned to crawl across the ceiling to launch his attack on the merc. Maybe he'd figured it out so that he could ambush the large moths that had begun coming in at night. She and Kyra had begun finding colorful wing fragments on the foot of their bed and the floor at the end of each night cycle.

"Well, he isn't going to find those here, I'm afraid," the cousin—Izil, she realized—continued. "I will stop by a pet supply shop and bring back some possibilities for him."

"Thank you." Jack took Kyra's hand. "Are you okay?"

Kyra's smile was a little loopy. "Usadden gave me the *good stuff*," she said, a slight slur to her words. "Gonna sleep now... now I know *you're* okay..."

"She won't be in any pain," Usadden murmured. "Not for many hours."

"Are you a doctor?" Jack found herself asking him. The Meziane family seemed to be huge, and highly accomplished.

He nodded. "I really am a medical examiner. Generally, none of my 'patients' require medication, but I have kept my license to practice on the living up to date, so I can also be called upon for search-and-rescue and triage in crises like the one we all suffered last week. And for situations such as this."

Jack suddenly wondered just how often this family found itself embroiled in intrigue.

"If either of you need anything," Takama gestured at a small device on the low table next to Kyra's head. "Someone is always awake in our house and will answer. Once Zdan has made sure you do not have a concussion, Tislilel, try to sleep as well. Good night, girls."

She shepherded Izil and Usadden out of the room, the three talking softly in Tamazight as they went.

"Now," Ewan said, reaching into his field bag again, "let's make sure of you."

He led her over to a chair and made her sit down, kneeling in front of her.

“You’re a pilot *and* a medic?”

His grin was rueful. “Pilot in training. I worked for the UMA while I was at University. I think Usadden hoped I’d become a doctor, too, but... flying won. Especially now.” He swallowed, the grief showing in his eyes again.

His brother was his hero, Jack thought as he shone his penlight into her eyes.

“Pupils are responsive, that’s a good start...” For the next several minutes, he took her through a series of tests, some physical and some mental, before nodding in satisfaction. “You’re going to have an impressive bruise on your forehead for a while, and probably a headache, which I’ll give you some meds for, but there are no signs of a concussion.” His smile emerged; as with his older brother, it transformed him from handsome to dazzling. “Which is very good because I imagine you’re quite tired by now. I don’t have to make you stay awake.”

Jack was about to object that she was perfectly awake when a yawn broke through, surprising her. “I think that’s a good thing,” she admitted, laughing.

His brotherly good night kiss left her cheek tingling.

He’s nine years older than I am, she scolded herself as she showered, Sebby splashing at her feet. *What I want is never going to happen.*

Why did she have to develop feelings for such unattainable men? First Riddick, then Tomlin, and now Ewan...

Feeling a little refreshed from the shower but still sleepy, she climbed into huge bed, moving her pillow to the middle so she’d be close to Kyra, and drifted off.

They were waiting for her, agitated, demanding to know what was wrong with “the other larva” and what had happened to both of them.

If I show you in three-shapes, will you understand? she asked.

We will understand.

Jack conjured up her memories, recreating the apartment in her mind. Her asleep on the couch, Kyra—the other larva, she told them—sleeping in the next room, and the hideous, foul-smelling mercenary sneaking in through their door, climbing on top of her and threatening her with a knife. She recreated the battle that had followed, showing them Kyra coming to her rescue and being wounded, and then Sebby rescuing them both. At first she wasn’t sure if they were seeing any of it, until they began to ask questions about what she had showed them.

So *many* questions...

“Jack? Jack, wake up...”

She opened her eyes, blinking at the unfamiliar surroundings in the darkness. Kyra was shaking her arm, looking pained and anxious.

“Kyra? Are you okay? I thought the meds—”

“They won’t let me sleep, Jack.” Her sister had the same look of panic in her eyes that she’d had the morning before they broke out of the hospital, when Red Roger had come back to her in her dreams. “They keep asking all these questions... I can’t get them to let me sleep...”

Jack sat up, concerned. “You want me to tell them to knock it off?”

Kyra nodded, her lip trembling.

She closed her eyes, focusing on *them*. Somehow, she was starting to be able to feel them even when she was awake. *The other larva is **wounded!*** she scolded them. *You must stop asking her questions! I'll tell you when she is well enough for you to talk to her again. Until then, you can talk to me. Just to me.*

She wasn't sure, but she thought she felt some kind of reluctant assent.

"I think I got through to them," she told Kyra.

"Thanks... but... I don't want to go back to sleep yet. Can you talk to me? Help me stay awake for a while?"

"Absolutely. What do you want to talk about?"

"I... I don't..." Kyra's eyes were filling.

She needed an anchor, Jack realized, something to pull her away from her own thoughts and the darkness waiting for both of them. The way she'd needed one that final day at the hospital, when she was drawing Red Roger on the wall—

Of course.

Jack had promised to tell her the true story about Riddick. Originally, it should have happened that very night, but the escape had preempted it and they hadn't circled back to it since. Now, she decided, it was time. She would give Kyra something to imagine that was almost completely disconnected from the current moment.

"Once there was a girl," she began, "who was unhappy at home and decided she was going to run away. Her mother was getting remarried to a real asshole, and she wanted to go live with her father. But he was hundreds of light years away on a military base, and nobody was going to just let her go to him. So one day, she cut off her hair, put on her cousin Rob's outgrown clothes, changed her name to Jack B. Badd, and set off after him..."

She could feel *them* listening, too.

35.

A Box with Infinite Chambers

Kyra didn't manage to fall back asleep until after Jack had narrated up to Ali's death and funeral, shortly before Fry had told everyone about the coming eclipse. Jack lay beside her, watching her sleep, until she was sure that her dreams weren't being disturbed. Then she closed her eyes and let sleep reclaim her.

Little larva? May we speak to you now?

"Yes," she told them, unsurprised to find herself floating in the night sky once more. This seemed to be where they centered themselves: in the darkness, surrounded by stars.

The story you told. Is it true?

"It is, yeah." Most of it, anyway. She had changed a few things as she went, trying to make it sound like she had met Paris Ogilvie well before the crash, in keeping with her prior claims to Kyra that *he* was the one who had mentored her in breaking security systems rather than her father unknowingly doing so. She'd worked in all of the things he'd told her about himself after the crash as if they were things she'd learned while traveling with him before boarding the *Hunter-Gratzner*.

"I've been to Earth eleven times now," he'd told her as he dug through his stash and pocketed tins of caviar, reluctantly offering her one for her own pocket. "Mostly, I've stayed in the Western hemisphere. That's the safest side. But it's still risky. There are radiation storms even there. And all the best museums and estates have security systems that are still protecting their collections, even now. I almost got fried by a positron screen doing the Smithsonian job..."

At the time, Jack had the sense that he wanted to recruit her, to have her "run with" him for real. He'd been planning his biggest heist yet and was eager to talk about it: taking a crack at the Louvre and the Mona Lisa.

"Nobody's survived that yet. They say it's impenetrable. But I found some old documents about the security system, things nobody else has ever seen. I think I can get to her. And if not..." He'd raised a bottle of *Domaine de la Romanée-Conte* in a toast, taking a long pull and offering the bottle to her. "Dying in the City of Light, that I was named after? It can't get more poetic than that."

Jack had taken a small sip of the wine. It wasn't terrible, but it just tasted halfway between spoiled grape juice and vinegar to her. She had yet to understand why so many people fussed over it.

No one else in the group seemed to take Paris all that seriously, especially when it became clear that he fancied himself a twenty-sixth century Indiana Jones.

"A male Lara Croft, thank you *very* much," he'd said when she made the comparison, "not that crass American..." Jack had ended up wondering if he realized that both adventurers had been fictional.

But she had been to some of the holo-museums that reproduced long-lost Earth artifacts, and she had *recognized* many of the items in Paris's storage bay. As improbable as it seemed, that gawky, snobbish man really had been, more or less, the wayfaring tomb raider he claimed he was. With a pang of regret, she found herself wishing she had hung onto the boomerang she'd carried for a while. From the British Museum on Earth, it had traveled to an unknown world and had been lost forever. She knew exactly where she'd dropped it after the eclipse, but it might as well have been left in another universe.

They, she suddenly realized, were observing her memories, which she'd conjured into their night sky as she thought of them.

He could break into locked places? they asked.

"Some, yeah," she told them. "Depending on the kind of lock."

And you know how to do this, too?

"Yeah. Again, just some of the time. Some locks are harder than others. I'm still learning." She really wasn't supposed to be learning anything of the kind, but somehow her life kept taking a turn toward the criminal.

It had been an act of desperation that had led Jack to try to pick Sharon Montgomery's pocket while waiting for the *Hunter-Gratzner* to arrive on Vasenji Station. She'd run out of money, none of her father's security systems were used on the station's commercial levels, and she was starting to get a little crazy with hunger. She'd done a terrible job of it and, even before her target had turned to look at her, John Ezekiel had her in a headlock.

"Zeke," Shazza had said, "let the poor kid go."

"Are you *barmy*? This little shit tried to steal your wallet."

"I know, but look at 'im. Skin and bones, he is. When's the last time you ate, yeah?"

It had been the beginning of a strange few days. Shazza had immediately figured out that she was a girl but had kept that a secret even from Zeke. But if Jack was going to tramp the space lanes, Shazza had announced, "he" was going to do it *right*.

Starting with how to pick pockets *properly*.

The hapless and still annoyed Zeke had found himself volunteered to be Jack's "mark," as she practiced identifying where people kept their valuables and lifting them undetected. Shazza had played "mark" as well, and had periodically made Jack play the role too, so she could "see how it's done" and learn how to spot other thieves in a crowd and avoid their light fingers. By the time the *Hunter-Gratzner* had arrived, the couple had amusedly turned her loose on a few crowds and critiqued her successes and failures until she was, in Shazza's words, "a certified pro" and it was time to part ways.

She hadn't actually told them that she was *joining* them on the ship. They'd only discovered that when they broke open her cryo-tube and freed her in the aftermath of the crash.

"Cripes, kid," Shazza had said, helping her up off of the floor. "If you'd told me you were planning on stowing away on this beast, I'd've bought you a ticket."

"You need ID to board the normal way," she'd answered, startling a rare guffaw out of Zeke.

They had also taught her how to pick locks.

These locks... they are mechanical in nature. Do you know how to open other kinds?

“Like what?” she asked, instantly regretting it. *She* had been thinking about her father’s security systems. *They* were thinking of something else altogether.

It was, at first glance, a cube, with no breaks in any of its surfaces. But it had far too many surfaces, more and more the longer she looked at it, infinite iterations of itself, dropping deeper and deeper down into—

“Stop, stop I can’t—”

We are sorry, little larva. We forgot how small you still are.

“I’m sorry too,” Jack found herself saying. “I just... I can’t see that far into...”

We understand. You must grow more first. When you hatch into your six-shape, we will show you.

Well, *that* wasn’t creepy or anything...

They let her sleep for *real* after that, eavesdropping on her dreams but letting them flow wherever her unconscious mind would take them. Later, she dreamt about being Audrey, sneaking downstairs with her cousins in the middle of the night to watch an antique vid they had been forbidden to see, a gory and disturbing story about a puzzle box that opened doors to other worlds—

She woke up gasping, feeling like she was on the brink of understanding something important.

...something about an old Earth vid called *Hellraiser*?...

It was gone.

Night, on Tangiers Prime, was long even at the height of summer; most people rose in the dark to begin their mornings. Jack climbed out of bed and picked up her tablet, which she vaguely remembered setting on the guest room’s elegant dresser the night before. Its chrono said that it was a little after six a.m. The sun would rise in another hour or so, which almost felt normal for a moment until she remembered that it had set almost thirteen hours earlier and would remain in the sky for nearly thirty hours once it rose. That was summer in New Marrakesh; most people had wakened two or more hours earlier still and were accustomed to the first few hours of their morning-day being spent in darkness. Mid-winter, Takama had told her when they first met, meant thirty hours of darkness at a time for an entire week, with the sun only rising a few hours before the noon sleep period began and setting just a few hours after everyone woke for the evening-day.

She wasn’t sure how long she had slept, though. She still felt tired, but far too alert and agitated to try to sleep again yet. There was a word tickling at the back of her mind, probably from her spelling bee days, that felt like it had something to do with her dreams.

Apeirochoron?

She looked it up on the tablet.

Apeirochoron *noun, sing.* [*mathematics*] /əˈpɪr.əˈkɔːr.ɑːn/

An n-polytope cube of infinite dimensions.

From ἀπειρος (ápeiros - “infinite”) + χώρος (chóros - “space, room”)

Was that what *they* had been trying to show her in her dream? It felt like it was. But *why*?

She switched off the tablet and set it down when she heard a soft knock on the door, grabbing up the robe that had been set out for her and slipping it on in a hurry. She wasn't entirely sure what the Meziane family's views on bed attire were, but it was something her parents had argued about during family gatherings. She wouldn't take any chances.

Kyra was still asleep, so she walked over to the door and opened it rather than calling out a *come in*. Tafrara and Ewan were waiting outside.

The first thing Tafrara did was give her a hug. "I'm so glad you're safe. I'm sorry I didn't stay to see you when you arrived."

"That's okay. Thank you," Jack said, hugging her back. Ewan, she noticed, was carrying his field kit. "K—Dihya's not awake yet."

"Really? I didn't think the sedative would last so long." Concern appeared on his face.

"We, uh... had a problem with the entities. They kept trying to talk to her instead of letting her sleep." Jack really needed to find a better name for those creatures.

"The... 'entities?'" Tafrara asked, her expression a little dubious.

"It appears," Ewan explained, "that Dihya and Tislilel's comings and goings across universes have attracted the attention of other beings who can do something similar. And who try to communicate with them when they sleep. Is Dihya all right?"

"I managed to get them to shut up and leave her alone," Jack said with a nod. "But she wasn't ready to try sleeping again for a while."

"They must've really upset her to break through that sedative so early on. Do you mind if I take a look at her?" He hadn't tried to brush past her, waiting instead to be invited in.

"Please," she said, moving aside for him. He flashed her a knee-quaking smile on his way past. Something about the room, she suddenly realized, felt off. "Where's Sebby?"

"Your little pet?" Tafrara smiled. "He's downstairs. He started scrabbling at the door a few hours ago. We think he was trying to find something to hunt. So Izil went to the night market and brought back a tub of feeder crickets, and he has been having the best time."

"He's been absolutely hilarious," Ewan added softly, moving aside the covers to check Kyra's bandages. Kyra's hand flashed out, catching his wrist, and then relaxed.

"G'morning," she said, still half-asleep.

"Good morning, Dihya," he replied, struggling to hide a grin. "I think you just passed your reflex test. How are you feeling?"

"Sore."

"I have something that'll help with that."

"And hungry," Kyra added.

"That's a very good sign indeed. We'll have something brought up to you right away. Tafrara, could you...?"

"Of course, Zdan. Come on," Tafrara said, tugging at the sleeve of Jack's robe. "Let's get *you* something to eat, too."

Tafrara led her down two flights of steps to the ground level, and out into the courtyard she'd passed through the previous day. The tide in Elsewhere had receded, Jack noticed; on that side, wan moonlight was sparkling over a barren garden of gleaming stone, wet sand, and seaweed, casting long shadows toward the west. In both worlds, above her, the sky had shifted from black to a dark, intense royal blue as the sun approached the eastern horizon.

The air was cool and perfumed with the scent of hundreds of blossoms in the courtyard garden.

“It’s so beautiful,” Jack whispered.

“Thank you,” Tafrara said with a smile. “It’s been a project of mine for many years now.”

“You did all this?”

“Well, not *all*, but I designed a good deal of the garden layouts.” Tafrara led her across the courtyard and into a brightly-lit room on the other side.

Reeeeeeeeeeee! It sounded different from the night before, not at all distressed. Jack followed the sound and spotted a large, high-sided storage tub, its lid set aside.

“Here she is now,” Cedric said, grinning. “You’re gonna love what your little fella’s been up to.”

Jack leaned over the tub and looked in on—

Total destruction. A cricket’s version of a summer disaster vid.

Not a single cricket was chirping. The surviving few were apparently trying to stay as quiet as they could while Sebby, pincers clattering enthusiastically, chased after them and stuffed them into his little mandibles. He wasn’t bothering to be especially tidy, and bits of cricket were everywhere in the tub.

“Oh wow,” she found herself laughing.

“It’s cricket Armageddon in there,” Cedric chuckled. “He’s finished off almost the whole lot.”

“Now I wonder if we’ve been underfeeding him,” Jack said, feeling a little rueful.

“If you have,” Cedric said, rising from the dining table she’d barely registered and pulling a seat out for her, “we’ll set that right soon enough.”

“You should have seen him pouncing them,” Safiyya said, entering the room with a large tray. “He’s like a *kitten*.”

Safiyya’s tray had a variety of traditional Moroccan breakfast foods on it; Jack suspected that Takama had told her which ones were her favorites. Soon she was settled at the table, dipping baghrir pancakes into amlou and scooping up cumin-seasoned fried eggs and khlii with a slice of khobz. Nearby, she could hear Sebby’s enthusiastic, almost ultrasonic mini-shrieks as he stalked his prey.

I could get used to this...

There were very rare moments—and this, Jack realized, was one of them—when the urge to stop her madcap voyage across the stars became intense. If she said she wanted to stay here, she knew, the Tomlin-Meziane family would welcome her into their fold, accepting her exactly as she was. She would become Tislilel Meziane, adopted daughter of Cedric and Safiyya, or maybe of Takama, youngest sister—or cousin—of Tafrara, Ewan Zdan, and Dihya... and the late Gavin Brahim. She would never be Jack B. Badd *or* Audrey MacNamera again... and she would never need to use the false ID she had created for her journey onward. She would learn to live by the unique rhythms of a world with 44 hours in its day and an alternate version with three moons and enormous high tides, and she could explore two sets of landscapes wherever she went. And although she could probably never have the man she longed for most of all right now, one day she could find someone almost or just as wonderful in the tribe, or at an engagement Moussem, and make a new family of her own...

Could she really do that?

Her parents, she thought with a pang of guilt, would believe she had died somewhere. Maybe they'd even suspect she'd died in the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash, but they would never know the truth of what had happened to her. Audrey MacNamera would stay in the "missing" category for a few more years and then be declared dead. Her memorial would have no coffin or urn, just a picture of a naïve young girl with long blonde hair who had vanished one day without a trace. Memories of who she had been and what she had done in her brief life on Deckard's World would already have faded by then. There would be hardly any stories for anyone to tell about the quiet, studious girl who had lived too far away from her school friends and other children her age and had made do with books and cats for companions, who never got into any trouble unless she was with her cousins—and those stories would really be about *them*, not her—and whose adventures had almost all been vicarious until then...

Could she really do that to *them*?

Her heart twisted as she realized that there was no way she could. As alluring as life with the Tomlin-Meziane family might be, and as much as she wanted to have any excuse to catch the light of Ewan's smile... she could never do that to her family. Especially not after seeing just how torn up Tomlin's death had left *his*.

"Are you all right in there?" Cedric asked.

Jack glanced up, trying too late to cover up the look of sadness that had crept over her face. "Um... yeah. Just... got a lot to think about."

If I didn't already have a father, I'd want you to be mine...

"Right," Ewan said at that moment, entering the room. "That's Dihya settled for the next few hours. She should sleep comfortably for a while. What do we want to do about the officers' reception?"

"Bloody hell," Cedric muttered. "I don't think we dare postpone it. Certain people would want to know why, if we did. Well, we'll see how she's faring tomorrow evening. It's still some sixty-odd hours away."

"How *Dihya's* faring?" Jack asked, momentarily confused.

"The plan was to introduce her to Gavin's associates in the Service during the reception we scheduled just for them," Cedric explained. "With that Quintessa bitch looking over our shoulders at the memorial, I couldn't find a way to extend an invitation for a meet-an'-greet that she wouldn't invite herself to, other than that. I *do* plan to keep Gavin's promise to Dihya."

Oh! Of course. Now it all made sense. "But now you're worried she won't be recovered in time."

"That's the worry," Ewan agreed. "Well, we can work around it if we need to. I know some of them fairly well and can invite them over for dinner, or something."

"How long is your leave?" Cedric asked.

"I have another week," Ewan said, popping an olive into his mouth.

Just four more of Tangiers Prime's long days, Jack realized, and Ewan would be back at the flight academy on Qamar. It was a struggle to keep her dismay off of her face. After the week ended...

She might never see him again.

It would only be another week from then until the transport to Furya arrived and, one way or another, she boarded it and left to reunite with her father. That was a rendezvous she *had* to keep. More than a year had gone by since she'd disappeared from Deckard's World, and by now word had reached him that she was missing. She'd planned to *beat* the news of her disappearance to him, or at least arrive soon after. She couldn't dally anymore. Which meant that, although she intended to spend the next two weeks immersing herself in this wonderful family, she would have to say goodbye to them all too soon. And goodbye to Ewan, possibly forever, even sooner.

Why did all of these things have to hurt so much?

A gentle hand on the back of her head drew her back to herself. Ewan was leaning forward, studying her face with concern. "Are you all right, Tislilel?"

She tried to manage a reassuring smile, but what appeared was probably pathetic and not reassuring at all. "It's just... been a rough few weeks. I think maybe I'll lie down for a while."

She couldn't tell them what she was feeling, not now... and could tell *him* least of all.

"Do you know the way back?"

Jack nodded, able to see it in her mind quite clearly. She only ever got lost in places she'd never been before, and only then if she hadn't had a chance to map them out in advance or had been given faulty and outdated directions. But she could see every turn she and Tafrara had taken.

The sun hadn't yet risen as she crossed the courtyard, but the sky had turned a vivid, deep turquoise blue and birds were muttering sleepily in the trees. Jack stopped for a moment to inhale the intoxicating scent of the space. She wanted to remember it forever, this magical garden that might, if only things had been different, have become her home.

She wondered if there were any flowers yet on Furya.

Kyra was sleeping again when Jack returned to their room. Ewan—or possibly his cousin Usadden—had set up an IV drip after she'd left. She looked up the contents of the bags on her tablet. Hydration fluids, mostly, but one small bag, on a timed drip feeding its contents into the other fluids, was a powerful healing accelerant. The tablet told her that it was rarely used because it was prohibitively expensive.

She was about to set the tablet back down when she noticed that she had a message. Or, more specifically, that her newest alias had a message.

Her pulse racing with sudden excitement, she opened it up.

Dear Ms. Tepper,

We are pleased to inform you that you are one of the top candidates to join the crew of the *Major Barbara* on its upcoming voyage to the Catalan System...

Wait, what?

She had applied to go to *Furya*. The *Major Barbara* was supposed to be going to *Furya*. She scanned the rest of the letter in growing confusion. The departure date was the same, although the ship was now scheduled to launch from New Fes.

But the destination had changed.

A terrible, cold, empty feeling was filling her as she used one of her Ghost Codes to infiltrate the shipping company's comms system and snoop on the chatter of the last few days.

Oh. Of course. Of fucking course.

Due to the current difficult circumstances facing Tangiers Prime and particularly New Marrakesh, the planetary government has requested that all humanitarian aid supplies located within the system be reserved for the rescue and recovery efforts currently underway...

The aid packages originally marked for shipment to Furya had been reallocated for local use. The *Major Barbara* would instead carry construction equipment to Catalonia Seven. And the shipping company was in the middle of arranging a new supply mission to Furya, originating from—

“Helion Prime. Helion *fucking* Prime...” Jack didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The tears won.

36.

Pathways to Pandemonium

By the time Kyra's sedative wore off and she woke up, Jack had mostly recovered. She had spent the morning unpacking the suitcases that contained their possessions and putting them away, scattering their shells, coral, and driftwood around the room on free surfaces. She'd even gotten dressed, although part of her had wanted to burrow under the covers and hide from the universe. From *all* the universes. But going to sleep would have meant having to explain her unhappiness to inquisitive beings—entities? She really needed to come up with a name for them—and she couldn't bring herself to face that yet, either.

"What've I been missing?" Kyra asked almost immediately.

"Sebby attempting to drive crickets into extinction. Breakfast." *The death of my dreams.* Jack shrugged. "Not much else."

"Ewan gave me broth for breakfast. How come even *broth* tastes so damned good here?" Kyra looked over at the IV drip. "What's all this?"

"Fancy medicine to make you heal faster."

"That eager to get rid of us, are they?" The amusement in Kyra's voice belied her words.

"You remember that reception for Tomlin's colleagues in the Service? The one Cedric mentioned at the end of the memorial?"

"Yeah?"

"They were planning on introducing you to everybody there and keeping Tomlin's promise. They're worried you won't be well enough now, but I guess they're trying to stack the deck for you. That stuff in the bags is *expensive*."

"If they keep being this amazing, I may never leave— What is it? What's wrong?" Kyra tried to sit up, grimaced, and lay back against her pillows. "*Damn* it..."

To keep her from trying again, Jack climbed onto the bed next to her. "I, uh..."

The concern on Kyra's face was only growing, which just made it worse.

"The transport... to Furya... it's..." The tears were trying to burst out of her. She struggled to hold them in, to find her voice. "It's... leaving from... *Helion*..."

"Oh *shit*, Jack..." Kyra put her left hand behind Jack's head and pulled her closer. "C'mere. My *shoulder's* not stabbed..."

It took a while before she managed to get her sobs under control.

When she was cried out, feeling hollow and quiet, Kyra didn't try to ask her what she was going to do. Jack would later realize that her sister understood exactly how lost she was already feeling and didn't want to make it any worse by putting her on the spot. They lay there for a while, neither one feeling any need to fill the silence. Finally, though, Kyra spoke.

"That was quite some hug Ewan was giving you last night as they were wheeling me out. He hasn't *tried* anything, has he?"

“What?” That surprised Jack out of her torpor. “No. It wasn’t like that. He’s nearly a decade older than me, anyway.”

“Good.” The look in Kyra’s eyes was far older than she was. “You just remember that, too. You look at him the way you looked at his older brother. And *he* was old enough to be your father, but I *know* that’s not what you were thinking about. I’ll bet you looked at *Riddick* the same way, didn’t you? You got a *thing* for older men, but I swear to God if anyone touches you—”

“He’d never.”

“He’d better not. I think he’s amazing, too, but he tries to mess with you and I *will* cut his dick off and make him eat it.”

“I *believe* you.” It didn’t surprise her, even a little, that it would be a sore point for Kyra, given what she’d been put through when *she* was still Jack’s age.

“Good. Don’t get me kicked outta here because I fucked up Cedric and Safiyya’s chance at having grandchildren.”

Now it was hard to keep a straight face. “I will keep it in my pants, I swear.”

An impish sparkle appeared in Kyra’s eyes. “Nuh uh. I *told* you, I’ll make him *eat* ‘it.’”

And just like that, Kyra had lifted all of the heaviness off of her. They didn’t laugh long, but the darkness had receded.

“We’ve got some time to kill,” Kyra said. “Wanna tell me more of Riddick’s story?”

Was it Riddick’s story? Well, if that was how Kyra thought of it... “Sure. You remember where we left off?”

“I was drifting in and out. Um... last thing I remember for sure was him showing Fry his eyes and you asking him ‘how do I get eyes like that?’”

“***Where the hell can I get eyes like that?***” Jack thought, but didn’t correct her sister.

She settled down next to Kyra, instead, and got comfortable.

“Yeah. He turned and looked at me and said, ‘you gotta kill a few people.’ Like he was talking about pulling a prank. And me, I was all bluster, trying to impress him, so I said ‘okay, I can *do* it!’”

In retrospect, part of her wished she’d been wrong about that.

“Yeah, now I remember, and he said... something about being sent to a slam...”

““Where they tell you you’ll never see daylight again,”” Jack said, dropping her voice to the lowest part of its register and making it a little growly. It wasn’t a bad imitation, if she did say so herself. ““You dig up a *doctor*, and you pay him twenty menthol *Kools* to do a surgical *shine* job on your eyeballs.””

It was fun, she thought, reproducing the way Riddick had said it, and his choices of which words to emphasize. She’d wondered for a moment if he was from Deckard’s World, himself, when he’d mentioned the Kools; one of her classmates had bragged about smoking that very brand, which was hundreds of years old.

“Damn, that sounds like it’d hurt.”

“Yeah.”

Jack had looked up the procedure while she was living with the al-Walids; it was dangerous and incredibly painful, and many of the people who had it done went blind. But in a place like “the Pit,” she supposed, the risk was a necessary one.

“I asked him if it was so he could see who was sneaking up on him in the dark, and he said ‘exactly!’ But that was when Fry ordered me to leave. Nobody wanted me to talk to him. I heard him call me a ‘cute kid,’ though...”

It suddenly struck her that Riddick had never once referred to her as a boy. Had he known, the whole time, what she really was? Had he been abetting her secret with even his choice of words? Up until he’d finally outed her, anyway...

“So he didn’t kill Zeke?” Kyra asked.

“Shazza sure thought he did, but he said it wasn’t him. He told Fry that there was something else we needed to worry about instead. I think Fry wanted to prove he was lying...”

The story spun out as they lay on the bed, side by side. She described Fry going into the hole, discovering that it opened into a cave system, and everyone waiting for her to come back... then the strange cries, sounding like Fry’s voice, that Jack had started to hear coming through the weird mineral formations nearby... and the terrifying discovery that *something* lived underground and had been on the verge of killing Fry before Jack had managed to get Imam and Johns to listen to the voice on the wind. Afterward, they had released Riddick and struck a deal with him, letting him join their party. But still refusing to allow Jack to talk to him.

“It was okay, though. They took us to this mining encampment they’d found, and there were all these cool buildings to explore.”

As the second-youngest of the survivors, exploration had been the official job she had been given by Fry, Johns, and Shazza. She wasn’t even supposed to look for anything specific; just go *looking*. As Audrey, she had long ago come to understand what that kind of instruction really meant: *The grown-ups are busy. Stay out of the way.*

Run along and play, little girl.

Only long practice had allowed her to hide her resentment at that. But, at least, as the *second*-youngest of the survivors, she hadn’t been entirely alone.

“Ali knew maybe six words of English, which was twice as much as *I* knew of Arabic, but we went off together to check out the houses. I found this broken pair of welding goggles in one of them, almost like the ones Riddick took from the *Hunter-Gratzner* when he escaped, and that’s when I got the idea that I could shave my head and imitate the biggest badass I’d ever seen...”

It had seemed so logical at the time. As if somehow a shaved head and goggles would transform her from a scrawny beanpole of a kid into... well, someone who didn’t have to worry about space station scum trying to proposition her or pull her into a dark corridor. Someone who wouldn’t wake up to find a filthy, sadistic merc straddling her with a knife to her throat...

I was so fucking naïve... It felt, at times, like ages had passed since then instead of roughly half a standard year.

It was the second time she’d gone through this part of the story with Kyra, and she found herself drawing in even more detail. Riddick, she told Kyra, had moved like a hunter... or a *tracker*... through the settlement, periodically pausing to unearth and examine objects that had, until then, been lost in the dust. Knowing what she did now but hadn’t understood then, she could see much more clearly what *he* had to have been seeing as he studied them.

“Everything was really old, like decades had gone by since anybody had touched them. And it wasn’t the kind of stuff people just left lying around, either. It was the kind of stuff that gets dropped, and nobody bothers to pick up, when there’s a panic on. He found a pair of eyeglasses with a cracked lens at one point, just lying in the middle of a road. The houses were like that, too. All the things you’d put away or take with you, if you were planning to leave, were still sitting out.”

“You don’t really think they left their with clothes on the hooks, photos on the shelves?”

In retrospect, she had seen Riddick’s tension rising, too, and the way an increasing level of caution and—battle readiness?—had begun to characterize the way he walked. He’d walked not like someone who was *looking* for a fight, but someone who *expected* one at any second.

Was *that* the walk she had begun imitating? Huh.

Jack was aware that she still wasn’t telling the story entirely truthfully. She had already recharacterized Paris as a mentor he’d never been, excusing away his retreat to the periphery of her story by drawing on the genuine truth that Shazza had essentially adopted her on the spot after the crash and had needed her more than ever once Zeke died. Now, though, she couldn’t quite tell the story right where Ali was concerned. She hadn’t managed to the first time through, either.

There had been a moment, when they had realized that Riddick was heading for a large building she would later remember with a shudder as the Coring Room, when mischievous glee had lit up both of their faces and they came to the unspoken mutual decision to get there first. Neither of them had quite understood the tension that was humming through Riddick’s frame by then, or why it might be a bad move to head for a building before he had cleared it. Jack understood now—and her story reflected that knowledge—that Riddick was following a trail, and that *he* knew the pandemonium that had overcome the settlement was leading straight to that building. It was the worst possible time to get ahead of him.

Or maybe part of Jack *had* realized. She hadn’t even tried to go inside, after all. Instead, she had wanted to climb up on top of the building to check out the odd, lumpy structure hidden beneath a tarp, but Ali had wanted to go into the building itself. He’d spotted a way in. She hadn’t known *that* at the time, hadn’t understood what he was saying to her in Arabic, although now, when she recalled his words after three months of immersion in his language, every word was horribly clear: *this way! There’s a hole in one of the panels that we can fit through!* He had shrugged and gone his own way when she’d shaken her head and pointed at the roof. She had never seen him—alive—again.

Even months later, the guilt of that was too gut-twistingly intense to explore. The therapists at the hospital would undoubtedly have told her that it was something she needed to come to terms with, needed to talk her way through. Maybe they were even right, but this wasn’t the time. She was telling Kyra the story, and that still-raw pain wasn’t something that would help distract her sister from *hers*. So the sense of blithe adventure that she’d briefly felt at the time prevailed. When Riddick pulled the tarp away from the roof, catching her spying on him, and had simply called to her to come with him—“You’re missing the party, come on!”—she had followed him without even a thought for Ali’s whereabouts.

Kyra didn’t need to hear just how much that had torn her up afterward. She didn’t need to know, either, that Riddick had seemed fully aware of where Ali must have gone but hadn’t seemed to particularly care, in spite of already knowing that the Coring Room was the most

dangerous place in the settlement. The story Jack was telling was meant to soothe and entertain, not wallow in guilt or expose the first moment she began to doubt her hero.

Kyra made it through Ali's death this time, all the way to the start of the eclipse, before she began to nod off. Jack kept the story going for a while longer, until her sister began to snore lightly, before she let the tale drop. She'd continue it later, probably restarting with the beginning of the eclipse again.

Climbing off of the bed, she went into the bathroom and washed up, erasing the last evidence of her crying jags. She'd have to figure something out, and soon.

But what was there to figure out, exactly? Her pathway to Furya had closed, barring a half-year wait and possibly a return to a world where she was actively being sought by the authorities. Unless she wanted to give into temptation and surrender her old life altogether, breaking her parents' hearts in the process, there was only one place left to go.

Back to Deckard's World. Back to her mother and Alvin the Asshole.

Back to being Audrey MacNamera. That *was* what she wanted, though, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

The chrono said it was thirteen a.m., the equivalent of mid-afternoon for one of Tangiers' morning-days. Nine hours until high noon, eight hours until Elsewhere's high tide, five hours until most people retired to sleep, and just a little over two hours until the waters of Elsewhere began to rise above sea level. She realized she was hungry. She'd have something to eat and then figure out which transports might take her back to Deckard's World, and if there were any she could take that didn't require getting back into Cryo. The prospect of ever being frozen again made her shudder.

Sebby raced over to her as soon as she entered the dining room. She spent a long moment cuddling him, walking over and peeking into the high tub he'd been playing in. It was completely empty now, aside from some bits of cricket exoskeleton and several of Sebby's own droppings.

What, she suddenly wondered, was she going to do about him when she left?

Maybe the Tomlin-Meziane family would want to keep him. Maybe, if Kyra stayed with them and pursued a military career, he'd be happy being her companion.

If she can, Jack thought with a shiver. They still needed to talk about whether their mere presence was putting a bulls-eye on everyone they loved here.

Jack was able to put together a simple but filling lunch using the fruits, breads, cheeses, and khlii set out beneath protective screens on the dining room table. A carafe of orange juice had also been left out. She suspected that someone had been thinking of her, specifically, although the quantity of food available hinted that other members of the family were inclined to stop by for snacks as well.

Sebby, of course, began demanding olives. He was happy to sample the other foods as well, spitting out the bread and dates but enthusiastically devouring goat cheese and khlii in addition to every olive he could snag. Jack was finishing up, and tidying up after both of them, when Ewan appeared in one of the doorways.

"I was hoping I'd find you here," he said.

His demeanor was different. This was not El Krim's grieving younger brother or the protective rescuer of the night before. He seemed agitated. He seemed, she realized, most

like the Ewan who had burst through her apartment door, alongside his father, with his gun drawn.

“What’s wrong?”

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes and releasing it. “You know how you were concerned about whether the envoy ever touched any of the *Matador* passengers? She’s about to get her chance. Usadden called me. The morgue still has the bodies of the eighteen people who died during the first high tide... but the Quintessa Corporation just filed paperwork to take custody of all of them.”

Fuck me running, Jack thought, going cold. “When?”

“He’s buying us time. He told them the bodies are scattered throughout the facility and he’ll need a full Tangiers day to get the paperwork in order. They’re still identifying victims from the blast, so he’s not actually lying. He’s told them the earliest they can do a pickup is fifteen am tomorrow.”

“Good,” Jack said. A familiar light sensation had filled her chest and her mind was racing. “Do you know the location of the morgue? Is it at the hospital downtown?”

Downtown was ten meters above sea level, she thought, her mind whirling through calculations.

“Yes.”

“Is it on the ground level? Higher? Lower?” It was happening to her again. She could see the path she needed to walk. The feeling was both exhilarating and terrifying.

“One level below ground level.”

The same level as the parking garage where she and Kyra had come out. Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

“Good. The tide in Elsewhere will leave downtown at roughly 4:15 pm. We’re leaving here at 3 pm. If you have any plans for this evening-day, cancel them. Damn it, I wish Kyra could be in on this—”

Fuck. She’d said her sister’s real name out loud. She glanced at Ewan. He didn’t look even a little confused.

I just confirmed something he already knew, she realized, heart lurching. How much did that mean he knew about *her*?

“I will endeavor to be a suitable proxy,” he told her, and she had the feeling he was hiding a smile.

Fuck it. Whether he thought of her as Tislilel, or Jack B. Badd, or P. Finch, or Jane Doe 7439, or her newest alias, Marianne Tepper, it didn’t matter. It didn’t even matter if he knew she was really Audrey MacNamera. He knew how to keep a secret. All that mattered was that he had her back.

“Good, because you and me... we’re about to pull a heist. And you’re gonna get to visit Elsewhere to help me do it.”

37.

Folding a Dali Cross

By the time Jack and Ewan left to go to the morgue, *everybody* had weighed in on the heist. Very few major changes had been made to Jack's plan, but there had been many good suggestions and improvements.

Including the idea that she should go back to dressing as a boy—but an *Amazigh* boy—for the day.

The entire family, as it turned out, had known who Kyra really was, and known as much about Jack as anyone on Helion Prime did, for as long as Tomlin himself had; Takama's intelligence-gathering had been the original source of that information. They had simply chosen to wait for the girls to tell them, or not, themselves. Before his death, Tomlin had also told *them* that, despite assumptions to the contrary, it had been Jack who had masterminded the hospital escape rather than Riddick. They had been better-known quantities to the Tomlin-Meziane family, the whole time, than they had ever realized.

Either way, she thought, the family's willingness to include her and Kyra in all of the discussions and decisions that affected them, rather than cutting them out and arbitrarily making decisions on their behalf, still astounded her. Maybe it was even *more* amazing, given what they had known all along. If only *any* adults had treated her this way before now...

That, she reflected, made it harder than ever to plan to move on. Going back to being Audrey MacNamera would mean going back to being talked *about*, rather than *to*, by all the adults in a room.

The dinner table conversation had been all about the heist. She and Ewan had both gone to bed early, taking mild sedatives to help them fall asleep so that they'd be fully rested when they woke up just two hours after noon. Kyra, although clearly wishing she could go too, had given the plan her stamp of approval.

Even *they* seemed to approve.

"I can't talk to you long," she had told them when she found herself suspended among the stars again. "I have to rest so I can do something difficult in a few hours."

That had only excited *their* curiosity. She had struggled to explain, until one of them seemed to come to a strange understanding.

It is hiding the shells of its lost broodmates from them, so they can't find the rest, it told the others. She felt comprehension, and endorsement, spread around her.

Now, suddenly, everybody seemed to understand *except* her. "Who are *they*?"

The demons of the darkness. The makers of the cages.

That sounded like something the being that hated her and Kyra might have said.

The — does not understand, they told her. She wasn't exactly sure what they called it. Not as much a name as a descriptor. Moribund? Something close to that. *Your shell looks like their shells, and it thinks that makes you one of them. But your five-shape is different. You*

*and your broodmates only just hatched into your five-shapes. Only you and one other larva are so developed. The others are barely growing, aside from the three from the smallest shells of all. But none of you will ever be like **them**.*

“I... are you talking about our bodies? Our physical shapes? When you say shells?”

Your shell is not your shape. Your shape perceives your shell, but your shell cannot perceive your shape. With each hatching you will perceive more, understand more. You are strong and growing so quickly. But we are patient, and you must be too. You will hatch into your six-shape in your due time. Do not try to make it happen too soon.

*And then... you will be ready to help **us**...*

They let her sleep then, and her dreams were full of strange attempts to understand what they had been telling her, to riddle out its meaning. Still, she woke feeling alert, ready to execute her plan.

Do I always start my crazy adventures at 2 in the “morning?” she found herself wondering, as she dressed herself like a teenaged Amazigh boy. This “morning” was bright, of course, the sun only beginning to come down from its hot zenith. She knew from the 44-hour library that people were awake at this hour, but not all that many. She and Ewan would arrive at the morgue while activity was still at its lowest ebb, and while the tide was still dropping away.

Sebby, who now had his cricket tub in their bedroom, climbed all over her for a moment, running his antennae over her strange new clothes, before returning to the bed to snuggle up to Kyra.

Ewan’s room, she had learned, was just two doors down the hall from hers and Kyra’s. He was emerging from it at almost the same moment that she emerged from theirs.

They went over the plan as they ate a simple breakfast, and then checked over their packs and the gear that Cedric had insisted they take with them in case anything went wrong. He had given them a comm with extremely powerful frequencies after dinner—“This thing can transmit through *solid rock*”—and had instructed Jack to take it halfway between ’verses. Then they had tested its signal, confirming that the part that was still in U1 could still connect to the comms system and reach him. Jack had taken it into the courtyard, isomorphed over to Elsewhere, and used it to call him in possibly the first comm conversation across universes. Before she and Ewan isomorphed into Elsewhere, they were to leave it behind in an agreed-upon, protected location in U1; if they ran into trouble and needed help getting back, they could return to that space in Elsewhere and use it to call Cedric. Kyra, when asked, had said that she felt strong enough to pull them back if she was taken to that location.

That was something Jack hadn’t even thought of when she had begun planning the heist. It made her very glad they were on her side and watching her back. She’d had to add one embellishment to that part of the plan, though, storing the comm in a plastic bag that “lived” in both universes and would shield it from harm in either direction. The outside of the bag, when she checked it over after breakfast, was wet on the Elsewhere side from the pre-noon high tide, but no water had gotten in.

Jack and Ewan went onto the roof, which turned out to have a beautiful rooftop garden, shortly before 3 pm to look over the city. Sunlight glittered on the waters of Elsewhere, which still overlaid most of New Marrakesh’s downtown streets. She described what she was seeing to Ewan, wishing she could show it to him. Technically, she could have, but she was

afraid to transition *him* halfway between worlds, lest she somehow infect him with threshold syndrome and make him a target, too.

Describing it would just have to do for the moment.

They spent the next almost-hour walking down toward those streets, which were still nearly completely deserted. The sun was still high in the sky and Jack was suddenly very glad that Ewan had shown her how to wind a proper Amazigh *tagelmust* around her head; it kept the glare away from her eyes in addition to partly obscuring her face.

“You make a surprisingly convincing boy,” Ewan told her as they walked.

“Really? How come?” Her hair under the *tagelmust* was still short, of course, just starting to grow longer than was considered a “boy cut” back on Deckard’s World. But other than that, and using bandages to flatten her small breasts against her chest when she had changed, she wasn’t sure what he found so convincing besides dressing in his years-old castoffs.

“I think it’s the way you walk. You don’t normally walk like this. It’s...”

“Oh! Yeah, I watched the way Riddick walked.” She hadn’t been consciously aware that she had slipped into her Riddick imitation, but she realized in that moment that she’d also dropped her speaking voice by a full octave.

The only one she hadn’t been able to fool with the imitation, she thought ruefully, had been Riddick himself.

“You really ran with him, didn’t you? Not as his hostage.” There was no judgment in Ewan’s voice, just curiosity.

“I was never his hostage. He was... nothing like you’d expect.”

“What *was* he like?”

That was, Jack thought, a good question. She remembered him luring Fry closer and closer to him, his voice a teasing purr, before lunging up out of his seat, held back just inches from her by his chains, to see if she would flinch. Testing her mettle, Jack thought, testing whether she’d be brave enough to face down the *real* threats on that treacherous, desolate world. She remembered him telling Shazza how they could use the skiff, which the New Australian woman had noted wasn’t a Star Jumper, to flag down the next transport that came through that node in the shipping lanes.

Stick out a thumb. Bound to get picked up... Somehow, she’d skipped telling Kyra that part of the story. She’d have to fill that in for her.

“Pretty self-contained, I guess,” she told Ewan. “I was trying to learn how to walk and talk like a guy well enough to fool everybody, so I followed him around for a while, figuring out how to act like *him*. He spent that whole time exploring the mining settlement, looking at everything the people’d left behind when they disappeared. He knew they’d all been killed, and told us so, way before we found any bodies.”

“So he was honest with you. Volunteered information.”

“Yeah. Johns—the merc who’d captured him—was lying to all of us the whole time about a *lot* of things, but Riddick never lied to us. Not once.” She found herself chuckling suddenly. “The only thing I know for a fact he hid from anybody is that I was a girl and he *knew* it the whole time.”

But, she realized, he’d tried to forewarn *her*. After Johns had tried to play his little master-and-dog game with Riddick—“You’re missing the party! C’mon, boy!”—and walked away, Riddick had repeated the same words to *her*... minus the “*boy*.”

“I can see that. I looked up his record.” Ewan smiled at her expression of surprise. “He appears to have a... *code*, I guess, for lack of a better word. Maybe even an *ethic*. There’s a pattern in who he does and doesn’t kill. And aside from some insinuations your former hospital has attempted to make about his treatment of *you*—”

“All of which are horse shit,” Jack found herself snapping.

That seemed to amuse Ewan. He grinned and shook his head. “Aside from them, all the evidence points to the conclusion that you were probably quite safe around him. Given what I’ve read in the declassified portions of the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash story, you may have even been far safer *with* him than away from him.”

“He’s the reason I’m still alive,” Jack told him. “He saved my life several times. Even times when he could’ve just let me die and nobody would’ve blamed him, and things probably would’ve been easier for him if he had.”

“Then he truly was a friend,” Ewan agreed, before changing the subject. “How’s the water level on the other side?”

“Dropping, but the lower level of the hospital will still be flooded. We’ve got time to get into position.”

In the meantime, they took the comm to its designated location, a private garden grotto that Cedric had booked for the family’s exclusive use for the next two days. Jack tethered its bag to a bench in the garden, making sure that the tether was tightly knotted and straddled universes as well. If they needed to take the comm to another location and still keep it protected from Elsewhere’s waters, they could do so. There were no cameras in the space, hinting at one of the ways the grotto was probably used. No one and nothing would see what happened next.

“It’s time,” Jack told Ewan, turning to him.

He took a deep breath, just a tiny hint of nervousness in his eyes. “I’m ready.”

There was sand beneath their feet on the other side; it would be a smooth transition. Jack stepped closer and put her arms around Ewan, stretching her senses to encompass his shape

—*his shell?*—

—and drawing both of them, gently, carefully, into Elsewhere, letting one world fade away and the other take its place. She felt his heart speed up against her ear.

“*Baraka...*”

Now, for the first time, Ewan would be able to see the things she had described to him, the world on the other side of a threshold few could cross. He would see the rolling surf, still retreating from the sloping plain of sand and rock that corresponded with New Marrakesh’s downtown. Off to the northwest, the sun glittered on the hull of the *Scarlet Matador*, marking the location of the devastated spaceport. Nearer...

She took her binoculars out of her pack and focused on the area where the hospital building, in U1, was visible to her as a faint outline. Something had begun emerging from the water. This was going to be creepy as *fuck*.

“C’mon,” she said to Ewan, hoping he wouldn’t be too horrified when he saw it, too.

They had almost reached the morgue when he gasped beside her, an appalled look on his face.

The bodies floated in the air, at different levels above the glistening sand, all eighteen of them. Five appeared to be hovering vertically, toes just inches above the beach, while the rest were perfectly horizontal. Back in U1, she knew, they were resting in cold lockers in multiple rooms, draped by shrouds and tagged with identifying information. On the Elsewhere side, they were undraped, untagged... and nauseatingly putrescent. Bone showed in many places where passing fish had nibbled during high tides. Her cousin Joey would have *loved* a horror vid with visuals like these... as long as he couldn't *smell* them. Jack suddenly wished she'd thought to bring nose plugs. Next to her, Ewan made a retching sound.

"What the hell *happened* to them?" he asked. "They're supposed to be refrigerated!"

"They are," Jack told him. "On the U1 side. Over here, they've been exposed to the elements for the last two and a half weeks." She shifted her vision enough to see what they looked like in U1. The walls of the cold lockers blocked her view of most of them, but five were hanging from hooks in a separate room, shrouded in plastic wrappings. "They look frozen over there. I think someone's been trying to stop the decay with no idea why it's progressing so quickly."

She hadn't expected it to be this bad, but she really should have. Fortunately, the thought of touching corpses had already been bad enough; she'd brought two pairs of thick rubber gloves, one sized for her hands and one for Ewan's, with her. Ewan, she knew, was carrying eighteen proper white funeral shrouds in his pack.

Regardless of his beliefs or hers, he'd told her, the bodies should be treated in a way that would respect their lost owners, whatever their creeds had been. He'd acquired a clandestine copy of the *Matador's* passenger manifest and had the religious affiliations of every passenger who had drowned. He knew which prayers to say over them if they were Muslim, or Christian, or Jewish, or even, in two cases, Buddhist or Hindu, and intended to send them on their way properly upon the shores of Elsewhere, once Jack stole all of them from the morgue of U1.

So let's do it already...

One by one, trying to breathe through her mouth against the terrible stench of decay, Jack reached out and put her gloved hands on each body, telling Ewan the name on its tag before pulling it the rest of the way into Elsewhere. The moment it was released from U1's hold, it fell to the wet sand, now half-frozen and—mostly—odorless. The flesh cratered in places where parts that had remained whole in U1 sagged over the gruesome cavities that had developed in Elsewhere.

I did wonder what would happen if a shark from Elsewhere tried to make a meal out of me... The answer was far more disturbing than she'd expected.

It took an hour. An hour she knew she would desperately want to forget forever. She would, she thought, probably have nightmares about this day for a long time.

Jack did the hanging bodies last, since their disappearances would be the easiest to notice. The last of *them* tried to topple onto her, which gave her a few really bad moments while Ewan held her, murmuring soothingly and stroking her shuddering back.

He had followed her as she worked, draping each body in a shroud, arranging them to face eastward if they were Muslim, and speaking prayers in different languages—Arabic, Latin, English, Hebrew, Khmer, or Hindi—over them depending on which name she had given him for each one. As he was finishing with the last ones, Jack walked over to a strange

multicolored cube that hovered, untethered, in part of the space that the morgue occupied in U1.

Their personal effects, she realized as she got closer. *All stuffed into a compartment on the other side...*

Those definitely had to go, too.

A moment later, all of those items had fallen and scattered onto the beach of Elsewhere. Clothes, that had probably been stuffed in now-empty plastic pouches in U1; jewelry; wallets and purses; corroded comms and chronos; all the little things that eighteen people had had with them first in cryo and then in the hospital, before they had been betrayed by the Quintessa Corporation and left to die horrible deaths...

*Quintessa can't have **any** of it.*

Had any other artifacts been left behind? There didn't appear to be anything else straddling 'verses in or around the hospital... aside from a pair of expensive-looking earrings and a large wad of cash she spotted and recovered from within an orderly's nearby locker and dropped onto the sand. She pulled out her binoculars from her pack again, training them on the spaces occupied by first Mansour Plaza and then Othman Tower. Nothing appeared to float incongruously in those spaces. She would take her higher-powered telescope to the roof of the Meziane house to verify it when they got back, but she was almost certain she'd gotten everything. The Quintessa Corporation wouldn't be able to analyze any of the physical objects that had been straddling universes. Not now.

Except, she suddenly realized, her heart sinking, one *very large* one...

"Fuck. I have to move the *Scarlet Matador*," she groaned.

It was nearly a two-hour walk across the drying sand.

"Are you *up* for this?" Ewan asked as they hiked closer and closer. "Takama and Dihya have both talked about how you were almost completely wiped out from transitioning those two shuttles back and forth. I don't want you getting hurt."

"I transitioned them really fast," Jack said, aware that she was whistling in the dark. "I'm going to do this one slowly. Pull it over here a little at a time. It'll help that it's already halfway *in* Elsewhere."

"It's *huge*, though."

"I can't leave it connected to U1. Not now. You're sure the cryo-tubes were returned to it?" Tracking down nearly two hundred cryo-tubes felt like it would be a far more daunting task than moving the ship.

"That's what the reports said," he told her. "Once the tubes were vacated, they were returned to the ship to be quarantined with the rest of its contents. The logs said nobody has entered since. I'm sure the Quintessa Corporation is planning on confiscating it next, though."

"Bringing me back to my point," Jack told him. "I... this is crazy, and I could be dead wrong about it, but I don't think they *know* what's in U322A. Your brother, when he was talking to the flight crew back when they first called him... he said that this was the first Level Five Incident on that Star Jump. If we cut them off from accessing anything directly connected to Elsewhere, I don't think they can get to it on their own. Not without actually using an Isomorph Drive to open a new path."

"That's a lot of supposition," Ewan observed.

“Maybe. But at least I’m not gonna make it any easier for them.” She wished she could make it not merely difficult but painful for them, after all the pain they’d inflicted on others.

“Just promise me that you’ll stop if it gets to be too much.”

She promised, but she wasn’t sure he believed her. She wasn’t sure *she* believed her, either.

She paused, briefly, to check whether her Ghost Codes still worked with the ship. Once her tablet confirmed the connection—and she had to briefly make it straddle ’verses to get the connection strong enough—she sent a few instructions to the ship before they entered the range of its now-deactivated exterior sensors. None of the cameras that could still see into Elsewhere would record anything unusual, and any cameras covering the ship in U1 were irrelevant.

It was just a few hours over eleven Tangiers Prime days since the *Scarlet Matador* had touched down. On the U1 side, it looked almost pristine... at least, on the side facing away from the shuttle explosion. In Elsewhere, seaweed coated many of its surfaces and barnacles had begun to grow. In its shade, creatures that looked eerily like Cambrian fossils Jack had once seen in a museum rested and trundled through the sand. Some of the metal surfaces were beginning to corrode. In a few years, Jack thought, the *Matador* would just be a strange reef on the beach of Elsewhere, sinking into the sand more each time the tide came through until it settled against rock... once it was released from the anchors and platforms of U1.

She put her hand on one of the struts and closed her eyes, feeling it, feeling its existence in both universes, feeling its shape—

—*its shell, this is only an empty shell, a shape is so much more...*—

—and sensing its boundaries.

She began to call it, and everything within it, home.

Slowly, little by little, she broke down the hold that U1 had on the massive spacecraft, aware that Ewan had moved to stand close behind her at some point, chest against her back, and had his arm around her waist. Bit by bit, she pulled it more and more of the way into Elsewhere, letting it begin to fade from the other ’verse altogether.

Except for one part. One part refused to budge, refused to let go of the other ’verse. One part was obstinately staying anchored.

She opened her eyes, focusing on what was happening in U1, aware that she was leaning back against Ewan and he had both arms around her now.

Alarms were sounding in that other world. People in ground crew gear and security uniforms were running toward the landing site, pointing and shouting. She could see a figure in flowing white garments racing with them—

The envoy. And around her, Jack could see, there was darkness. Some terrible darkness that inhabited the same space the envoy did, hidden by her white garments and the fact that human eyes weren’t made to see such hideous abysses in the fabric of reality...

The envoy was staring at one part of the *Matador* as she ran.

The rest, Jack felt as a small shockwave passed through her, had just finished crossing the threshold into Elsewhere. Back in U1, the anchors dropped to the ground with loud metallic crashes. Only one thing remained suspended in that space: a smallish metal box.

A box that refused to relinquish its grip on U1.

Her breath quickening, Jack focused all of her attention and energy on it, willing it to cross from U1 to Elsewhere—

—*Is it already in Elsewhere?*—

—and vanish from the other world. It resisted, feeling inert and far too dense, too complex, for something as simple as a *cube*...

She shifted her focus, pushing at it, willing it to relinquish its connection to U1, no matter where else it was...

Little larva, what are you doing?

The envoy was hurrying toward it, one hand outstretched.

I gotta get it out of there before she gets to it...

No! they cried out in her head. *You are not ready!*

She could feel it slowly, grudgingly beginning to shift, its ties to U1 almost imperceptibly thinning.

Little larva, you must stop! Stop now!

“Tislilel, what in God’s name...?” Ewan gasped at the same moment, echoing *them* without knowing. “*Stop! Stop now!*”

She couldn’t. Not yet. She was almost there. She couldn’t let the envoy reach it... She almost had it...

With a final, aggressive thrust, Jack shoved hard at the box with her mind and felt something snap, lashing back at her and into her. Blinding pain bloomed in her head.

In U1, the box vanished, startling a horrified scream out of the envoy.

Darkness engulfed Jack.

38.

The Bell That Must Not Ring

Pain.

There was nothing but pain for a time. Her universe was made of it.

Little larva, can you hear us? Little larva, come back to us...

She wanted to tell them to leave her alone, but she couldn't make words.

Little larva, do not die. Come back to us...

They weren't going to leave her alone. Finally she found just enough strength to answer.

"Not dying..." she mumbled. "Just... trying to fucking *sleep*..."

"That's my girl," a man's deep, velvety voice said from somewhere outside of the darkness. "You rest, *a tafat-iw*. I have you. I'll keep you safe..."

Riddick? No. The voice was different, just as deep but not quite as rough. With a hint of an accent Riddick didn't have...

Ewan. That was the name that went with the voice. Ewan Zdan...

We told you not to do that, little larva. You could have died.

"Had... to... move it..."

We do not understand how you accomplished that and lived. It should not have been possible. You are still so small.

The stars were far too bright to look at. She felt *them* surrounding her, peering at her with eyes that weren't eyes, seeing her in some way she struggled to comprehend.

You almost broke your five-shape. Do not try to do anything like that again until you have hatched.

"Do what?" she managed to ask, also managing to limit her words to the dream space. She was vaguely aware that her body—her shell—was being held in someone's arms. Ewan's?

They tried to explain, but she didn't understand. She could barely focus. They showed her mind-bending shapes, things that normally would have had her fleeing in terror, but she wasn't even strong enough—or scared enough—to look away. Emotion was a blank. Emotion needed energy, and she had none.

A cube, she thought after they showed her yet another iteration. *A sealed cube with no way in or out...*

Broken now.

It means nothing. The ...Moribund's...? voice was like angry distant thunder.

It means everything.

She was already lost. What use is breaking an empty box? Be done with this filth.

She hatched this larva and its broodmates. They are not filth. They are hope. This little one might even be the One.

One reckless trick and you would fall at its nethers. You lie to yourselves. We will be your "One." You waste your time. We do not need this filth's help to rise. We will break the

'verse itself...

And have you yet? Go. You have no place among us.

If Jack were strong enough to care, she thought, she might have been afraid. But she felt almost as if she was back in the isolation ward, cocooned against herself, cut off from sense and emotion. Even the poisonous rage of the one entity—

She needed to call them *something* better than that.

“Do you have names?” she asked the darkness. “What are all of you called?”

Names are delimiters, the Moribund snarled. Jack wondered if it knew what the others called it.

Our names were stolen, they whispered.

“Can I give you one? I need something to call you.”

She sensed disgust from the one hateful “voice” in the darkness, but curiosity from the others.

“What about...” The word, which had been in her head since the morning, floated back. “Apeiros?”

Apeiros... infinite... She could feel them mulling it over. It is an interesting choice. You may see deeper than you know. A name that means hope. Yes, little larva, you may call us this.

Fools. All of you. Falling over a tiny piece of filth...

Little by little, the pain was receding. The stars were no longer blinding. Jack could feel herself, not floating anymore, but lying down on something warm. She could hear a soft double-rhythm pulling at her.

Go, little larva. You can wake to your five-space now. You will not die...

She opened her eyes.

There was still daylight, but the light level had dropped considerably. Even so, it felt almost too bright to keep her eyes open, and it set her head pounding again. She was resting in Ewan’s lap, head on his chest, his heartbeat in her ear. He was sitting in the sand, legs stretched out and his back leaning against a boulder, gazing out over the landscape of Elsewhere. The tide, although still several kilometers away, had begun rolling back in and the sun, mostly hidden by the deep grayish blue of pregnant storm clouds, was halfway to the horizon. Lightning flickered over the waters off to the southwest.

An unknotted string hung in the air nearby, marking the spot where Jack had tethered the special comm to a bench in U1. Ewan had carried her back to the location of the grotto.

He had the comm in one hand, and his other arm was wrapped around her. Their packs lay beside them in the sand. His was open and a smaller version of his field kit was out; several bloodstained wipes were lying crumpled beside it along with a penlight and a portable diagnostic.

He glanced down at her and blinked, his eyes widening a little. “*Baraka*. Oh, thank God. Tislilel? Are you back with me?”

“Mmm-hmm...”

“I need you to say a little more than that, *tahbibt-iw*. Can you, for me?”

“Did I pass out?” Jack managed to ask.

“You did. Your nose started bleeding right before you collapsed, and for a while, one of your pupils was dilated. You’ve been unconscious for the last three hours while I brought you

back here. I was afraid you might have given yourself an aneurysm.”

“Kinda felt like I did... fuck, my head hurts... I felt like I split it open when I pushed that damned box out...”

“Box?” Ewan gave her a quizzical frown.

“Inside the ship. I think... I think I broke open an apeirochoron.”

“Unless that’s just the name of some cerebral blood vessel I’ve forgotten about, I don’t know what that means.”

She didn’t really have words for what she was trying to tell him... or if she did, she couldn’t put them together. She couldn’t paint the air with shapes made out of light, *Apeiros* style, to try to show him, either. But that was okay. Maybe one day...

Maybe one day *what*, exactly? She felt like she was trying to focus in eight directions at once, some of which were impossible. Her thoughts were looping... looping...

“Please don’t go back to sleep, Tislilel. Not yet.”

“Sorry...” She wanted to tell him that she’d gone too far, that she should have listened to him, and to *them*, and stopped. But she’d been incapable of doing so at the time, and even now that was hard to admit. It had been the act of a child, the child she kept telling herself she no longer was. She changed the subject. Slightly. “I saw the envoy. She was at the spaceport. And I got a better look at what she’s connected to. Darkness. She wears all white, but she’s all darkness.”

An infinite darkness that even the *Apeiros* seemed to fear...

The demons of the dark... What would look like a demon to one of *them*?

“Stay awake, Tislilel. No sleeping. Did she see you?”

“No. Remember how I used my tablet for a few minutes before we got close to the ship?”

“I do, yes.”

“I turned off the ship’s outside cameras. My codes were still good. Nobody saw us walk up, in either ’verse.”

Ewan laughed softly. “Well played. So you could see her in U1, but she couldn’t look into Elsewhere to see either of us. And if they were recording the camera feeds from the ship itself...”

“We never appeared on them before they stopped.”

“That’s a relief. I’m curious... do you play chess?”

Jack wondered if he really was curious, or just trying to keep her talking, coherent, and awake. “My dad was gonna teach me, but when my parents started fighting, and after the divorce, he never had time.”

“You should learn it. You have the right strategic mind for it.”

“I dunno. Half the time I feel like it doesn’t tell *me* the plan until it’s time to do it.” She was, slowly, having an easier time staying focused on the moment at hand. The tide would be rising soon. “What time is it?”

“Almost thirteen pm.” He quirked a smile at her. “We’ve missed lunch. Not that I had any kind of appetite until now. How about you? Are you feeling at all hungry?”

“Yeah, but... also queasy. Is that bad?”

“Possibly. Do you want to try to drink some water? I can give you something for your headache if you think you can keep it down.”

Until then, Jack hadn't noticed how thirsty she was. "Yes, please. Or if you have anything with caffeine—"

"Absolutely not. Not until I know for certain you don't have a brain injury."

"Spoilsport..."

"I'm *serious*, Tislilel. No caffeine until I say it's safe."

"*Fine*... any orange juice?"

"Yes, that you can have. And I do, indeed, have some."

He brought out a small bottle of juice for her, making her use the first few sips to take some pills for her headache. To their mutual relief, her nausea began to ease, and he let her have some of the savory crackers he'd also brought, flavored with spices she'd never known before New Marrakesh.

"These are so good," Jack sighed, leaning her head against his shoulder. "Now I'm *really* getting hungry."

"It might be time for us to go, then. Especially with that rain approaching. I was just about to call for help when you began mumbling actual words." He stroked her cheek with his fingertips. "You have no idea what a relief it was to hear you say 'trying to fucking sleep...'"

He had done an amazing imitation of her accent. She found herself laughing. *Ow*.

"My head does still hurt," she admitted, "but not nearly as bad. I think I can pull us back into U1, though."

"Now you have me in a quandary," Ewan sighed. "I don't want to overtax you after everything you've already done, and especially not before I can get a good scan of your hard little head. But the alternative is dragging your sister out of bed, while *she's* still healing, to come down here to bring us across. So you have to promise me..."

He leaned his head closer to hers, locking his eyes with hers, his expression simultaneously fiercely serious and gently teasing. The palm of his hand, where it rested on her cheek, made her skin tingle.

"...that *this* time, you *really will* stop if it becomes too much." A hint of a genuine plea appeared on his face. "Please don't scare me like that again."

He thought I might be dying, too. At the time, it had just felt like a strange tug of war game that she'd desperately needed to win. Until the tension had abruptly *snapped* and its full power ricocheted back against her. She'd *won*, but she still wasn't sure of the cost. What if she really *had* given herself brain damage?

She lifted her hand and rested it on his cheek, feeling smooth skin and rough stubble under her palm, the muscles over his cheekbone and the hollow below, the strong line of his jaw. "I promise. I really, *truly* promise."

His eyes weren't *olive* green, she found herself thinking. More a sea green, a few shades paler, and slightly bluer, than hers, which her father had called "moss green," her mother had called "jade green," and her cousins, always looking for creative ways to be rude, had called "pond scum green." His sea green, she mused, was the loveliest shade she'd ever seen.

For a long, still moment, their eyes stayed locked. Jack found she was intensely aware of every point of contact between their bodies, all of which seemed to almost hum with energy. Then a look of alarm flickered over his face and he pulled away, just a little. A second later, a roguish—but somehow forced—grin appeared as he drew back even more. "In that case, I

will accept your invitation to return to U1. I've made sure we're in a clear space of the garden *Ababat*—sorry, my father—rented.”

“How'd you manage that?” Jack asked, still recovering from the moment herself as he moved her off of his lap—the brief touch of his hands on her waist sending powerful shocks coursing through her—and stood up.

He picked up the plastic bag that had held the comm, dropping the tether inside it at the same time. “I flapped it around the space to make sure it didn't hit anything on the other side. Since it's in both worlds.”

“*Smart*,” Jack laughed, climbing unsteadily to her feet. This time, laughing didn't make her head hurt quite so much.

“I have my moments,” he agreed as he helped her up and began reassembling their packs. She noticed that he was careful not to let their bodies come into contact again.

It made the transition back a little awkward, but he was willing to at least let her hold his hands to do it. A moment later, they were surrounded by a garden that she realized would have been a terribly romantic setting if they weren't suddenly so busy hiding from each other.

A lesser man, she mused, would have tried to kiss her. Would she have wanted him to quite so desperately if he'd *been* a lesser man?

If I were even just five years older... she thought, filled with a sense of terrible loss. He would never, *ever* act on what she was certain both of them had suddenly been feeling. Part of her, the part that still wanted to try to eat an entire bucket of Halloween candy in one sitting, the part that knew and didn't *care* that some of the things she craved might be bad for her, the part that always convinced itself that she was more of an adult the less she acted like one—the part of her that had nearly shattered her brain over a sealed box just hours earlier—was tempted to try to get him to do so anyway. Every cell of her body was hungry for something she couldn't name or explain but was certain he could give her. But—

It would break him. It would break them both. She didn't *want* to know that, but she knew it.

And then, she admitted to herself and had to swallow back a laugh, *Kyra would cut his dick off and make him eat it*.

Maybe, she supposed as she rewound the *tagelmust* around her head, she could return to Tangiers Prime when she was legally an adult. Maybe then, if Ewan hadn't already married and settled down, there would be a space for these feelings...

“So,” he asked behind her, the cheerful tone in his voice sounding just a little bit forced, “do you feel up to making the trek back home?”

Jack shouldered her pack and nodded, slipping back into her teenage boy persona. Hopefully that'd help defuse the moment further. “Let's do it,” she said in her boy voice, an octave below normal.

The rented grotto was part of a garden complex that could be hired for lunches and dinners, for parties and gatherings. Although the lunch hours had already passed, many of the parties were only just breaking up. Well-dressed diners and revelers were departing, most giving Jack and Ewan askance looks as they emerged from *their* grotto and locked its gate behind them. They *did* rather look like a pair of disheveled ruffians, Jack thought. She was glad Ewan had already cleaned up her nosebleed.

*I know what they all think **he's** been doing... with a **boy**,* she thought, hiding the snicker that bubbled up. Even a few hours ago, she could have shared the joke with him. Not now.

While he stayed close to her as they walked, and she could feel him watching her the whole time for signs that she was unwell, he didn't touch her. The gulf suddenly between them felt miles wide. But any time she glanced his way, she saw only concern. Periodically, he tried to use the special comm to make a call, but it never seemed to go through, even after she pulled it all the way back into U1 for him.

Along the route back up into the Rif, Jack heard snatches of conversation and rumor about some kind of new security incident at the spaceport. Nobody was sure, exactly, what had happened out there, but the place was in full lockdown and the local comms system was overloaded. She was suddenly glad that the garden Cedric had chosen was so far away from the perimeters that had gone up around the spaceport... and might soon go up around the hospital. It was even outside of the checkpoints she and Kyra had encountered the last time they'd traveled downtown, partway up into the heights.

And Ewan had had to haul her unconscious ass that whole distance, she realized. Almost fifteen kilometers and up several hills...

"I'm really hoping that carrying my dead weight all that way didn't throw out your back or anything," she told him.

"It was torture," he said with an almost-easy smile. "You weigh *nearly* as much as my boot camp combat load."

"This is what you guys get for feeding me," she teased back, feeling more relaxed—more like things were normal—with each passing minute.

"You *do* eat enormous quantities. Not *quite* your weight in crickets, though... I could swear I thought it was going to rain soon," Ewan said as they crested a switchback and looked down over the city and sea below them. To the west, the sky was mostly clear, the sun dropping closer to the horizon. Her eyes were handling the increased light level better, she realized.

"Not in *this* universe," Jack reminded him. No one was around to hear.

"Ah. Yes. Of course." Ewan's smile became rueful. "Is it raining over there yet?"

Jack shifted her vision to look into the darkening world of Elsewhere. "Looks like it's gonna storm pretty hard there soon. Good thing we didn't wait around on that side."

"It's a beautiful place," Ewan remarked. "So untouched by humans until now. And yet habitable..."

"Pretty weird, huh?" Jack agreed as she followed his train of thought. "No terraforming required."

"I suppose every planet has a universe where that's true," he mused, gazing out over the more familiar landscape of U1's New Marrakesh.

"Yeah. Back when I was first learning about this stuff, I asked my teacher why we'd gone into space at all if we could've just moved to other Earths that hadn't been polluted to death. He didn't know why."

"Because colonization is about control," Ewan said after a pensive moment. "The concessions and payments that had to be made, by so many societies, to gain access to ships to leave Earth... the treaties they had to sign, the rights they had to sell away... would have

been unnecessary if all one had needed to do, to reach a new world, was take a beautiful girl's hand—”

He stopped himself then, turning his head away, but not before she saw the sudden, stricken look that passed over his face.

Jack made herself look away, too. The instant of vulnerability she'd seen in his eyes was unnerving, almost negating the thrill of hearing him call her *beautiful*. “Oh look,” she said after an awkward minute, pointing at the hospital. Its base practically sparkled with flashing blue lights. “I think someone discovered our handiwork.”

“I think you're right.” Ewan grinned, his expression relaxing again. “Fortunately, Usadden had this evening-day off and instructed the noon shift to complete an inventory of the *Matador* bodies an hour before we were set to arrive. In preparation for turning them over to the Quintessa Corporation tomorrow, of course. So they were fully accounted for long after he left the morgue at the end of the morning-day. And *he* has an iron-clad alibi for this afternoon.”

“Where's he been while we've been doing crime?”

“Attending a conference hosted by the President of the City Council,” Ewan told her, the sparkle back in his eyes. “Discussing, of all things, how to improve the quarantine protocols for incoming Star Jumpers.”

“That,” Jack laughed, “*is* a damned good alibi.”

The silence between them as they hiked the rest of the way still wasn't entirely comfortable, but it was slowly getting there. They were still two blocks away from home, and phantom thunder had begun to growl overhead in Elsewhere, when Cedric, Safiyya, Takama, and Izil hurried out to meet them.

“Where have you two been?” Takama demanded. “Dihya's been upset for hours, saying Tislilel was hurt!”

Fuck, Jack thought, guilt knotting her stomach. *Of course she knew...* She hoped the *Apeiros* hadn't begun badgering her sister again.

“Right after she started,” Cedric added, “we got word that the spaceport was under lockdown. What did you two do?”

Jack could feel even more guilt rising within her, and the sudden fear that they might never trust one of her plans, or her, again.

“Tislilel realized that it wouldn't matter what else we took away from the Quintessa Corporation if they still had the *Scarlet Matador*,” Ewan told them. “But pulling that into Elsewhere turned out to be more difficult than she expected. Some part of it—you called it an ‘apeirochoron,’ is that right?—resisted. Pulling it through knocked her out.”

But she hadn't pulled it through, she thought. It had already been *in* Elsewhere. She'd had to force it *out* of U1—

“And you *allowed* this?” Safiyya's face, in that moment, looked almost exactly like her mother's when she'd been up to no good with her cousins.

“He was yelling at me to stop,” Jack volunteered, some of Audrey's I'm-so-sorry-please-forgive-me seeping into her voice. “I... didn't.”

“I want her to have a proper CT scan,” Ewan added. “We can use the bruise she already has on her forehead as the excuse.”

“I will arrange it,” Takama said, sighing. “Right now, we had better let Dihya have a look at her so *she* can calm down and get back to resting.”

“Did you try to call us at all?” Izil asked. “The comms have been spotty since the lockdown was announced. We tried a few times, but got no answer.”

“It took almost three hours to get from the spaceport to the garden,” Ewan sighed. “But yes, I did try. Several times. No connection.”

“Why did it take so long?” Safiyya asked, frowning again at her son.

“He had to carry me the whole way,” Jack told them. “I was out cold.”

Big mistake. Takama and Safiyya began fussing over her, their arms around her as they shepherded her toward the house. Ewan had fallen back and was talking softly to Cedric and Izil, too softly for Jack to hear what they were saying.

“It’s done, though,” she told both women, struggling to find a way to get back to a sense of achievement. “Everything that had a connection to Elsewhere in the hospital and the spaceport is all the way in Elsewhere now. You should’ve heard the envoy *scream* when the ship disappeared...”

“I am glad you succeeded,” Takama said, her voice still a little stern. “Now, though, you are on bed rest until I take you for the scan, and after that until the physician says otherwise. Understood? You may be very good at ‘heists,’ but there will be no more for a while.”

Kyra and Sebby were both agitated when Jack entered the bedroom.

“Oh thank *fuck*,” Kyra muttered, sagging against her pillows. She looked exhausted, sending another pang of intense guilt through Jack. Sebby, meanwhile, practically launched himself across the room and wouldn’t stop touching Jack’s face with his antennae.

Later, while Jack and Kyra rested, Ewan appeared with Tafrara by his side to change Kyra’s bandages and IV bags. He seemed more himself, bantering with both of them in an easy way, telling Kyra that, next morning-day, she would be allowed to get up and begin walking. They had brought a very late lunch with them, which Jack dug into ravenously, and he’d even teased her about how moving starships must be hungry work.

Those words echoed through her, trying to connect to... something... but failing.

It was only much later that Jack realized that, for the remainder of her stay on Tangiers Prime, Ewan made it a point to never be alone with her again.

Except once.

39.

Unquantified, Unseen, Unmasked

The good thing about telling Kyra the story of the eclipse, Jack thought to herself, was that she was increasingly sure whatever head trauma she might have wasn't affecting her memory. The bad thing about it was realizing how often she was lying to her sister about just what had really happened.

Most of her lies, she was aware, were about Riddick. About his thoughts and motivations. About the depth of their emotional connection. In truth, Jack still wasn't sure what he had thought of his little copycat, whether she'd amused or annoyed him. But in the story she told Kyra—who needed Riddick to be the hero and needed to go on believing that he had metaphorically vanquished Red Roger for her—their friendship had bloomed early and was never in doubt.

There *were* small things he'd done in their interactions that had pointed to genuine kindness. When they had been sitting in the back of the sand cat, for instance, and she'd been doing her best Riddick impression for him, he had given her the tiniest hint of a smile... and then pointed. When she followed the direction of his finger, she'd spotted the approaching skeletal remains of a massive creature. Shazza, in her haste, was about to drive through it without alerting anyone. Riddick's silent warning allowed her to duck in time.

For Kyra's sake, she played up that kindness and removed any ambiguity about his actions and their motives. For the story she told to soothe her sister, he was unfailingly kind to, and protective of, her.

Elsewhere's lightning was strobing their room and its thunder growled and roared almost nonstop as they lay in bed and Jack continued the story. If they'd been on that side of the threshold, they would have been completely soaked. Both of them were enjoying the show, though; no window had ever provided as spectacular a view of a storm as their window between 'verses.

"We pulled the sand cat up to the crash ship—that's what we were all calling it, nobody wanted to waste their time calling it the *Hunter-Gratzner* or anything—and most everybody jumped off to grab supplies and power cells and things, to load into the back. Shazza stayed in the driver's seat and kept it idling so that we could move the second everything was loaded up. But it was getting darker and darker. The rings were starting to come between us and the suns. I thought, maybe, if I got all the dirt off of the solar collector's dome, there might still be enough light, so I started wiping at it like crazy with one of my shirts..."

"Why didn't they have backup power for it?" Kyra asked. "Even just a *battery*?"

"They really should've. Hell, they should've had a port where we could have plugged in one of the power cells, or something." Jack was still peeved about the sand cat, and the suggestion she'd *tried* to make, later on, that had been completely ignored. She still thought

it would have worked. “But they didn’t *know* there’d ever be a sunset on their planet, not until it was too late, so probably somebody was just too cheap to add that.”

Her father had often railed against customers who were too cheap to pay for protective features they were obstinately convinced they’d never need, especially when they blamed him, later on, for their absence. *Deciding to drive without insurance* was what he’d called it. The psychiatric hospital on Helion Prime, as it had turned out, had been among those customers. At least, she thought, she and Kyra had personally benefited from *that* bout of short-sightedness. On a planet of *almost* eternal sunlight, that same kind of skinflint incaution had cost almost everyone their lives.

“I got that dome *so* clean, but once the rings were over *both* of the suns, the collector just stopped turning. The sand cat was *dead*. The temperature dropped real fast too, by about ten degrees. I could still kind of see the suns behind the rings... a big red blob and a smaller yellow blob... but it had gotten so dark. And then the noises started.”

“Noises?” Kyra snickered. “C’mon, you can be more specific than that.”

“Animal noises,” Jack said, hearing them again in her head. “Growls, cries... sounds I’d heard faintly the whole time we’d been at the crash ship, but I’d thought it was just the wind until after Fry almost got taken. But now they were really loud. And then...”

It had been, she told Kyra, picking through her words carefully as she tried to capture the terrifying beauty of the moment with them, almost like someone had shaken up a snow-globe full of pitch black, batlike shapes, that had begun floating into the darkening sky from the chimney-like structures as if smoke itself had developed sentience. They shrieked as they flowed upward, whirling and spinning in the twilight...

“*People... just a suggestion... perhaps you should flee!*” Paris’s voice echoed in her head.

She had found herself running alongside the others, racing for the upturned cargo container where Paris was shouting for them to hurry. It was only when she reached the container and looked back that she realized Shazza and Riddick had fallen behind.

“Riddick brought up the rear,” she told Kyra. “He stayed behind Shazza the whole time. I think he could have outrun her if he’d wanted to, but he didn’t. Fry yelled at them to get down, because the creatures were almost on them. They ran up the side of the gouge that the crash ship had plowed in the ground and dove down inside it. I swear, the creatures were chasing them too... flew right over them and away, but then...”

Then, as she had watched helplessly from much too far away, the screeching murmuration had begun to circle back.

She’d watched them both lying on the ground, Riddick on his side, Shazza on her belly. And even from that distance, she had seen the moment when Shazza’s nerves had frayed and snapped.

“Shazza, stay there!” She’d yelled, pulling free of Paris’s restraining grasp. “Stay down, Shazza, just stay down!”

“Come here!” the would-be tomb raider had shouted, pulling her back into the cargo container. She struggled against him, against what was inevitably about to happen.

Shazza couldn’t see what was behind her, running flat-out for the cargo container. But Riddick, on his side, could see everything. He hadn’t even tried to rise. Instead, he rolled onto his back and flattened himself against the dirt. The flock swooped past just inches above his chest.

Several of them struck Shazza, knocking her to her knees. Instead of flinging herself to the ground, instead of rolling to get them off of her, she tried to rise, to keep going.

“Shazza!” Jack had heard herself screaming, trying to throw herself forward to the rescue, “just stay down!”

Paris hauled her back again, his arm around her no longer at all gentle. She fought his hold until the moment when she heard Shazza’s unearthly scream of agony and saw her torso pulling free of her legs in an explosion of blood. She was still screaming, now in several pieces in the living whirlwind’s grasp, as it spun past the container and off into the darkness.

Suddenly Paris’s arm had been the only thing holding Jack up.

And now she found herself lying to Kyra again. Riddick had risen from the ground, calmly, looking completely unbothered, dusting himself off as he sauntered over to the container, stepping around the splashes of Shazza’s blood in the dirt with casual indifference. Jack, who had just lost the closest thing she’d had to a mother since she’d left Deckard’s World, had felt a moment of intense resentment for that nonchalance. For that moment, she’d found herself almost hating him.

She couldn’t tell Kyra that. This wasn’t supposed to be *that* kind of story for Kyra. Riddick was the tale’s hero. So she muted the grief and pain and...

“There wasn’t anything he could have done to save her, but I know he wanted to...”

She was projecting her own feelings onto him, her own motivations. His had been completely inscrutable. She had no real idea what had lain behind that calm deadpan, not then, maybe not ever. But in the story she told Kyra, it was a mirror of what *she* had been feeling and wishing.

“Paris was telling us we needed to get deeper inside so he could close the outer doors. Everybody climbed in, but I could hear Fry and Riddick, still outside. These strange new hoots and howls had started up and she asked him, ‘what is it, Riddick? What is it now?’ And he told her, ‘like I said, it ain’t me you gotta worry about.’ And then the last of the light was gone.”

Before she could get further with the story, Takama knocked on the door. Ewan and Tafrara were with her. While they began tending Kyra, Takama led Jack down to the garage level and helped her into a swanky-looking car so they could go get her head imaged.

Dusk had descended over New Marrakesh. In Elsewhere the storm had moved off, upward into the New Atlas foothills, and the tide was moving in. They didn’t drive toward the waters, though, instead driving further uphill and into one of the ritzier suburbs of the city, arriving at what appeared to be a satellite branch of the hospital.

Takama handled the check-in paperwork, using false names for both Jack and herself and weaving a tale, for the intake staff’s benefit, of visiting relatives and a children’s competitive tree-climbing excursion that had gone awry. Moments later, Jack was lying on a table, her head inside what she could only think of as a massive white donut. It didn’t take long. But soon after, a frowning technician appeared, examining the images, and asked if they could do an electroencephalogram.

That took nearly an hour.

Finally, after that was over, a doctor entered the room.

“Is there something wrong with Tafsut?” Takama asked in Arabic, using the false name she’d picked for Jack.

“No, not at all,” the woman answered, surprising both of them. Officially, Jack couldn’t understand a word she was saying, but she was following along just fine. “There are no signs of concussion, no brain bleeds, nothing. She’s perfectly healthy. It’s just...”

Takama shot Jack a confused and worried look just as *Jack* was shooting one at *her*.

“Has your niece ever been Quantified?” The way she said it, Jack could hear the capitalization in the word.

Alarm appeared in Takama’s eyes for the briefest instance. Then her expression became disapproving. “No, of course not. We do not believe in such things.”

“You might want to consider having her tested,” the doctor said, holding out a tablet with colorful data and imaging on its screen. “The readings we were getting are unusually high—”

“*Baraka!*” Takama almost shouted, one hand slapping at the tablet while the other made a gesture that Jack had learned was for warding off evil. “Do not speak of such things! Do you wish to make her a pariah? Ruin her chances to marry and have a family? We will not stay to hear such nonsense!”

If Jack hadn’t spent the last two and a half weeks getting to know Takama quite well, she might have been fooled by the sudden act, but she wasn’t. She could see that the doctor was, though. She could see the change in her demeanor and could, she thought, almost hear her thinking, *superstitious old bat...*

Takama led Jack back out of the clinic, hovering over her the whole time while deliberately grumbling about terrible treatment and how the doctor was trying to hex her niece, fussing even when she paid the bill. Only after they had driven away from the clinic did she drop the act.

“What was *that* about?” Jack asked, her emotions caught in a tug of war between confusion, amusement, and a little bit of fear.

“Brahim said that you are good at infiltrating secure systems, yes? You will want to do so the moment we get home, and destroy all of the scans they made of you and the EEG readings they took.” Takama only looked worried now, as she glanced over at Jack. “*Have you ever been Quantified?*”

“I don’t know what that is,” Jack told her, “so I’m guessing not.”

“It’s testing for extrasensory abilities. When readings go above a certain level, and I think your scans indicated that they would... testers are required to notify the Federacy. You need to destroy those records as soon as we get home. At least,” Takama added, flashing a tight smile at her, “we know you took no lasting harm from your misadventures this afternoon. And I really should not be surprised that a girl who can move a starship between universes, using her will alone, would test highly. I *am* sorry, Tislilel. I was so worried about brain injury that it never occurred to me I might be exposing you to—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jack said, feeling a little stunned. “I’ll grab some baseline readings and sub them in, no problem, soon as I have my tablet.”

“I hope it is as easy as you make it sound,” Takama worried beside her.

“Is it *that* bad?” Jack suddenly found herself worrying that there might have been a kernel of truth in Takama’s act; if it really would make her a pariah with the Imazighen.

“Good heavens, no. Dihya—the warrior queen your sister is named after—was a seer of great power. Such gifts are only as good or as evil as the one making use of them. No, the

problem is the Federacy. It ‘recruits’ anyone who tests highly enough. Whether or not they wish to be recruited.”

Jack, who had spent her childhood hearing only good things about the Federacy, was left a little dumbfounded by that claim.

Takama hustled her into the house the moment they returned, almost dragging her upstairs. Her anxiety was infectious, and Jack found herself running alongside her “aunt,” the need to delete the files filling her purpose.

“Get hacking,” Takama commanded the moment they reached the room. “I will have dinner sent up for both of you.”

It took Jack only a few minutes to find her way into the clinic’s files, using her most insidious Ghost Code. Looking over her patient file, she was relieved to see that almost none of the data would point directly to her. She made a few changes to obscure herself further, adjusting the height—when had she reached 1.73 meters?—weight, and eye color that were stored on file. She saved copies of the original scans and readings on her tablet—she wanted to take a closer look at them, herself, later—before going hunting in the system for another head’s data to replace hers with.

Tafrara and Ewan arrived with trays for her and Kyra right as she was finishing up and erasing the security footage, inside the clinic and out in the parking area, that she and Takama had appeared in. They didn’t stay more than a minute.

Weird. Usually there were at least a few moments of joking banter before they left. Jack walked over to the doors that led out onto a balcony overlooking the courtyard, pulling the curtain back just a little.

Brother and sister were hurrying across the courtyard toward the dining room.

Huh.

“I’ll be back,” she told Kyra, and slipped out of the room.

The moment she was level with the courtyard, and the ground of Elsewhere, she isomorphed over, keeping a strong visual and auditory connection with U1. She crossed the still-wet sand of Elsewhere’s version of the courtyard in a hurry, entering the space that was, back in U1, the dining room.

The whole family was assembled. There was no food on the table.

“I suppose it should not have come as a surprise,” Takama was saying in English, probably for the benefit and inclusion of an elderly, elegantly-dressed Black man sitting at the table with them. He, alone, had a cup of tea before him. “Brahim said most of the survivors struggled a great deal to master their instructions. I asked Amastan if any of them had spoken of dreaming of those... beings... both girls speak of, and he says no.”

“Did he answer you about the other matter?” Ewan asked.

“Yes. He says none of them met the envoy, although some of them remember seeing her on their hospital floor. She was aloof and never spoke to, much less touched, any of them.”

“Good. That’s something, at least.” Ewan still looked uneasy, and deeply unhappy.

“So...” Cedric said, after the momentary silence started to become uncomfortable, “all of the survivors of the *Matador* owe their lives to the fact that the two stowaways on board, who escaped Quintessa’s control, happened to be un-Quantified espers.”

“Are we sure it’s both of them?” Safiyya asked.

“You did not see Dihya bringing them across from the other world—”

“Elsewhere,” Ewan interjected.

“—from Elsewhere and into the market square,” Takama continued. “She has power, too, although probably not quite as much as Tislilel.”

“You got a look at the readings before you started up with the doctor, right?” Cedric asked. “What were the PKP indices?”

“Maximum. As high as the sensors could record.” Takama sighed, steepling her fingers and pressing them to her lips for a moment. “She is a cerebral girl, at her core. A teacher’s dream... Dihya, I think, relies more on her physicality. She has a good mind too, very intelligent, but—”

“Not on the same order of magnitude,” Cedric agreed. “She’s older, but follows Tizzy’s lead because—”

“*Tizzy?*” Tafrara blurted.

“Why not? It suits her more than you think. *Anyway*, she follows *Tizzy’s* lead because *she’s* such a *quick* thinker. Makes it a little hard, though, to tell one of her plans from one of her impulses.”

“Exactly,” Safiyya sighed. “We have all been remiss. We need to bear in mind that even a child prodigy—”

“Is still a child,” Ewan finished her statement for her. “I... am... aware.”

His eyes looked haunted. Tafrara put her arm around his shoulder.

“It is hard for *all* of us to remember that about her,” she said, her voice soft and almost coaxing.

“I nearly let her kill herself,” he whispered, closing his eyes.

“Do you think *that* is what she was doing?” Takama suddenly asked.

An arm slipped around Jack’s waist. She flinched and then realized who it had to be. Kyra, wearing the bathrobe Jack had left on the chair, was standing beside her, fully in Elsewhere.

“What’ve I been missing?” her sister whispered. Jack couldn’t find her voice to answer.

“We have seen her records from New Athens General,” Takama was saying. “Severe blood loss and drowning. She very nearly succeeded that time. *Could* she still be suicidal?”

Ewan’s complexion had turned almost ashen.

“If she is,” Safiyya mused, “I don’t think she knows it. But there is something called ‘suicide by proxy,’ that some people engage in when they won’t deliberately try to die or consciously admit to wanting to. They put themselves into dangerous situations, ones that could result in their deaths—”

“I can’t—” Ewan almost knocked his chair over as he got up from the table. He crossed the room swiftly, approaching the doorway where Jack and Kyra were standing, unseen and intangible.

“Do not go to her!” Cedric commanded, bringing his son to a halt.

Although a world away, Ewan was only inches from Jack, his breathing ragged. The agony on his face twisted at her heart. He closed his eyes and took a few long, deep breaths. Everyone at the table was watching him with concern.

Jack wanted to hug him. She only realized she was leaning toward him when Kyra pulled her back.

Finally Ewan spoke, his expression and voice growing calmer. “She wouldn’t have done that to me. She wouldn’t have left me stranded in another universe.” He turned to face the

table. “Maybe she’d put *herself* in harm’s way. I don’t know. But she’d *never* do something that put someone else in danger.”

“Not on purpose,” Jack whispered. Ali and Paris still haunted her.

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Kyra whispered back, giving her waist a gentle squeeze.

“If she had known, or even suspected, that she was in that much danger... if she had been *trying* to die... she would have sent me back to this universe first,” Ewan continued.

“You can’t know that,” Safiyya said.

“I *do* know that. And you do, too.” He turned and stalked back to the table, sitting back down in the chair he’d vacated. His body was still tense. “I think... she just doesn’t know her limits until she crashes into them.”

“This is a reasonable hypothesis,” the Black man mused, his rumbling, accented voice even deeper than Riddick’s. “Many with her kind of ability only develop it at the onset of puberty, which the remaining fragments of her medical records indicate is relatively recent.”

Ewan winced, closing his eyes. Tafrara put her hand on the back of his neck and murmured something soft in Tamazight. He shook his head, his lips pressed tightly together as he looked over at her.

“Your ‘Tizzy,’” the man continued, “may have no idea what she can or cannot do with these gifts until she tries.”

“Who the fuck is *he*?” Kyra whispered.

Jack shrugged, shaking her head. She had seen him in line, well behind the envoy, at the end of the memorial, but Ewan had already whisked them away from the church before he came anywhere near the family.

“I guess we should be especially grateful that you decided to visit us tonight, General Toal,” Cedric said. “You’ve worked with espers in the past, haven’t you? Trained Operatives.”

Even as the general nodded, Safiyya spoke up. “Is there any new word about your son or his platoon?”

General Toal shook his head, his expression briefly sad. “Nothing. It has been almost ten years... soon they will be declared dead. I... have made my peace with it.” He sighed and then seemed to put it aside. “But I am afraid that my visit this evening is not as auspicious as you have hoped. I came to warn you.”

Uneasy looks passed around the table.

“In the last day, the Quintessa envoy has been approaching many of Gavin Brahim’s former comrades-in-arms, the ones who will be visiting your home tomorrow evening. Many of them have asked me for advice,” the General explained. “She has hinted to all of them that she would like to attend as their ‘plus-one’ if they would be so inclined.”

“If that vile *tkahbacht* even *tries* to enter this house—” Tafrara exploded.

“*What?*” Ewan asked. “*What* can we do if she tries, Elspeth?”

Jack had wondered if, like her brothers, Tafrara had a Scottish name as well as a Tamazight name. Now she had an answer.

“Our brother’s murderer will never be welcome here!” his sister shouted, slamming her fists on the table. “I will see her *dead* first!”

“Tafrara.” Somehow, Cedric’s almost-gentle tone stopped her tirade cold. “It’s easily prevented. We’ll just clarify that this isn’t a gathering where plus-ones can be

accommodated.”

The General’s mouth twitched and he nodded. “That does indeed solve *that* part of the problem. But she has not been alone in her visits. Her *entourage*, these days, includes a mercenary who is eager to tell everybody he meets about the pair of dangerous teenage girls he is tracking—”

Ewan muttered something in Tamazight that made every woman at the table gasp and glare at him. He even got a reproving look from his father. There was no shame on his face now, though; only fury.

“—*and* he has been circulating pictures of them,” General Toal continued. “Already many of the officers who spoke to me have commented how similar they look to your visiting nieces. Now, *we* all know the truth about these two young ladies. And certainly, we all know that, even if they *were* the monsters he portrays them as, they never would have had time to commit the heinous crimes he’s claiming they engaged in between their escape from the psychiatric hospital and when the *Scarlet Matador* left Helion Prime. But...”

“An accusation does not have to be true to do great damage,” Takama sighed.

Jack felt Kyra begin to tremble beside her.

“Indeed.” The General looked around the table at everyone. “I was hoping to help you make this work. I truly was. But at this time, there is no way we dare introduce Miss Wittier-Collins to the officers who will be visiting tomorrow evening. Whether or not he suspects who your ‘nieces’ really are, this ‘Alexander Toombs’ has poisoned the well.”

“Oh *fuck*, Jack...” Next to her, Kyra’s eyes were welling with tears.

It just *figured* that Elsewhere’s tide would show up right then, too.

40.

Out of the Field of Fire

“So what now?” Jack asked Kyra as they returned to their room and two unappetizing trays of food. Sebby had already helped himself to bits of their meals from both trays, including all the olives, and was grooming his carapace on Jack’s pillow.

Kyra swallowed, looking around the room with hurt, wistful longing. “Now... we get ready to leave in a few more days.” Her voice cracked on the word *leave*. Jack moved to hug her, but she held up a hand. “I can’t right now, I need to... *fuck*, if that Toombs bastard were in range, I’d—”

“Yeah. Me too.” Jack sighed and sat down, picking up her tablet to start a search. “So where do we go next?”

“We...” Kyra sighed. “I’m sorry, Jack. I really am. I don’t want to run out on you, but... it can’t be *we* anymore. You heard that Toal guy. Toombs is looking for *two* girls, partners in whatever crimes he’s made up...”

She sat down on the foot of their bed and sighed, surreptitiously wiping at the corner of her eye.

“He’ll catch us if we stay together,” Kyra finally said.

“Not if I lay a false trail,” Jack protested. “I was thinking maybe some doctored photos of us, with Riddick, could show up on the merc network—”

“*You* have a *life* to get back to,” Kyra told her. “You really think that’s gonna work if you show up back at your mom’s house with the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain in tow? ‘She followed me home, mom, can I keep her?’” The bark of humorless laughter that escaped Kyra was painful.

Of course Kyra knew where she was going, Jack realized. She’d felt, in the last few weeks, like they were sometimes hearing each other’s thoughts, seeing into the insides of each other’s heads... and based on the latest revelations, she hadn’t been wrong.

It had started in the hospital, at least between the two of them. Looking back, she thought she could see so many clues—

“I’m a known quantity,” Kyra said, flopping back on the bed and then wincing with pain. “Fucking stitches... my prints are on record. Finger and retina. All kinds of data. You were able to clear yours out, I know that, but mine are in too many systems for you to get to them, too.”

“Amnesty Interplanetary—”

“It doesn’t *matter*, Jack. They could get me exonerated or pardoned or *whatever* and it wouldn’t matter. If I’m with you, I’ll lead Toombs *right to you*. He doesn’t give a fuck about me. He just wants to use me to get to you, and you to get to Riddick.” Kyra sighed and closed her eyes. “Even if the bounty on me ceases to exist *tomorrow*, I still won’t be safe for *you* to

be around. You can't ever stop being Jack B. Badd if I'm along for the ride. And we both know you're sick of being her."

Jack found herself desperately wishing that Kyra was wrong, but knowing that she wasn't.

"And," Kyra sighed, "if anybody outside of this family and that Toal guy ever puts our trail together, enough to prove to the envoy that we *were* on board the *Scarlet Matador*... there's no place in the Federacy that'll be safe for us or *anybody* we care about. So yeah, get those fake images out there. Make 'em think we *did* run off to the Bayou Nebula or something. Make 'em think we're living lives of crime as Riddick's *hench-bitches* a hundred light years away from here. We need all the camouflage we can get. But it doesn't change what has to happen."

Jack swallowed, nodding. She could do that. She could lay down a convincing false trail, for all of their sakes. But—

"Will you be okay?" Kyra asked, snatching up the words that she'd been about to say. "I mean, you weren't being abused by your mom or her boyfriend, were you?"

"No," Jack told her, sighing. "It wasn't anything like that. It's just... I don't think Alvin and I *ever* liked each other. He was dating my mom, but... the fact that she had a kid from a previous marriage was a big turn-off for him. I think it made things a little too real. I tried to just... make myself scarce when he was over. I figured they wouldn't be together long anyway, and when they started fighting all the time, I figured I was right. They even broke up for about a week."

"What were they fighting about?" Kyra asked, looking interested. It struck Jack again how incredibly different their childhood homes had to have been. If Kyra's mother had been on board for the whole New Christy colony project, she'd probably been domestic and pious, not a high-powered corporate lawyer who, in the year before Jack took off, often hadn't gotten back from dates until early Sunday afternoon.

"Everything. Nothing. The dumbest things were suddenly setting them off at each other. I was relieved when it ended, especially because, for a few days, I thought maybe my dad had a chance to come home..."

And then everything had crashed and burned.

"I still don't know what happened, but suddenly my father was just... really quiet, and then he told me he'd rejoined the Corps of Engineers and was leaving for Furya. I wanted to go, too, but he said there weren't any schools there that'd be challenging enough for me, and I should stay with my mom, and I'd understand why soon..."

"And did you?" Kyra's voice was soft, almost hesitant.

"Two days after he left, I came home from school and Alvin was back. Sitting in the living room, holding my mom's hand... and they told me they were getting married in three weeks." The pain of that moment was still sharp and fresh. She pressed her fist against her heart, trying to tamp it down. "They fucking waited until it was too late for me to go with him..."

"Why the hell did she take Alvin back?" Kyra sounded every bit as confused as Jack felt.

"I don't... know. I didn't really care. I just felt—" ...*feel*... "—so fucking betrayed..."

"How long after that did you run?"

"A week before the wedding," Jack sighed. "He was already throwing his weight around, wanting to be a father figure, wanting to be the fucking *man of the house*, like we needed one

of *those*... He even said ‘my house, my rules’ to me one time, that fucker... So I figured out a route to Furya, forged my mom’s signature on some forms that’d let me pull the money I’d been saving up for summer camp out of the bank, and got the fuck outta there while they were having their bachelor parties and some twit from up the street was too busy making out with her boyfriend to *babysit* me.”

“And you’re just gonna go back to that?” Kyra looked dubious.

Jack shrugged. “Maybe. Probably. I can’t get to Furya, and I don’t *want* my parents to think I just died somewhere... but if he’s still a shit I’ll just... I dunno, threaten to disappear again if they don’t let me go live with my grandparents or one of my aunts and uncles, or something. I can’t let them think I just died, though. I didn’t... I didn’t do any of this to *hurt* them.”

I never wanted to hurt anybody...

It made her ill to think of what she’d put her mother, and also her father, her cousins, her grandparents, *everybody* through for more than a year now. It was especially hard to think of how her cats must have looked for her, called for her, those first few nights... and *they* would still have been bereft even if she’d made it to Furya on schedule.

Ewan’s wrong... I don’t think enough about how my actions affect others...

“No, Jack, Ewan’s *right* about you,” Kyra said.

She glanced over, surprised. Kyra smirked and tapped her temple. There was, she realized, no point in either one of them hiding or denying anymore that they were in each other’s heads.

“You don’t try to hurt anybody. You just tried to get to your dad fast before anyone could stop you,” Kyra continued. “Not your fault there was an unexpected detour into a shitstorm. Life’s just a series of detours, anyway, right? Most of what we plan out never really happens the way we expect it.”

“Yeah. Probably...” No *probably* about it, Jack admitted to herself. “Yeah. And *that’s* why I’m gonna give you a shit-ton of resources to take with you if we’re splitting up. Gonna teach you how to ghost around in case you ever need to replace Kali Montgomery with another alias.”

For the next hour, they made plans. They wouldn’t leave *right* away, but they would have to go soon, before someone got it into their head to restrict their movements “for their own good.” The conversation came to an abrupt halt when they heard voices in the courtyard.

“Fuck,” Kyra said, rising up and grabbing their plates and carrying them into the bathroom. “I don’t know how to put my IV back in. Take Sebby and jump in the shower, okay? I’m going to tell them I needed to take a shit and you couldn’t help me get up to do it because you were already showering. C’mon, *go*.”

While Jack climbed into the shower with an excited crustacean, Kyra scraped their cold, uneaten food into the toilet and flushed it down.

Jack waited a few minutes, giving Sebby time to do his little water dance at her feet, before she emerged from the shower and slipped into the robe that Kyra had left for her. In the bedroom, Ewan was reconnecting her sister’s IV drip with an air that was simultaneously amused and martyred. He avoided looking at Jack much once he realized she was only wearing a bathrobe.

“In the morning, we’ll begin your physical therapy,” he was telling Kyra. “Your stitches look really good, though. In another few weeks, if you want, Takama can take you to a clinic to have the scar removed.”

“Scars are trophies,” Kyra said. “I want to keep it.”

Tafrara entered the room with a box... a *singing* box. Sebby, on Jack’s shoulder, began to make a high-pitched *reeeeee* of excitement.

“Yes, little one, this is your dinner,” she said, pouring the box’s contents into Sebby’s tub. “*Yezan!* Get off of me, you little...” She brushed off several crickets that had jumped onto her arms instead of into the tub.

With a delighted shriek, Sebby leapt off Jack’s shoulder, bouncing across the bed and then sailing through the air, straight into the tubful of crickets.

“This is why Izil put the box into the tub, flipped open the lid, and jumped back,” Ewan observed.

“And he still had three crickets jump on him,” Tafrara retorted, smirking. “We’ll see how well *you* manage next feeding. You can show us how it’s done.”

Throughout their good-natured ribbing, Jack noticed, they never once mentioned their visitor, or the conversation in the dining room. She wondered if it would ever come up.

Some of it’ll have to, she thought sadly. They’re gonna have to tell Kyra that her participation in the reception tomorrow evening is off.

Several times, before Ewan and Tafrara said good night and left the room, she thought Ewan was going to say something to her, but he always stopped himself. Things still weren’t normal between them. They’d almost gotten there, until everything changed again while she and Kyra were supposedly having dinner in their room.

Maybe we’ll find a way back to normal, she thought, picking up her tablet and carrying it over to the bed as the door closed. We still have three more Tangiers days...

And then he would be gone. And, soon after, so would she.

Kyra fell asleep almost immediately, but Jack couldn’t manage to. Maybe it was because she’d taken an unscheduled nap during the middle of the day, but her mind was too active. She spent another hour writing up instructions for how to access the hidden menus on different security platforms before Kyra began to whimper in her sleep.

“No... leave me alone... don’t wanna look...”

“Kyra?”

“Just... fucking... stop already...”

Jack closed her eyes, focusing on the starlit place that the *Apeiros* inhabited. “Are you talking to the other larva?” she demanded.

Yes.

“Stop. Leave her alone. You’re hurting her,” Jack told them.

For a moment, there was silence. Then...

We did not know.

Back on the bed, Jack could feel Kyra relaxing beside her.

“She’s still not healed. Talk to me. Just me.”

You are also injured, they pointed out.

“Maybe, but you don’t hurt me by talking to me. It hurts her when you do. So I need you to leave her alone.”

Nothing should have to be alone, one of them whispered.

“Okay. Fine. But you wait until *she* talks to *you*. If she calls to you, you can answer. But otherwise, let her be.”

There was a long pause. She had the sense that the ether they inhabited was full of communication, just none of it directed at her.

This is acceptable, they finally said. *You and the smallest ones are enough*.

That was a little creepy, she thought, and decided not to ask “enough for what?” Not yet. She wasn’t sure she was ready to know.

They didn’t seem to mean either her or Kyra harm, she reflected. They had been afraid, when she’d been struggling with the cube from the *Scarlet Matador*, that she would hurt or even kill herself, and had tried to stop her. For the moment, their motives seemed kind. But, and it would be especially true once she left Tangiers Prime and parted ways with Kyra, soon there would be no one she could discuss them with if she developed doubts about that. She would sound completely psychotic—

—*like an escapee from a mental hospital, even—*

—if she told anyone she was communicating telepathically with a strange alien race, unless she submitted herself to Quantification and the risks Takama believed came with that.

If she ever came to think they posed a threat, though, she might *have* to.

Unless it’s just a threat to me...

And... *there* it was.

She spent another half hour, still not even a little sleepy, researching “suicide by proxy” on the tablet. The historical material was disturbing; the law enforcement literature was a little horrifying. She skimmed over case studies of people whose guilt had overwhelmed them but who were repressed from making active suicide attempts, and who began to do more and more dangerous things, most of them in some way connected to the guilt they felt or a moment that they’d survived but felt they hadn’t deserved to. “Suicide by Cop,” she learned, was one of the most common forms, as people punished themselves and ended their lives by creating threatening-seeming situations in which police believed they had no alternative but to shoot to kill.

But it didn’t seem to cover what she was doing. Or what she had done.

In the al-Walid house, she reflected, she had felt completely alone and cut off from the world. She barely spoke Arabic for the first several weeks, none of the people she encountered there knew or were willing to speak English to her even though she *knew* that Abu, Lajjun, and even little Ziza were all bilingual—they were, they had told her, immersing her in “her” new language “for her own good” —and she wasn’t even allowed to control how she presented herself to the world. Skirts, dresses, and hair coverings, not as disguises but as her new normal, had been shoved upon her. They only grudgingly continued to call her “Jack” because she had refused to give them, or answer to, any other name; they used it as little as possible, too, often referring to her as “*her*” when she was standing right there.

Why, she wondered, was it so much easier to let people call her Tislilel—which, when she’d looked it up, she’d found literally meant “bride of the sea”—and to wear jalabiyas and other traditional North African attire, here in New Marrakesh than it had been there?

Because the Tomlin-Meziane family loves me, loves us... And because the name had been a gift from a man she had fallen in love with and was in mourning for.

She'd tried so hard to believe in the love that "Uncle Abu" and "Aunt Lajjun" had claimed to feel for her, tried so hard to reciprocate it... but in comparison to what she'd experienced in New Marrakesh, she could see just how empty and controlling it had all really been. The al-Walids had used "love" as a bludgeon, and had very nearly broken her with it.

In *their* house, she hadn't had access to any resources she could use to run away again, and they had never given her an opportunity to find any. Anything she questioned or protested was grounds for a lecture about everything they were sacrificing for her sake, and how hurtful her ingratitude was to them. Through it all, she'd felt "Uncle Abu's" judgmental censure over her hooligan ways, hidden beneath a wrapping of well-intended avuncular guidance, even as she'd been made to feel guilty over her instinctive, bone-deep rejection of all that prescriptive "nurturing."

Death, she thought, had been the only way she'd seen out of the terrible, inescapable prison that had been assembled around her. Somehow, she'd even come to believe she *deserved* it all.

Those musings seemed to resonate with something. She tried to follow the thought, but it vanished as she tried to chase it down.

But the only remaining part of the despair she'd suffered in the al-Walid household was the sense that she had failed others when they'd needed her most, hadn't done enough to help or protect them... and an absolute terror of finding herself as the sole survivor of yet another disaster.

There was, she noted ruefully, an abundance of links to the subject of "survivor's guilt" on the tablet.

If she really was an esper, the way everybody suddenly seemed to think, was her persistent survival in part because she'd unconsciously foreseen, and been able to side-step, disasters as they came at her?

"First you're a boy, then you're a girl, and now you're a psychic. Careful what you wish for, Jack..."

Of all the people she'd met on the first leg of her run, only three had survived meeting her, and only one of the people she'd loved had. She realized that she couldn't stop dreading the possibility that history would repeat itself *here*.

She didn't want to *die*, but she didn't want to be the only one left standing if death came for the people she loved again.

On Deckard's World, movies from twentieth century America were enormously popular, and she had watched hundreds of them with her cousins. There had been one where a man—a *Scotsman*, much like Cedric—had discovered that he was immortal and outlived everybody who mattered to him over and over, losing all the people he loved to war and time, slowly growing more aloof and disconnected from humanity. The film had made it seem so romantic and dashing, but a line from one of the songs that had played in it had indelibly embedded itself in her head: *Who wants to live forever when love must die?*

The conviction that the Tomlin-Meziane family, and the *ait Meziane* tribe as a whole, would be far safer with her and Kyra gone was still strong. And Kyra would probably be a lot safer, too, no longer traveling with the walking bullseye that was Jack B. Badd. Every bullet she'd dodged, and there had been so many now, seemed to have struck someone else as a result.

She didn't want to step into a bullet's path, though. She wanted out of the field of fire.

"Deckard's World it is," she sighed, and burrowed her way into the shipping schedules for that region of space.

Most of the shipping turned out to be indirect. Her planet, which had seemed so huge and consequential when she'd lived on it, was considered something of a remote backwater by the rest of the Federacy. There was regular, direct passenger traffic between there and New Queensland, and most of the freight that reached her home world was offloaded on Vasenji Station before making the final leg of its journey on smaller vessels. She would probably have to pass through one of those two locations on her way back.

She narrowed her search, setting a maximum time frame: she wanted to return to Deckard's World within two years of the date of her disappearance. When she added Tangiers Prime as a starting location, only fourteen scheduled flights were left with openings in either their passenger or crew manifests. With a feeling of resignation, she added an exclusion for cryo-sleep, expecting all of them to disappear from the list.

One did not.

The *Nephrite Undine* was a new freighter, which was only just coming out of Sirius Shipping's orbital shipyard at their headquarters above Tangiers Six. The company was preparing for its run-in flight using a new set of Star Jumps that would allow for direct traffic between the Tangiers system and Deckard's World—

Could anything be more perfect? It seemed too good to be true.

It was.

The ship had never Star Jumped before. Maiden voyages, she soon discovered, had 90.3% success rates. They generally carried inexpensive and easily replaced cargo and were staffed by tiny skeleton crews that not only had to agree to the risk of a journey they might never return from, but also had to be willing to stay out of cryo and be "on call" every second of the journey in case something went wrong. High risk, high maintenance... hardly anybody wanted that. Those positions paid handsomely but were difficult to fill, especially if, as in this case, it was a months-long solo flight.

And, Jack saw, the job listing for the *Nephrite Undine* was still up.

Sirius Shipping had been sweetening the pot every way they could think of, she read, in an attempt to get even *one* qualified person to apply. It would be a five-month journey with twenty-five Jumps, none of them more than two days long and the rest of the time spent traversing normal space. The crew quarters were advertised as lush, with a recreational facility and data center that was described as "on par with any luxury system available to the public." The maintenance schedule, they insisted, would only take up a few hours of each day, and the emergency procedures had been streamlined but shouldn't be necessary. The human crew member would have AI support and would only be responsible for situations that non-humans had no legal authority to handle.

And yet the position was unfilled.

She dug deeper, slipping behind Sirius Shipping's firewalls—she gravitated to their ships and ads, she thought, because she knew that they used her father's security systems everywhere—and digging into their Human Resources department's confidential files.

The job *had* been filled, briefly, a month ago, but had been relisted less than a week earlier... following the discovery of an obituary for the man they had hired and who had died

in the spaceport explosion. The one backup candidate they'd had on file was no longer available. With the inaugural flight just eleven Standard days away, the company was becoming desperate and had, just hours earlier, increased the benefits they were offering.

Still, the almost one in ten chance that the ship would fail to reach its destination seemed to have deterred everyone... especially with the lucrative alternatives that had opened up in New Casablanca and New Fes as both cities' spaceports expanded their staffs to accommodate traffic that would normally have gone through New Marrakesh. The few queries the listing had received in the last eight Standard days were from people seeking even *more* benefits and securities.

"Marianne Tepper," she noted as she looked over the listing again, was fully qualified for the position. And under the circumstances, she didn't really care how much she'd be paid.

Ewan was leaving in three Tangiers Prime days, slightly less than six Standard days. To reach the Tangiers Six orbital shipyards in time, she would need to leave New Marrakesh two morning-days after, travel to New Casablanca, and take a midnight launch from there. She would arrive at the Sirius Shipping HQ a little under one Standard day before the *Nephrite Undine* was scheduled to leave.

But there was almost a one in ten chance that, if she boarded that ship, she'd vanish forever and never make it home at all...

Would this be this some addlepatented suicide attempt on her part? Boarding a ship that might never be seen again?

The Hunter-Gratzner was never seen again, she thought, *and everybody thought it'd be safe*. She had already survived one Level Five Incident. She could survive another, if it came to that.

She'd be home in less than six months if it worked, well before what everybody would think was her fifteenth birthday. If she could play a good enough hand, maybe she could even make people believe she'd been somewhere on Deckard's World the whole time...

No matter what happened, the *Nephrite Undine* could break her trail.

Jack opened the message that she had received from Sirius Shipping that morning-day. They were still waiting to hear whether she wanted an interview for the *Major Barbara* position, something that was probably a simple formality. They might even skip an interview altogether when she made her counter-offer. She began to compose a reply.

Dear Ms. Nguyen, she wrote, addressing it to the executive who had signed the interview offer. A year before she'd taken off, her mother had shown her a stack of letters that had come from candidates she was considering for her law firm. Jack tried to phrase things the way her mother's favorite choices had in their letters.

Thank you for your kind offer of a potential position on the *Major Barbara*. I regret that, due to some logistical and scheduling issues traveling to the Catalan System would create, I must decline the offer at this time. However, I am aware that you have another opening that doesn't pose any such conflicts on your new vessel, the *Nephrite Undine*...

Either way, she told herself as Kyra slept on beside her, Jack B. Badd could finally disappear forever.

41.

Monde à Deux

Clack!

Jack woke up to the sound of... baseball?

Clack! Clack! Her first impression was of someone hitting ball after ball out of a park in rapid succession. As she woke up more, she realized that she was hearing wood striking wood.

“Again,” Cedric’s voice said from somewhere below her and to the left. She opened her eyes.

Kyra had thrown wide the balcony doors and was sitting in a chair, her arms on the railing and her chin resting on her hands, watching something that was going on outside. Jack got up, pulling on her robe and walking over to see.

Two levels down, in the central area of the courtyard, Tafrara and Ewan were sparring with staffs while Cedric observed them and called out commands. By the sweat sheening their skin and soaking their tops, they had been at it for a while. Both wore loose white pants and tank tops and moved barefoot across the paving stones, circling each other. Just when Jack wondered if that was all they were going to do, they came together again in a flurry of movements, staffs cracking into each other repeatedly as they struck and blocked one another’s strikes.

Ewan was taller and stronger, with a greater reach. But Tafrara, Jack decided, had more skill and experience... and a lower center of gravity that she knew how to use to her advantage. They were evenly matched. Their attacks were almost brutal, forcing Jack to cover her mouth several times when the impulse to cry out a warning struck her. They clearly knew what they were doing, though. On the rare occasions when one of their staffs slipped the other’s guard, it stopped centimeters before actual impact. For a second, both combatants would freeze, waiting for their father to confirm which one of them had just gained a point.

That kind of control was impressive. They hadn’t just been taught how to hit; they’d been taught how *not* to.

“Goddamn,” Kyra said, her voice wistful and cracking a little. “I want to get *in* on that...”

Jack put her arm around Kyra’s shoulder, aware all over again just how much her sister had suddenly lost in the last day. By the time she was healed enough to join them in a sparring match like this, Ewan would be back at the flight academy... and it would be time for the two of them to leave. The chance to be part of something so perfectly suited to her had been cruelly ripped away. Worst of all, she could see that beautiful dream right in front of her, but it would be forever out of reach.

I have to help her find something even better before we go...

And it wasn’t like the scene was much easier for Jack to watch.

It was the first time she had seen Ewan wearing so little. His musculature was leaner than Riddick's and his older brother's, but he still looked like he could have been carved by either a Renaissance artist or the ancient Greek sculptors they had been emulating. She found herself wishing she could touch him, feel him against her again—

“Down, girl,” Kyra murmured next to her.

“Shit, am I that obvious?” she whispered.

Kyra smirked and shook her head, tapping her temple. “You got a good poker face, though. Shame... think what kind'a damage we could'a done in a casino...”

It was a little hard to laugh at that. All of the might-have-beens were hitting them like violent blows now that they had committed themselves to a course of action that would separate them for years...

...maybe forever.

“Did I miss breakfast?” Jack made herself ask after a moment. The sun appeared to have risen a while ago.

“Yeah, and my first physical therapy session, but I'm sure they'll get you something.”

Kyra glanced at Jack. “Did you tell the *Apeiros* to stay out of my head?”

“I did, yeah. They were giving you nightmares last night.” She hadn't actually told Kyra the name she'd given them, but she supposed it was no surprise that her sister knew it anyway.

“They were. Then they said that you had forbidden them to talk to me anymore unless *I* talked to *them* first... and I haven't heard a peep out of 'em since. Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Least I could do. I mean, they weren't even supposed to start talking to you again until I said they could, until I told them you'd healed up—”

“But they freaked the fuck *out* when you hurt yourself breaking open a ...something... Some word like the name you gave them. That's what they said you'd done, anyway. And I... couldn't *feel* you for a few hours... I didn't even realize I *could*, and *had*, until you were suddenly gone from my head. I thought you might've died. I kept asking them if you were okay and they kept saying they didn't know.” Kyra looked incredibly vulnerable in that moment.

“Fuck, I'm sorry. I really didn't think, did I?”

“Hey. *Quit* that. You did good. It was something you had to do, even if it *was* gonna scare a bunch of us. You're closing the door between 'verses, as much as it can be. It'll make it harder for that Quintessa bitch to find the other survivors. Or prove that we were ever among them.”

“Yeah...” Jack swallowed. She didn't feel entirely reassured. “When did you start to feel me again?”

“About two hours before you came back. But damn, you felt weak. There was this *moment*, though... whoo! You and Ewan better not have been fucking, because I was serious —”

Jack burst out laughing. Below them, in the courtyard, three heads turned to look their way. She felt heat rising into her cheeks. Hopefully, they hadn't heard what had made her laugh. Hopefully, they didn't think she was laughing at *them*. She waved in their direction and Ewan raised his hand, waving back at her.

“No,” she managed to tell Kyra, struggling not to laugh again. “We weren’t. Not for a lack of me *wanting* to, though. It’s been kinda awkward since then. He knows what I was feeling.”

She tried to leave the rest of it—that she believed the intense chemistry had been mutual—unsaid, but she could see in Kyra’s eyes that she might as well have said that part out loud.

“Of course he does. *I* knew what you were feeling from how many miles away? Kind of a shame, in a way,” Kyra mused. “He’s been so gentle and careful with me, treating my stab wound, and today’s physical therapy session... If I’d lost my virginity to someone like *him*, maybe the idea of sex wouldn’t be so disgusting...” She shook her head. “Course, someone like him would’ve *never* taken it from me when I was twelve... and won’t take it from you now. Well, he’d just better keep being honorable about it all. I figured it was why he was looking so freaked out last night.”

“Yeah,” Jack sighed, “things are uncomfortable right now. They *were* almost back to normal until that whole dinner table conversation.”

“He *was* having a hard time looking at you after that, wasn’t he? You never told me what I missed. I mean, I caught some of the ‘child prodigy’ stuff. What brought *that* talk about?”

“The brain scans I had last night,” Jack explained. “I guess I didn’t actually do myself any brain damage or anything when I broke the apeirochoron—”

“Yeah, *that’s* what they were going on and on about.”

“—but the scans were abnormal enough that they did an EEG and decided I’m probably a psychic.”

Kyra was giving her a *duh* look. “And you didn’t *know* that until now?”

“I...” She hadn’t believed that kind of stuff existed outside of the adventure books she’d read as a kid, and some of the old sword-and-sorcery vids she’d watched with her cousins. There’d been one strange girl in her fourth-grade class who had claimed it was all real, and that *she* had powers, but had always refused to prove it and had, the next year, claimed she was the secret love child of a popular twentieth century movie star instead. It had *all* seemed ridiculous to Audrey back then, even if sometimes—

“*Damn*, Jack, the hour before Heather died, you were following her around like a worried puppy. Wouldn’t let her out of your *sight*. You looked real uneasy and kept staying super close to her, like you were expecting her to fall over at any second. When she finally did, when I heard you screaming for help, I remember thinking ‘oh, this is why.’”

When Kyra described it like *that*, it was suddenly so obvious. “I... when I was little, my parents had a dog who was epileptic. I could always tell when Balto was about to have a seizure. He died while I was at school and I... they told me I couldn’t possibly have, but I *felt* it when he died. And then when Heather started feeling the same way to me...”

“You knew the exact moment she died, too, didn’t you?” Kyra asked. “I saw your face change. And then there were other times, I swore I could feel you in my head, and... that night you had the nightmare about Riddick cutting your throat, I could *see* it.”

“He’d never do that,” Jack said, still conscious that Kyra needed Riddick to be a hero and not any kind of threat.

“I mean, of *course* not, but that asshole who visited you got you all mixed up for a while. *El Imam Abu al-Walid*,” she sneered, spelling out the full name Jack had described him rattling off when they had first met.

Again, Jack found herself remembering how Fry had seemed to think the *el Imam* part was his first name, calling him by it several times the way he had called her Carolyn, and sometimes seeming to pronounce it as “Elmo.” She’d liked Fry a great deal, and had started to think of her as a kind of older sister, but there had been moments—

“Judgmental dickhead,” Kyra continued. “He really thought *you* could *enjoy* killing? Shit.”

“He was nice to me back then,” Jack found herself protesting. “I mean, before the *Kublai Khan*... during the eclipse...”

“Yeah, before he decided to *save* you from *yourself*. Before everybody else who could’ve stepped in and made him cut his shit out was gone.” Kyra shook her head. “Sorry. It just makes me so mad. I saw how you looked after he got done giving you a talking-to, and I wanted to beat the *shit* out of him.”

That, Jack realized, had been the moment a switch flipped in their relationship, and Kyra had begun acting protective toward her... and their minds had started to link up. Two esper roomies, both with PTSD... if the hospital staff had had any idea, she thought, they’d have put them on opposite sides of the building from each other.

“Yeah, they’d have sent us to opposite sides of the *planet*, even,” Kyra replied to her unspoken words.

“Here, I want to try something...” Jack said, and closed her eyes. She began to put together, in her mind, one of the most beautiful and terrifying moments she’d been describing to her sister... the ringed gas giant rising into the sky and slowly creeping closer and closer to the twin suns...

“Oh *shit*, Jack, that’s so *beautiful*...”

It had worked.

After a quick run down to the kitchen for some breakfast—okay, she admitted, a *lot* of breakfast—Jack spent the next hour conjuring more visions for Kyra, different moments on the crash planet that had been particularly stunning. The miles-long damage path behind the remains of the crash ship... the rising of the blue sun as the twin suns were setting... the enormous field of bones... living clouds of tiny monsters eddying against the auburn sky... in its own way, that desolate, dangerous world had been spectacularly beautiful.

She shied away from other visions, though, refusing to show her sister what Ali’s devoured body had looked like, or Shazza in pieces in the screaming maelstrom... for those, she would only share her carefully crafted words. Kyra was still recovering, still *delicate*, and seeing those hideous moments wouldn’t help her stay distracted from her pain. She needed the part of the story that was adventure and excitement... not the gruesome reality.

Jack told herself that she wasn’t really lying... just being selective about how much of the ugly truth she would divulge. But part of her, even then, knew that was possibly the biggest lie of all. Kyra, however, seemed to want the lie too much to question it.

Jack was able to let Kyra *hear* the sounds of the strange creatures on the crash planet, even as she described huddling with the other survivors inside the cargo container and Imam speculating that they used those noises to see. Riddick had located the cutting torch that Shazza had left behind, when they had stopped trying to salvage things and had relocated to the mining settlement, and he had used it to carve a passage into one of the largest cargo compartments after they’d ended up trapped in a small one.

“He handed Fry the torch and went off scouting right away, while we were trying to block the opening behind us. He could see everything just fine. But there were sounds... *in* the compartment... and we all knew the *things* were already inside.”

Fry had told *her* to stay close, but Imam hadn’t repeated the admonition in Arabic. Nobody, not even Jack, had noticed at first that Hassan had wandered off.

Not until Jack heard Riddick speak, his voice pitched low enough that the others around her didn’t seem to hear: “Extremely... bad... timing.”

She had convinced herself, until now, that her feeling that the darkness was horribly *alive* was just her overactive imagination. Now she wondered if she’d been feeling the creatures’ presence. What *had* she felt?

Two... no... *five* minds in that stygian darkness. Two human... and three almost incomprehensible aside from ravenous hunger. Hassan, rooted to the spot in terror as he stared up at a horrifying, barely-visible shape above him. Riddick, near him, feeling an almost academic fascination about the creature he could see clearly and a mixture of annoyance and concern for the scared boy just in front of him...

Had she really managed to get that far into people’s heads at the time? Without knowing or understanding?

She’d heard him tell Hassan “just don’t run...” Unlike Ali, Hassan would have known enough English to understand that.

Or *should* have. As she explored her memories of that moment in greater detail, she thought the boy’s mind had been paralyzed with fear; he could barely think in *Arabic*, much less *English*.

“Wow,” Kyra said beside her. “Poor kid...”

“Yeah,” Jack agreed. “He was really nice, too. So they were over there, just staring at the thing above them in the darkness. Fry called out to Riddick and he raised his voice just a little more, so everybody *else* could hear him, and said ‘don’t stop burning.’ I think he meant they needed to cut another hole in a wall to get us out of that compartment. That’s what Fry and Johns thought, anyway, because she gave him the torch and he gave her his flashlight, and he started cutting another hole. And *that* was when Imam *finally* noticed that Hassan wasn’t in the group anymore.”

The boys, she suddenly realized, had *liked* giving him the slip, the whole time she’d known them, and Suleiman—who spoke the best English of all of them—had quietly told her back at the mining settlement that they had hardly known him at all before he had been put in charge of their youth group’s Hajj. He’d been a newcomer to their mosque, less member than guest, but had been selected as a replacement guardian after another Imam, who had organized the journey, fell ill; he was only taking them because he’d been on his way to Helion Prime anyway, to return to his wife and young daughter. Perhaps, if they’d known him better, they would have stayed closer to him—

“*You* knew him better and you cut your *wrists* to get away,” Kyra grumbled beside her. “Damn, this in-your-head shit is getting spooky. Sorry. It’s hard for me to think of him as one of the *good guys* in your story after how I saw him treat you.”

The courtyard had fallen silent while they talked and Jack shared her memories; she glanced down and it was empty. Before she could pick up the tale again at the moment of Hassan’s terrified flight and death, someone knocked at their door.

Takama, Cedric, and Safiyya were outside, expressions serious.

Jack had to give them credit; they didn't hide a thing about the meeting the night before, except just how torn up Ewan had been by all of it. Thanks to the interference of the envoy and Alexander Toombs, she and Kyra were told, it was no longer safe for them to try to introduce Kyra to Tomlin's former brothers and sisters in arms yet. Out of further concern that the envoy would try to enter their home and provoke an incident with Tafrara, they had contacted all of the invited guests and informed them that the reception had been moved to the grotto Jack and Ewan had used the evening-day before.

The venue change let them also claim that they couldn't accommodate any guests beyond the ones they had specifically invited, something that would have been preposterous if they had still been hosting it in their enormous home that could—and did, when needed—accommodate the entire *ait Meziane* tribe. The house, which Jack had been giving a hyphenated name in her head until then, belonged to the whole tribe and was used by whichever members happened to be in town at any time.

"Officially, the change has happened because three visiting members of the tribe have fallen ill," Takama said. "Including, should anyone inquire, both of you. It is a summer fever common in the New Atlas region. Perhaps you brought it with you when you came down from the mountains."

"We've already had it, so we're immune, but we wouldn't want to accidentally spread it to our esteemed guests," Cedric added, lips quirking a little.

"We truly *are* sorry that you can't meet everyone yet, Dihya," Safiyya told Kyra, reaching out to take her hand. Kyra allowed it, but Jack could feel how much she was struggling with the impulse to pull away from the affection behind it. "But the last thing we want to have happen is for one of them to decide that Toombs' story about you is more plausible than the truth and turn you over to him."

"Yeah," Kyra sighed. "Especially since the only way for me to *be* the girl he says I am—" *The girl I really am...* Jack heard in her head.

"—is if I came on the *Scarlet Matador*; which would open up a can of *Guinea* worms all over all of us."

The image Kyra had in her mind, of those worms, was horrifying. Jack couldn't help shuddering.

She wondered if Toombs and Logan would stake out the gardens, hoping to get a better look at "Dihya" and "Tislilel" before the disappointing news that they were "sick" was shared—

Hoo boy. There it was.

"Got an idea," Jack said, unable to suppress her grin. Four sets of eyebrows went up as she grabbed her tablet and began searching for local hospitality services. The others kept talking as she worked, telling Kyra that they hoped, in a few weeks or months, to make the meeting possible.

We'll be long gone before then, she thought. Well, *she* would be, anyway. There was always the possibility that Kyra would change her mind and want to stay.

But the vibes coming off her sister didn't point in that direction.

"There," she finally said, feeling immense satisfaction. Maybe this would help fix her screw-ups of the evening-day before.

“What is it?” Cedric asked, amusement and trepidation in his voice.

“I just booked some extra help to take care of your guests this evening-day,” Jack told them with a grin. “Nothing major, just carrying *hors d’oeuvres* trays around and stuff, but check them out.”

The four young women, whose pictures were on the tablet screen, bore eerie resemblances to her, and to Kyra. It really hadn’t been all that difficult to find some who would.

*We really **could** blend in here... hide in plain sight...*

It’s too late for that, Jack... Kyra’s voice sighed sadly in her head.

“Good heavens,” Safiyya said, laughing.

“Maybe your guests’ll stop thinking we looked a lot like... *us*... when they’re looking at other girls who do, too,” Jack said. “And who knows? Maybe Toombs will try to arrest one of them and embarrass the fuck out of himself and that envoy.”

“Not bad,” Cedric told her, trying to hide a grin. “I’ll make sure to have some people on hand who can step in if he tries.”

The conversation briefly shifted to logistics—when and where Jack should have the four waitresses arrive at the garden—before the plans were fully solidified and the discussion moved to the future.

“We’ve settled on a date for the celebration of Brahim’s life,” Takama told them. “His birthday. It’s four Standard months away, so it will be very early in the fall this year. That will give his former colleagues plenty of time to request leave, and the rest of the tribe time to come here.”

“Sounds lovely,” Kyra said beside her. Jack hoped she was the only one who had heard the slight break in her voice as she said it and had caught the sudden feeling of wistful sadness embedded in it. She was feeling much the same way; if things went according to plan, she’d be most of the way back to Deckard’s World when it took place.

It was lunchtime by then. It was also the first time Kyra was officially cleared to go up and down stairs, so it was the first time both of them joined the family in the dining room—for food, anyway—since the memorial dinner. The table was huge, but the family, many of whom Jack had only met once before, almost completely filled it. Lalla, Izil, and even Usadden all joined them; the hospital morgue, Usadden told them, was closed for another Tangiers day while investigators went over everything centimeter by centimeter, trying to discover how eighteen bodies, and all of their belongings, had vanished into thin air. Already, to his dismay, two orderlies had been found to have been pilfering personal effects of the deceased, but nothing connected to the missing *Matador* passengers had been among their recovered loot.

Jack remembered the earrings and the cash she’d isomorphed out of one of the orderlies’ lockers. Those were floating out in the sea by now, but she would need to do a walkabout through New Marrakesh at some point to see if anything had been stolen and fenced in the days prior and could be seen hovering incongruously somewhere in Elsewhere. Even one such artifact could tell the envoy far too much about her and Kyra...

Ewan, Jack noticed, was sitting at the far end of the table, engaged in quiet conversation with an elderly man who looked a great deal like a male version of Tafrara and Safiyya. His grandfather? They were speaking in Tamazight, so she couldn’t eavesdrop. She felt a little embarrassed and guilty over how much she wanted to.

Most of the family, though, was speaking in English, discussing the plans for the celebration of Gavin Brahim Tomlin Meziane's life, making suggestions, planning out how to send word to various members of the tribe and other far-flung friends. They were deliberately making sure to include her and Kyra in the conversation, under the blithe assumption that both girls would still be on Tangiers Prime and participants in the festivities.

Jack didn't have the heart to tell them otherwise. Neither, she noticed, did Kyra.

42.

A Growing Stack of Felonies

Jack didn't bother keeping a discreet distance between herself and Eve Logan as she shadowed the merc. There was no need. She was, after all, in Elsewhere as she did it. It was more fun that way, hiking practically by Logan's side; she got to hear everything the merc was muttering as she walked.

"Idiot! Absolute idiot! He's gonna get us kicked off this planet... not that I'd be sad to leave this teetotaler shithole..."

Only when Logan hurried up the flight of steps that led to New Marrakesh's courthouse did Jack stay behind; there were no such steps in Elsewhere for her to climb. It didn't matter too much; she knew exactly what the merc was doing inside.

Her honey trap had caught Toombs; now Logan had to bail him out of jail.

Kyra had stayed back at the *ait Meziane* house, not wanting to be a phantom attendee of a party that had, originally, been clandestinely in her honor. She intended to spend the evening-day researching other opportunities that could replace the one she had lost, and that her false ID qualified her for. But Jack hadn't been able to stay away.

She had begun worrying about the four women she'd thrown into Toombs' path too much to just let everything play out without watching. Elsewhere and U1 were similar enough in terrain—most places—that following everyone back to the garden, invisibly, hadn't been hard at all. She'd felt like the star of one of the *Ginny Lane*, *Kid Spy* novels she'd voraciously devoured at the age of nine as she did it. Ginny's cases would have been *so* much easier if *she* could have conducted surveillance from another universe. She wouldn't have needed so much of the tech Audrey's father had insisted didn't actually exist.

She had antigravity shoes, which don't exist, but never once used a Master Key, which does... huh. Of course, using a Master Key was a felony. Jack had, months ago, already discovered how different adventures were in reality, compared to those safe, sanitized books where every case was solved, and every caper foiled, within a hundred pages.

The party hadn't even begun yet. The grotto was still being set up by the garden's regular staff. Cedric was greeting men and women in military uniforms outside of the garden complex itself and directing them inside. Apparently, among the officers Tomlin had served with, early was on time, on time was *late*, and there was absolutely nothing fashionable about being late. The wait staff was still arriving, intermingled with the officers they would soon be serving, when one of the four waitresses Jack had added hurried up to Cedric... and Toombs pounced.

It was one of the two who looked a great deal like Kyra, technically not even *his* bounty as much as Logan's. In person, the resemblance was even more uncanny, although the woman had straight black hair and bangs instead of Kyra's wild, dark brown tangle. But Kyra had been wearing a long, black wig with bangs at Tomlin's memorial, when Toombs and Logan

had gotten a brief look at her and been told she was Ewan's cousin Dihya. The waitress was almost at the entryway, and had begun asking Cedric in Arabic if she was late, when Toombs emerged from concealment between two ornamental topiaries and grabbed her from behind.

"Ain't happenin', Miss Wittier-Collins," he said, grasping the crown of her hair and pulling as if to remove a wig. "You're comin' with me, an' you're gonna tell me where your friends—"

The waitress, who hadn't understood a word of what Toombs was saying—none of the women Jack had hired spoke English—obligingly picked that moment to scream.

Within seconds, Toombs was surrounded by several active members of Tangiers Prime's military service and the two off-duty police officers Cedric had asked to join the event. While Tafrara comforted the disheveled waitress once they'd pulled Toombs away from her, *he* shouted about how they were harboring a fugitive from the law and would pay for interfering with an officer conducting an arrest. Seeing *him* arrested, on the spot, by two *actual* police officers had made Jack very glad that nobody could hear her whoop of victory in Elsewhere.

"You stupid son of a bitch," Logan had quietly said from behind another topiary.

Seriously? You're hiding behind a bush shaped like a camel and calling him stupid?

A military captain, a few years older than and almost as handsome as Ewan, had taken the young waitress in hand, charming away her tears and asking her if she would accompany him to the police station, promising to stay with her and hold her hand the whole time she gave her statement to the authorities. Jack could see the young woman going from thinking that this was one of the worst days of her life to the starry-eyed hope that it might turn into one of the best.

Do the men of this planet just breathe in suave from birth?

Toombs, meanwhile, was staring in outraged confusion at the second Kyra doppelganger, who had just walked up and begun asking Safiyya for directions to the party. This one looked even *more* like Kyra than the first. *Both* of Jack's own lookalikes had arrived with her, one shorter and much curvier than her and the other with long auburn hair braided in an updo that would be impossible to pull off with any wig. Several of Tomlin's former colleagues had begun murmuring to each other, gesturing to the waitresses and to Toombs as they did.

He just lost all credibility with the military officers who witnessed this, Jack thought with delight as some of them offered to escort the new doppelgangers inside. *Everybody at the party is gonna hear just how full of shit his accusations turned out to be. And they're all gonna see how easy it is for a New Marrakesh woman to meet the descriptions he's been throwing around...*

But, she admitted as she waited for Logan to re-emerge from the courthouse, it wouldn't be enough. Kyra was right. Their mere presence on Tangiers Prime, if ever proved, would reveal that they had to have traveled on the *Scarlet Matador*, and that anyone who had given them shelter might know too much about that accident to live.

They still had to leave the planet, and they could only ever possibly return if they broke their trails too thoroughly for any connection between their visits to ever be made.

Thinking about that filled her with strange, hollow pain. This world, she thought, could have become Kyra's home, maybe even hers too, if only—

Logan and Toombs, fortunately, emerged from the courthouse right as she was in danger of wallowing in the unfairness of it all. Although the two mercs walked side by side, Jack could

feel, even across the threshold between worlds, just how angry both of them were with each other.

“...and don’t even get started on me about them bein’ locals,” Toombs was growling as they came into hearing range. “I was goddamn set up and nobody’ll say who by.”

“Nobody *knows*, damn it,” Logan fumed right back at him. “The women were hired last minute to work for the party, but not by the Meziane family. There’s no record of who contracted them or where the payment came from, but the garden staff was expecting them. Whoever arranged this—”

“*He* did. He’s *here*. This proves what I’ve been tellin’ ya.” Toombs scratched at his neck. “Son of a bitch flushed us out—”

“I hate to break it to you, especially now, but you’re wrong,” Logan said, pulling out her comm and cuing something up on it. “I got an alert about this from the Merc Network while I was waiting for you to get processed and released. Hot off the damned *presses*.”

Jack, who had fallen into step with the mercs as they came in range, didn’t need to look over Toombs’ shoulder to see what he was about to watch. She’d spent most of the morning-day and part of the noon sleeping period building the video file, using extremely powerful, and even more extremely illegal, programs to do it. The programs had just needed some archival footage of Riddick and a few minutes of posing and talking on camera from her and Kyra, and they had assembled everything with such speed and precision that Jack had been left wondering if the people of Helion Prime were right about AIs after all. Even so, it had taken hours to get just right. Toombs’ face, to her delight, became more and more confused, and angry, as he watched.

On the little screen, in long-shot but looking as real as if they were standing in front of the mercs, she and Kyra were dancing, clad in slinky little dresses, on either side of Richard B. Riddick, touching his chest and arms suggestively as he finished a drink and said something that made both of them laugh. They were surrounded by other revelers out on a public street at night, the glittering buildings in the background indicating that the street party was on—

“*Shakti Four*? What the fuck are they doing on *Shakti Four*?” Toombs looked as if he was about to break Logan’s comm. She grabbed it back out of his hand before he could.

“It was the spring equinox on *Shakti Four* two weeks ago,” Logan told him. “Big party. The ship that took off for there was the *Barsoom*. It boarded and launched while we were fussing over the *Scarlet Matador* and *Bon Temps* passengers, and landed there just in time for a hemisphere-wide shindig. I checked the *Barsoom*’s manifest and there were three last-minute passengers. A man and two women. It’s them. We’ve been chasing wild geese here.”

“Fuck. I *hate* that guy.” Toombs scratched at his head, making Jack glad that whatever vermin his fingers were chasing down couldn’t jump across the threshold and onto her. “We thought he was distractin’ you from the passengers on the *Matador*. Then, when they all cleared, we thought maybe it was a diversion to keep me away from the *Bon fuckin’ Temps*...” His mimicry of Logan’s correct French pronunciation was childishly mocking. “And by the time we were done with that, and thinkin’ maybe we’d missed somethin’ on the *Matador* ’cause no cameras glitched over by the Pretentious Fuckin’ Good Times... he and his girlies were gone on a whole ’nother ship. Son of a bitch. The big ones are s’posed to be *dumb*...”

Jack didn't bother hiding the smug grin that had bloomed over her face. The false trail had worked.

It wasn't even something she could really take much credit for, aside from a few moments' research into which ships she and Kyra could have departed on instead of the *Matador*. Her father had told her about several very dangerous worm programs that still showed up from time to time on the networks... some of which could be tamed and even trained by people with the right codes and sent on new targeted missions. He'd showed her the codes, probably unaware that they would stay in her head forever. Now two of those worms had been liberated from law enforcement containment and, after a little bit of domestication and instruction, one was burrowing its way through the Merc Network, laying bits of false trail and erasing contradictory data as it spread from node to node. In a few weeks, the entire merc network, from one end of the Federacy to the other, would carry her video... and the accuracy of the information about her and Kyra would be massively diminished, too. Another, smaller worm was making minute changes to the *Barsoom*'s flight manifest records throughout the Federacy.

And, Jack thought ruefully, by doing all that, I'm technically a class-one cyberterrorist now... The felonies kept stacking up somehow.

She'd gone back to the old apartment building to pull those stunts, wanting to make sure that none of it could *ever* be traced back to the *ait Meziane* house. That trip could have caused a few problems of its own, but Ewan was the only one who saw her and Kyra sneaking back into the house, and he'd kept his mouth shut even if he hadn't looked thrilled about it.

"Does that mean we're leaving?" Logan asked. "Finally?"

"Soon as Pritchard turns back up," Toombs said. "Son of a bitch still has my Master Key. Where the fuck is he *today*?"

Logan tapped her comm a few times. "Still somewhere south of here on the coast. The... Shady La— damn it, another brothel. How is he *paying* for all this shit?"

Jack snickered, remembering the motorcycle pirate that Ewan had given "Pritchard's" comm to. Apparently, the ride it had gone on was a wild one indeed. *I should ask him what that guy's story is...*

"Maybe that big score he insisted was about to come through did, and he just didn't wanna share it," Toombs grumbled. "Fucker'll be back when he finishes blowin' through his winnin's. Meantime, you get anywhere with his account?"

"Nope. His password clue was 'fuck you, Alex.'"

Toombs snorted. "Asshole knows me, I'll give him that. Lemme try."

Logan started to hand over her comm again and then stopped, holding it out of Toombs' reach for a moment. "You break it, and you're buying me a brand new one with twice the memory."

"Yeah, yeah... gimme."

Now Jack did watch over Toombs' shoulder as he pulled up Pritchard's Merc Network login. She paid close attention as he entered the other man's User ID, committing it to memory.

"How many tries do I get?" Toombs asked.

Logan rolled her eyes, *you should know this* written on her face. “Three. Then the system locks you out for an hour.”

Toombs began to type.

B00BS

“Oh for God’s sake,” Logan grumbled. “Are you *twelve*? You know damn well that you have to use capital and lower-case letters, *and* numbers, *and* a minimum of eight.”

“Fine,” Toombs snickered, changing his guess.

B1gB00bs

“You’re really not funny,” Logan told him.

Toombs seemed genuinely surprised that his guess hadn’t worked. His next one was obscene enough to make Logan smack the back of his head.

“You’re just wasting guesses here, fergodsake—”

“He’s spent the last how-the-fuck long goin’ from brothel to brothel and you think this password would be out of character?” Toombs asked, smirking as she rolled her eyes. “You don’t even know what he pays those places to let him do. Count yourself lucky.”

“Trust me, anything *you* find gross, I don’t wanna know about.”

“Annnnd... now I’m locked out. So much for his favorite food groups...”

“Why are you even bothering, anyway? Let’s just get the hell off this rock.”

“He owes me a Master Key.”

“So what?” Logan grouched. “You’ve got his Cam-Jam. Call it even.”

“Maybe I will. What’s the word from Her Majesty?”

“Oh. Yeah. ‘You’re fired.’” Logan frowned at him. “That was for *both* of us, by the way. I’m guilty by goddamn association. Thanks for that, asshole. I had a perfect record ’til you came along.”

“’Til *Riddick* came along and took a likin’ to the piece of tail you were huntin’, you mean.” Toombs handed her back her comm. “Not a scratch on it, see? Does that mean you don’t have to finish goin’ through the comm records for the morgue staff?”

A chill moved through Jack.

“Yeah, she said she’d have someone else do that,” Logan sighed. “I managed to get your charges reduced to misdemeanor assault. The Meziane family was talking about pressing *stalking* charges, saying you had intended to assault a visiting relative—way to be *subtle*, by the way—but I talked them out of it. Plead no contest, pay the damned fine, and we can get off this planet *today*.”

“Damn right. You wanna come with me to Shakti Four when we do? They’re a *civilized* world that knows how to serve *booze*.” Toombs waggled his brows.

“Jesus Christ, you just can’t let go of him, can you? You’re gonna end up like *Johns*.”

Logan shook her head. “Maybe. Gotta check on the status of the Wittier-Collins case back on New Dartmouth, first, make sure the bounty hasn’t been pulled. There’s a bunch of pressure on the government about that case from both sides. Half the planet wants to see her hang and the other half wants her crowned as a *rebel princess*. Weird damned world.”

“They’re *all* weird. Whether or not she’s good for the bounty, we catch up to her and we find the *big* prize. I’m still willin’ to split the take with you...”

Jack turned away from the pair, on a new mission. Slipping back into U1 behind an ornamental screen, she headed for the transit station where she’d rented a locker for a two-month stretch. Once she had liberated the funding cards inside, she went straight to a nearby tech shop, hurriedly purchasing the equipment she needed, and then started back for the Rif. The two mercs would be gone in the next few hours, the next day at most, and she no longer needed to dog their steps. She had something much more urgent to attend to.

As much as she didn’t like going back to the apartment where Kyra had been stabbed—by a merc she now knew was really named Pritchard—it was better to pull some of her more illegal shenanigans there than near or in the *ait Meziane* house. And anyway, Kyra was using her tablet to plan her next moves. The two of them had agreed, unhappily, that neither one of them should know where the other was going, just in case one of them got caught. Jack spent an hour setting things up on the new tablet, pulling in some of her more illegal resources, before she was ready to get started. Fortunately, the reception for Tomlin’s service colleagues was a lunch-to-dinner affair and she had until full dark to get back to the house without anyone noticing she’d been gone.

The first issue to deal with, she decided, was the morgue staff comm records.

Sometime after the Quintessa Corporation had informed the morgue of their intention to claim the *Matador* passengers’ bodies, after all, Usadden had called Ewan to warn him. That call linked the Meziane family, even if only tenuously, to the subsequent disappearance of all eighteen of those bodies. It needed to cease to exist.

It took another hour to locate the cache that was being sifted through, which technically belonged to law enforcement but was being handled by Quintessa Corporation staff and their associates. Once she found her way in, she began searching. She had the advantage of knowing what she was looking for, while the staff did not. It still took longer than she liked.

Usadden had been smart; no calls had been made from the morgue to the Meziane household or Ewan’s private comm number. But his private comm showed a call to Ewan’s, approximately an hour after he had finished talking to the Quintessa Corporation on the morgue’s line, that lasted two minutes. Worse, a recording of the call had been downloaded and logged.

She was going to have to fix that.

“Here’s the problem with trying to steal something, or kill somebody, and not have people realize that you were targeting something or someone specific,” Riddick had told her one “night” on the skiff, after Imam had fallen asleep and they could speak freely without incurring the holy man’s censure. The cleric was already trying to limit their conversations; talking shop about felonies would have sent him raging if he’d known. But Jack would have been happy to listen to Riddick talk about *anything*, and the world of crime was what he knew best. “You do a surgical strike, just taking that one thing, or taking out that one person, and you’ve told everybody way too much about the reason behind it. And how to find *you*, or your employer.”

“What do you mean?” she’d asked.

“Well... say I was hired to get a new piece of military tech that some developer had at home in his safe. I go in, crack open the safe, steal the tech, and leave... and everybody

knows that the tech was the target. They know whoever stole it was hired by someone who wanted to use it, or maybe stop its developer from using it. So there's a small suspect list, the fences who deal in that kind of tech are put under surveillance, countermeasures go into place to minimize the damage the tech can do... everybody's anticipating the next steps of someone who'd steal, or use, *that tech*."

Jack had nodded. Anything to keep him talking, but it really was fascinating. Riddick was, after all, one of the only people who'd ever defeated one of her father's security systems, and he'd defeated *four* of them.

"But what if, instead, I went in like a normal burglar? Emptied out the safe, not just of that piece of tech but all the other documents and valuables inside. Stole the wife's jewelry. Took the electronics. Made off with some of the smaller artworks. Made it look like my goal was just to grab anything valuable and portable and the tech just *happened* to get caught up with all that. Now they don't know what I was really after. Now, as far as they know, I don't even know what I *have*. Now they gotta put every fence in town under surveillance. If they want the tech back, they gotta hope that some of the other things I stole start showing up on the black market and can be traced back to one source. The whole way they look for me, and everything I took, changes..."

If she just deleted that one recording, Jack realized, she would draw all the attention to it, to that one call and the people who had made and received it. But if a wider array of materials went missing or got damaged...

Thank you, Riddick, wherever you are. She hoped it was somewhere nice... just not Shakti Four.

Jack checked the log. Eve Logan hadn't been replaced yet, and she'd only just finished going through the records from the morgue itself. Morgue employees' private comm calls, however...

...had all been stored in a separate folder. Personal comms required more warrants, many of which were still being signed, filed, and served.

Jack replaced the contents of every single recording within the folder with pure white noise. Then, carefully, she reversed the metadata of Usadden's call to Ewan, making it look like *Ewan* had called *Usadden*. For good measure, she canceled forty of the warrants that were still being processed, including the one for Usadden's comm, and erased all evidence that they had ever been filed. A quick side-trip using another Ghost Code, into the comms servicer the Meziane family used, and their records also indicated that Ewan had called Usadden that morning instead of the reverse. Much less suspicious.

She listened to a few of the other comm conversations Ewan and Usadden had had in recent weeks, wondering if the Meziane family even knew such things were being kept on file, picking the most innocuous and extemporaneous of them and replacing the comms servicer's offending audio file with it. If the file got downloaded again and another warrant was served, all anyone would hear was Ewan asking his cousin to settle a debate he and his—literal—wingman had about when and how rigor mortis set in after death. Ewan had apparently won the debate.

Weird thing to be arguing about, she thought. Something to do with a really old vid called *Clerks*...?

There had been another, actual call from Ewan to Usadden several hours later, which no one from Quintessa or law enforcement had logged or requisitioned. Yet. If they ever did, it would damn the whole family. That one, at least, Jack could erase completely from the system. She spent some extra time making sure that all traces of that call had been eradicated.

By the time she finished, night had settled in. She still needed to hack into Pritchard's account in the merc network, but that was something she could safely do back in her and Kyra's room in the *ait Meziane* house. She wouldn't be committing any class-one felonies by logging into a dead merc's account, especially since, she realized, she already knew his password. She wiped her new equipment and reset it to factory specs, hopefully erasing all evidence that it had been used to commit several cybercrimes, and then bundled everything up to take home.

Someone had always escorted her into the *ait Meziane* house, she realized as she reached the locked gates. Even when Ewan had caught them sneaking back during the noon sleeping hours earlier that day—and he'd never said why *he* was up at that time—he'd simply opened each of the gates for them and it hadn't occurred to her that they might have needed keys, even though the courtyard level was under six meters of Elsewhere's high tide at the time and bypassing them hadn't been an option. Fortunately, the next tide had yet to arrive. She passed through the gates' corridor on the Elsewhere side, wondering if she should ask for keys or if that would be a bad idea, given how soon she was going to be leaving.

It had gotten later than she'd realized; the party had already broken up. Takama, Safiyya, Cedric, and Ewan were arguing in the dining room as she entered the courtyard. She slipped back across the threshold into Elsewhere before they could see or hear her, approaching them as a phantom.

"...can't keep just going off on her own like this," Safiyya was saying. The presence of General Toal, seated nearby and diplomatically staying out of the fray, explained why she was saying it in English.

"It is what she is accustomed to doing," Takama said. "That is a habit that we may have trouble breaking."

Kyra? Listen in with me. You need to hear this. After a second, she could feel her sister paying attention to what she was seeing and hearing.

"But if she is to live with us—"

"Is she?" Cedric asked. "Gavin said she told him she had somewhere she needed to go. What makes you believe either of them plan to stay past Dihya's recovery? Have you even invited them to yet? Much less heard them say yes?"

"They are *children!*" Safiyya protested.

"D'you think, after everything they've been through and done, that they're just going to let any of us treat them like children?" Ewan asked. "You know what I was like at that age, and I was still fairly sheltered. They already know how to survive without—"

"Survive? Dihya was stabbed!"

"And Tizzy killed the man who did it," Cedric observed, putting a gentle hand on his wife's shoulder.

Jack winced even as Safiyya did.

“My point is,” Ewan continued, “you’re not going to convince them that you’re looking out for them by treating them like kids. Especially since they’re used to us *not* doing so.”

“Even if that was—”

“Even if that was wrong, *yes*. I do *know* that. But if you turn around and start... *infantilizing* them now—”

Safiyya gasped, staring at her son in offended shock.

“—it might just be the last time we ever see them.” He looked around at his parents and aunt. “I’m *serious*. For God’s sake, they’re high-powered *espers* with experience living on the streets and cracking security systems, *and* the ability to move into a whole other *universe* at *will*. You couldn’t keep me out of trouble, and I’m a baseline human and your *son*. Even if you *were* their parents and *had* the authority, how could you possibly think to *ground* someone who can do all *that*?”

“You can’t,” Takama agreed. “Not without locking them up in a way that they can’t escape, even with all of those advantages.”

For a moment, as Jack felt her heart plummeting, no one spoke.

43.

What Cannot Be Unlearned

The silence grew more and more painful as the moment dragged on. Takama's words hung over everyone. Jack, standing in two thresholds at once, could barely breathe.

Oh fuck, Jack, she heard in her head. Kyra wasn't any happier about this than she was.

"No," Ewan finally said, looking from one face to another. "*No*. Don't even start *thinking* about it."

"We may have to—" Safiyya began.

"What the hell are you planning on *doing*, exactly?" he demanded. "Casting a circle of salt around them? Trapping them in a bottle or a lamp? Locking them in a tower above Elsewhere's high tide line? Do you think they will *ever* believe you're on their side again—"

"We *are* on their side—"

"Not if you start thinking of imprisoning them! Tislilel hasn't even confided her *real name* to us yet and you would completely shatter her trust—"

"We just want to keep them safe," his mother protested.

"Don't make me remind you of what happened the last time someone tried to keep her *safely* locked up," Ewan told her, his voice shaking a little. "Look at her arms if you've forgotten."

Jack glanced down at her wrists. She'd honestly begun to forget the scars were there, markings of a suicide attempt that now seemed to have happened eons ago to another girl. She'd have to figure out what to do about them when she was heading home. There would be a lot of questions waiting for her on the other end of her journey, and that could be an especially difficult one to answer.

"What would you suggest we do instead? Let them run wild?" For whatever reason, Safiyya seemed to be the most upset.

Her first-born son's been dead for less than two weeks, Jack reminded herself.

She can't replace him with us, even if we were staying, Kyra countered in her head.

"Why do you believe she's running wild?" Ewan asked his mother. "A child prodigy may still be a child, but she's also still a *prodigy* and if we stop respecting that—"

"I just want to know where she *is*!" Safiyya's voice was breaking.

Jack winced at the desperate pain in her voice and stepped back out of their line of sight, isomorphing into U1 before re-entering the dining room doorway. "Right here," she said. She'd gone for her calmest tone, but it sounded more *depressed* than calm.

Four alarmed faces stared at her; General Toal's expression remained deadpan. She could see, in Ewan's face in particular, the knowledge that she had probably heard everything.

"The Quintessa Corporation envoy fired Toombs and Logan after the scuffle at the garden," she told them, her voice still heavier than she'd planned, before any of them could get over their shock and start in on her. That dual revelation seemed to shock them all

speechless anew. “They’re planning on leaving Tangiers Prime. Back during the overnoon sleep period, I sent out a fake vid that makes it look like Kyra and I are on Shakti Four with Riddick, and they’ve fallen for it, so that’s where they’re planning to go now. Before they were fired, Logan was reviewing recordings of all outgoing calls made by morgue employees before the *Matador* bodies disappeared. I spent the last five hours hiding the evidence that Usadden called Ewan and took a call from him a few hours later.”

She kept her words calm, informative, trying to use the debriefing style that both Ewan and his older brother had sometimes used. Silence greeted her. Almost everyone looked stricken; General Toal’s face remained inscrutable.

“If anyone ever asks,” she said, turning to Ewan and meeting his gaze, “*you* called Usadden that morning-day, not the other way around, and only once. You wanted him to settle a bet you had with Didier over how and when rigor mortis sets in.”

Ewan blinked, his eyes widening slightly. The call *had* been in Tamazight, but her translator program had helped her wade through it. Still, she could see him wondering how much of the language she’d picked up.

Jack shrugged at him. “It was the only other recording I could find that was short enough and didn’t reference times or events that could get flagged. I hope all of you *agreed* to your service provider recording your calls, because it looks like they have recordings of everything.”

“Tizzy...” Cedric began softly.

She couldn’t let him continue. She didn’t dare. Part of her desperately wanted to apologize to them, beg their forgiveness, let them take control of the moment and all the moments to come, but she couldn’t. In only a few more days, she had to leave, and if she let them tie her to them—and it would be *so easy* to—she might never go. This was, probably, as good a moment as she would ever get to sever that forming knot before it could tighten into something inescapable.

“I didn’t want to commit any class-one felony cybercrimes using your network address or geolocation,” she told all five of them instead, “so I went back to the apartment. It’s paid through the end of the month, anyway.”

Takama closed her eyes and nodded, sighing. Jack had the odd feeling that General Toal was struggling to hide a smile.

“I also learned, from shadowing Toombs, that the real name of the man I killed—” she faltered for a second as Safiyya flinched “—is Pritchard. They worked together sometimes. He was borrowing Toombs’ Master Key when he broke into our apartment, and I guess Toombs was holding onto *his* ‘Cam-Jam’ as collateral. I looked it up. It’s merc slang for a long-range *camera jammer*. I think Pritchard may have been the person who brought the bomb into the spaceport, but I won’t know for sure until I crack open his Merc Network account and take a look. So I’m gonna go do that, and then I’m gonna go to bed. Good night.”

She’d kept her voice calm, almost flat, through the whole speech. She’d tried not to let any of the hurt show, the sadness, the growing awareness that the harder they tried to hold onto her, the more she’d want to run. She *hoped* none of that had managed to come through, but her voice had felt so *heavy* the whole time.

Before they could say anything, she turned and started across the courtyard.

“Tislilel,” Ewan called after her, “have you eaten anything?”

She turned around again. He was standing in the doorway, poised to follow her. She could feel him struggling not to, struggling not to say dozens of things that could never be undone if he gave them voice. She shook her head at him, realizing for the first time that she hadn’t eaten since before they had all left for the officers’ reception and she had followed behind them as a phantom.

“Tafrara and I will bring something up to you,” He managed.

“Thank you.” She wanted to say so much more to him. *Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for defending me. Thank you for protecting me from myself on the beach of Elsewhere... ...I love you...*

If she said another word, she’d unravel everything. Instead, she turned away and headed into the opposite side of the *ait Meziane* house.

If they did lock us up, she found herself thinking, How would we get out? Our room is on the third floor. Unless we floated out of the house during high tide, we can’t pass through the walls without falling through the floor.

Could they?

She hadn’t been able to follow Logan into the courthouse, and had missed the beginning of her argument with Toombs, because the courthouse steps hadn’t existed in Elsewhere. But was there any way to be more selective? To let some of U1’s solid surfaces prevail while others were excluded?

She was still on the ground level, Elsewhere’s sands beneath her feet on the other side of the threshold, she thought as she reached the staircase up to the second story. If she wanted to test her idea, this was the best place to try. She isomorphed over, keeping U1 visible as a shadowy overlay, and contemplated the lowest stairstep.

I am in Elsewhere, completely in Elsewhere... the objects of U1 are not with me. I can pass through them, but... the surfaces of U1 will elevate me...

Her foot dropped through the top of the first step when she tried to put her weight on it.

Fuck. She sighed and concentrated harder. *I didn’t learn to isomorph the first time I tried to, either...* This was too important to give up yet.

She repeated her mantra, focusing on the idea that the solid surfaces of U1, the floors and stairs, should support her weight even when her body was all the way in Elsewhere... when she *wanted* them to. That the step, although it didn’t exist in Elsewhere, could still override the laws of gravity of that other ’verse, at least where she was concerned...

She tried stepping onto it again.

It held her weight.

Carefully, one step after another, she began to climb the staircase, barely daring to breathe.

“Tizzy?” Cedric’s voice called from behind her. She stopped, heart lurching, and turned to look at him.

Was she actually in U1? Could he see her on the stairs? Was that why the steps were holding her up?

But Cedric was looking around, walking toward the staircase but not focusing on her.

“Is she upstairs already?” Safiyya asked, entering the room with General Toal.

“Looks like,” Cedric told her. He took his wife’s arm as she started toward the stairs herself. “You need to let Ewan and Tafrara handle this. After everything she may have heard

you and Takama saying.”

“But—”

“We’ll only make things worse right now. Let them talk to her first, m’love?”

“I recommend this as well,” General Toal agreed. “Tonight was, unfortunately, not handled well. Especially now that we know where she was, and what she was doing for your family’s sake.”

Safiyya looked like she wanted to argue with him, but then she sighed and nodded, her face crumpling. Cedric drew her into a hug. Their grief was too painful for Jack to look at long.

She turned and finished climbing the steps. They hadn’t known she was there; what she had tried was *working*.

Kyra, can you feel what I’m doing?

Yeah. Good thought. You’ll need to teach me how. Now get up here.

Kyra pulled her into a hug the moment she entered their room. They stood still, embracing fiercely, for a long moment, only finally letting go when Sebby climbed onto both of them to get their attention.

“We can’t stay much longer,” her sister whispered, sadness in her face. “I love them and I know you do, too... but they don’t get how much danger they’re putting themselves in, trying to look out for us.”

“Yeah,” Jack sighed, wishing there was some argument that could be mustered against that, but knowing there wasn’t. “Did you find anything?”

“Got a few possibilities,” Kyra said with a wry grin. “Can you help me write the cover letters? You’re pretty good at that.”

They were finishing the first cover letter when Tafrara and Ewan knocked on the door. Kyra closed down the tablet and put it away while Jack walked over to let them in.

True to Ewan’s word, they had brought up food. The moment its aroma hit Jack’s nose, she realized how ravenous she was. “Thank you. *So much*. Do you two want to come in?”

They did, but the next few minutes were a little awkward. Jack tried to concentrate on stuffing her face, especially any time the urge to apologize surfaced again.

I’m going my own way in just a few days more, she reminded herself. *They’d better get used to it now. I’d better get used to it now.*

Kyra, however, needed firmer answers.

“Look,” she said, her eyes moving between Ewan and Tafrara. “We love all of you, we really do, but I gotta know if someone’s about to start locking us in here or anything.”

Ewan winced, looking ashamed, even though he was the one who had argued vehemently against it.

“Our parents are very sorry,” Tafrara began.

“Sorry they considered it, or sorry we overheard them considering it?” Kyra asked.

“A bit of both,” Ewan muttered.

Tafrara shot him a *look*. “It’s just... neither of you should be on your own, not at your ages,” she told them. “You shouldn’t *have* to take care of yourselves so much.”

Kyra looked over at Jack. *Don’t rise to that*, she sent through the air before turning to look at Tafrara again. “You know neither of us chose to be in these situations, right?”

“But that just makes it more important for you to have someone—”

“Making the few choices we have left *for* us?” Kyra tilted her head, still keeping her eyes locked with Tafrara’s. “You know my story, right? You know what started the whole damned stand-off in the first place?”

Ewan and Tafrara both shook their heads.

“The New Christy Elders wouldn’t let girls learn math. Or science. Or social sciences. Or anything much except how to be good little wives and brood mares. You know who figured that out and raised a stink?” When they didn’t answer, she continued. “Amnesty Interplanetary, that’s who. And a bunch of shitstains who hated us already took it up as a *cause*. ‘Save the girls of New Christy.’ As if they actually gave a fuck. You know how many of those girls died after Red Roger and his men stormed the place to supposedly *rescue* us?”

“All but three,” Ewan whispered. “And you were one of those three.”

“And trust me, you don’t want to know what they did before killing most of ’em. You don’t even want to *imagine*.” Kyra stood up, stalking the room with restless energy. Jack could feel her wishing for something, *someone*, to pummel until the pain went away again. “So yeah, I know your parents *mean well*... but people meaning well already cost me my whole family, my friends, my freedom, my *virginity*...”

Brother and sister both winced.

Kyra stopped near the balcony doors and turned back to face the room. “Nobody... *nobody* makes my choices for me. Not ever again. I appreciate everything you guys have done for me, are trying to *do* for me, but that’s my line in the sand. I’m not gonna be anybody’s daughter. It’s too late.”

It was, Jack realized, the last word on the subject. Neither Tafrara nor Ewan asked about her own reasoning or plans; Kyra had shut the whole conversation down too thoroughly. Her sister had done that on purpose, so that Jack wouldn’t tell them where she had been trying to go, or where she was going back to, or even just that she already *had* a family that was awaiting her return. The known quantity of Kyra’s history had been used to obscure the hidden story of “Jack B. Badd.”

No wonder she’s not impressed by Amnesty Interplanetary’s attempts to defend her now, Jack thought. *They accidentally set all of it in motion, and even if they try to atone now—*

“We are so sorry, Dihya,” Ewan said. His voice was subdued.

Kyra managed a curt nod. “Not like any of you were in on it. It’s just... too late for me to go back. You know, the most fucked up part of all of it was I *wanted* someone to rescue me back then. I wanted a different life than I’d gotten. I wanted to do the things they said were *boy* things. I wanted *out* of the enclave. Did I ever get my fucking *wish*...”

You didn’t make any of that happen, Jack told her. *None of it was your fault.*

Kyra looked her way, a pained smirk appearing on her face. *Survivor’s guilt, right? Just another thing we have in common...*

“We’ll explain to our parents,” Tafrara said in a voice that was every bit as cowed as Ewan’s. “I think... they miss getting to *be* parents... once Zdan went off to university, they haven’t quite known what to do with themselves since. I think, when they saw these two *orphans* wander into the Rif—not just our parents but Takama and Brahim, too—they were all hoping...”

“To rescue us,” Jack finished for her. “Only the things they wanted to rescue us from...”

Mercenaries? Monsters? Death and destruction? Mayhem? Being, essentially, child soldiers on a shadowed battlefield where most of the villains posed as white-hats? The loss of innocence?

“...already ate us,” Kyra finished when she couldn’t.

Ewan closed his eyes, swallowing. When he reopened them, and they met Jack’s, the sorrow and regret in them speared through her. She couldn’t look away—

Kyra cleared her throat sharply.

“We should go,” Tafrara said, nudging her brother to break the dangerous spell that had begun to build. “We’ll let you two rest. In the morning, we have something special planned,” she continued as she ushered Ewan out of the room. “We saw you watching us spar, and even though your stitches won’t let you do that yet, there are exercises that are safe for you to do.”

Ewan allowed himself to be pushed out of the room, not looking back.

“We’ll show you tomorrow. Good night, girls,” Tafrara said, and closed their door.

Kyra stared after them for a moment and then started to snicker. “Damn. You two can’t even *look* at each other without sparks the size of *Sebby* flying. Now we know how to end any awkward conversation around here.”

“Jeez, yeah,” Jack grumbled. “With even *more* awkwardness.”

“Well, he’s only here for two more Tangiers days,” Kyra said, and then winced as pain sliced through Jack at the thought. “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking. But even if you were eighteen right now, we’d still have to leave, you know. So it’s better that there’s this ...barrier... anyway.”

“I guess so,” Jack said, pulling the new tablet out of her bag. “I’m gonna move my stuff off that tablet so it’s all yours. I’ve got instructions on how to use ghost codes and how to make fake IDs on there. You get to keep those. But that way you don’t have to worry about me seeing your plans.”

“And you don’t have to worry about me seeing yours,” Kyra nodded. “I know you don’t like it, but... everybody thinks they’re brave and stoic enough to make it through being interrogated, but most people turn out not to be. We can’t spill what we don’t know.”

Jack nodded, reminded of Pritchard again. He hadn’t seemed to *care* that she didn’t know where Riddick was. She was pretty sure he’d begun really looking forward to hurting her because he’d realized she wouldn’t have any bargaining chips to use to make him stop. There’d been something deeply sick in his head.

“Yeah, that guy was a fucking creep,” Kyra agreed. “I felt it, too. A little too literally. Son of a bitch got a *hard-on* when he stabbed me.”

“Eww. I didn’t see that.”

“I felt it. Went away fast after Sebby stung him, though. You’d better not feel even a little regret about finishing him off.”

“*Don’t you cry for Johns. Don’t you dare,*” a voice rumbled, in response, out of memory. Even though it was entirely inside her head, her sister heard it.

“When’d *that* happen?” Kyra asked, tilting her head quizzically.

“Damn, I still have a lot to tell you about the eclipse.”

Jack talked while she ported her data over to the new tablet, careful not to describe in too much detail just what had happened to Hassan, focusing instead on the discovery that light wasn’t merely painful but injurious to the crash planet’s native life, burning away the skin of

the one Johns shot and killed. All they needed, they'd realized, was enough light, and they could make their way back to the mining settlement and the skiff.

Except that Johns wanted to stay put. The argument had gotten ugly. Imam, still seeming so wise and judicious to her, had said that the orrery back in the settlement indicated that the darkness might last a long time, days or even weeks, subtly siding with Fry. Paris, aside from volunteering his alcohol stash for burning and pointing out that the sand cat wouldn't run at night—an assumption Jack still had *issues* with—refused to choose a side. But then when Johns and Fry started getting really nasty with each other, and Johns had started to make a move toward violence—

Riddick had stepped in.

Calm, silent, having said nothing at all during the debate, he still didn't speak, but he put himself between Fry and the muzzle of Johns' gun. He didn't seem to be bothered by the possibility that, if the merc pulled the trigger, he'd be headless. Instead, he'd gently tapped one of Johns' legs with his shiv.

At the time, Jack had thought it was her imagination, the male voice she'd heard in her head, the *Riddick* voice in her head murmuring *The abdominal aorta's a gusher, but wait 'til you see the femoral artery go...*

"Goddamn, he's a serious *badass*," Kyra snickered.

It shouldn't have been quite so equal a standoff. Would Riddick really have had time to slice open Johns' thigh if the lawman—she'd still thought he *was* one up to that point—started to pull the trigger? But she'd heard another echo of Riddick's voice, along with the remembered heat of him against her back—

—No, not *her* back, but Fry's—

—saying "then again, I *am* worth twice as much *alive*."

And somehow she'd known, suddenly, that *Fry* knew Johns wasn't a real cop. That he'd done something so horrible that he'd lost all of Fry's respect in the process. Something that, when Fry had realized it, had shifted her allegiance away from him and his empty representation of law and order. She had no faith in him, no belief that he could or would help any of them. She trusted Riddick more...

Riddick, who was calmly staring Johns down while acting as Fry's shield.

The fake cop had backed off, his smile disturbingly unhinged as he did so. Jack had been struck with terrible knowledge: this wasn't over. Whatever was going on with the three of them was going to end in blood.

"Hopefully his," Kyra said, powering down her tablet and setting it aside. "Okay... my cover letters and credentials are sent and my brain is *fried*... you okay if I go to sleep now?"

"Sure," Jack said, checking over her new tablet's safeguards one more time. "I'm gonna see if I can get into Pritchard's account and then I'll probably do the same."

"Sounds good. G'night..."

Jack spent another half hour making sure that her incursion into the Merc Network would be untraceable, before finally pulling up the login screen. Typing in Pritchard's username, she hoped that Toombs wasn't still tossing obscene password possibilities at the account and it wouldn't be locked.

A new screen appeared, inviting her to enter a password.

Jack closed her eyes, visualizing the piece of paper that had been tucked into Pritchard's billfold. It had looked like a random string of numbers and letters at the time; now, having seen the gross passwords that Toombs had tried, and the way he'd used numbers as letter substitutions in places, the string resolved into a revolting phrase that told her far too much about what Pritchard paid brothels extra to let him do. Suddenly she regretted being eidetic; there was no way to wash that back out of her mind.

She entered the combination into the password field, feeling sullied just typing it.

Welcome, Duke Pritchard.

She was in.

The man was a packrat; that didn't surprise her. His case and correspondence files stretched back for more than two *decades*. He and Toombs had been messaging for the last decade, on and off, and had seemingly worked on several cases together. Only one other correspondence file was larger. She opened that file and dug in.

Bingo.

She read over the most recent messages, feeling a strange tightening in her stomach as she went.

DP: Don't worry about it. Lay low. I've got a line on him. We can make him take the fall for everything. Bonus: both his girls are fair game.

"Motherfucker," Jack murmured. They'd been planning on shifting the blame for the spaceport explosion onto *Riddick*?

She looked back further in the log.

JM: Target inaccessible. Need a two-block package. You know the kind. Can you bring it to me?

DP: On my way. Location?

JM: Concourse C4. How's that for irony?

You fucking bastards.

DP, Duke Pritchard, had brought the bomb into the spaceport. A "package" sized to take out two city blocks? Or maybe a package made out of two blocks of explosives? She wasn't sure. But JM was the man who had shadowed Tomlin in the spaceport, driving him into the pilots' lounge, and then calling for a bomb to wipe him and hundreds of others off the map.

Who was JM?

She dug around in more correspondence and case subfolders, looking for anything where the full name was spelled out. It took just ten minutes and then she hit the jackpot.

Javor Makarov. He and Pritchard had hunted together often. Their bounties, she noticed, were almost always women when they did. She realized why soon after when she found the media files Pritchard had hidden in a subfolder with the odd label "Bad Kitties."

There were, she realized, multiple image collections behind the label... hideous pictures that Stacey would have loved, of Pritchard and Makarov with, when Jack opened one

collection, a young woman who looked barely older than Kyra...

There were more than two dozen different collections like that, she saw, her nausea rising. Each set featured a different woman. Or girl. Always young, one or two looking younger than *her*...

There were vid files in each folder, too. She didn't even try to open any of those.

The man with Pritchard in virtually every image was recognizably the same man who had been captured, at a distance, by surveillance cameras as he set the bomb down on a bench. Makarov was the bomber. But he was *so much worse* than that.

Her hands shaking, Jack began to assemble a new file folder in Pritchard's account, copying as much damning evidence as she could stomach into one deadly, terrible dossier. She would have to send it on later, from the old apartment, just in case anyone could break through the backtrail protections that she had in place. Once the tide went back out, she would go.

And then law enforcement would learn a whole lot more about Duke Pritchard and Javor Makarov, two monsters hiding behind fake badges... two hideous excuses of men who made William Johns look like an Eagle Scout by comparison.

She wondered just how much Toombs had really known about Pritchard... and how much Logan really knew about *Toombs*. Worse, she now knew exactly what would have been done to her and Kyra, only a few evening-days earlier, if the *Apeiros* and Sebby hadn't been helping them defend themselves.

...both his girls are fair game...

It was too much.

Jack hoped none of the *ait Meziane* clan—especially not Ewan, who had made such an effort to get her fed—could hear her puking her guts out into the toilet. She hoped she'd shielded Kyra from what she had learned, and it wouldn't seep into either of their dreams.

Could she ever be Audrey again with this monstrous knowledge in her head?

44.

Any Box Could Be Pandora's

Jack's letter of employment from the Sirius Corporation was waiting for her when she woke up. "Marianne Tepper" had officially been hired.

She had an odd memory of speaking with the *Apeiros* and asking them to help her not dream... or to pull her back into their "space" if her dreams became troubled. Maybe it had worked, because she had no memory of any other dreams, but felt surprisingly well-rested given how wretched she'd felt when she'd closed her eyes.

As she had suspected they might, the Sirius Corporation had bypassed the formal interview—one would be held, more or less, when she arrived at the orbital shipyard and they checked her in—and instead had sent her all of the forms a new hire had to fill out. She completed and returned them before Kyra began to stir.

The countdown, she thought, had truly begun for her.

Ewan's leave would end in two evening-days; his family had been discussing his planned send-off as they walked to the garden grove the evening-day before. Two morning-days after that, it would be Jack's turn to go. The Sirius Corporation had included information about her reservation on its shuttle to the shipyards that evening-day; she just needed to make sure she was in New Casablanca in plenty of time for it. She booked her ticket immediately, using one of the new funding cards she had picked up from the drop she'd finally visited the day before. Most of the other cards would go to Kyra; all of Jack's expenses would be paid for once she boarded the *Nephrite Undine*, and the payout for flying it to Deckard's World was an almost obscene amount that would easily fund her return home and whatever cover stories she needed to concoct once she got there.

Now she could focus on getting through the next few days.

"So," Kyra murmured from the pillow next to her, "you got good news?"

"Yeah. Got a route back to— home..." At the last second, she reminded herself that, even though she was finally at the point where she was okay with telling Kyra where *home* was, they'd agreed that she shouldn't. Damn. "...leaving three morning-days from now. If all goes as planned, I'll be back long before my fifteenth birthday."

"How much younger than that will you actually be?" Kyra asked, smirking. Jack had, after all, told the first group therapy session she'd attended that she was thirteen, and only three Standard months outside of cryo had passed since then.

"Just about fourteen when I get home," Jack admitted. "I've lost nine months to cryo so far. Hopefully I won't seem *too* much younger than my official age when I get back."

"You'll look different than they remember, I bet, enough to keep them from thinking you should've changed even more. I mean, you shot up in height while we were in the hospital." Kyra snickered at Jack's shocked look. "Seriously. You didn't notice? You were two inches

shorter than me when you got there. Now we're the same height. You've been on a helluva *growth spurt*."

"1.73 meters..." Jack said with awe. "I saw it on my charts two evening-days ago and couldn't figure it out. I was 1.63 meters when I left— home..."

"I don't think you're done growing yet, either, not with the appetite you've got," Kyra told her. "Your family run tall?"

"My dad's side, yeah. My mom's side isn't *as* tall, but yeah." Her father was 1.9 meters, the same height as most of the men in the Tomlin-Meziane family. Back on Deckard's World, though, they used old Imperial measurements, just like twentieth century Americans had; by that reckoning, her father was 6'3", her mother was 5'6", and she *had* been 5'4" when her Missing posters would have gone up, and had just crossed the 5'8" mark on her way to god-knew-what. Kyra, she noticed, used feet and inches, too. But Audrey's father had insisted on teaching her the metric system concurrently with the Imperial; as ex-military *and* an engineer, he'd considered it both more precise and more valuable to a life in the wider Federacy.

"Bet you get another inch or two before you stop," Kyra chuckled beside her. "C'mon... let's go have breakfast. No more room service unless one of us gets sick or hurt, y'know."

"Except for Sebby," Jack laughed, climbing out of bed. "Sebby gets room service."

Reeeeeee? The crustacean in question peeked out from beneath the dresser, where he'd apparently been playing.

"Only because Lalla doesn't want crickets hopping around in her kitchen," Kyra laughed back. "Don't worry, Sebby, we'll bring you your food soon."

Sebby chirped happily and vanished under the dresser again.

"I swear, he understands everything we say..."

General Toal was at the table with everyone when they entered, Jack noticed. She wondered if he was staying at the house as a guest. Everyone seemed relaxed around him, though. Maybe he was a regular guest.

Cedric waited until the meal was ending before bringing up the previous night. "We really are sorry about jumping to so many conclusions last night, Tizzy," he said. "And for overstepping where your liberties are concerned." His gaze turned to Kyra. "We won't try to parent you, Dihya. It's hard not to *want* to, but... we understand how you feel about it."

"Thank you," Kyra murmured, but she set her fork down with food still on it and didn't pick it back up.

"I'm sorry, too, about not telling you where I was going or anything," Jack said. "So I should probably tell you that I need to go out for a while, today, to do some things I can't do here."

Takama gave her an inquiring look.

"Duke Pritchard brought the bomb into the spaceport," she told them. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw General Toal come to complete alertness, his teacup freezing millimeters from his lips. "The man in the bomber video is Javor Makarov. They've worked together a lot. I have evidence I need to release into the wild, but if law enforcement is gonna be able to use it, it has to go out in a way that doesn't disqualify it from use. Which means I need to do some pretty illegal things to make it look like Pritchard himself accidentally released it. Things I don't want ever getting traced back here."

“So you’re going back to the apartment again,” Takama said, her voice soft.

“Yeah. Probably for a few hours.” Jack swallowed. Looking through Pritchard’s files again, making sure she created a trail that would lead law enforcement back to his and Makarov’s Merc Network accounts, making sure none of the surveillance pictures he’d taken of her and Kyra still existed, was going to be a hideous ordeal. At least, if she ended up stress-puking again, the family wouldn’t hear her doing it—

“Someone should go with you—” Ewan said. Tafrara jostled his arm, her expression scolding. “...Like Tafrara—”

“No,” Jack said too quickly. “I... don’t want anybody to see what I’ve found. It’s really bad. I wish *I* hadn’t seen any of it. But when law enforcement gets it, it’ll be a game changer. Just... it’s bad enough that *I* had to look at it—”

Kyra, next to her, gasped in horror and covered her mouth. Fuck. Some of what she had seen must have slipped across their connection.

Everyone was looking at Kyra with concern now. She swallowed, wincing, and lowered her hand after a moment. “None of you should see it,” she agreed. “Ever.”

“Won’t it come out, whatever it is?” Lalla asked.

“Not... in so much *detail*...” Kyra said, pushing her plate a little further way from her.

“Unfortunately, the only way to ensure that it is acted upon at all is a wide release,” General Toal rumbled. “The Universal Mercenary Registry is a powerful organization with a history of evading law enforcement oversight and having warrants voided. You will need to get your data into the public sector, into the hands of people who can and will broadcast it widely, who have high profiles and strong credibility, to ensure it isn’t covered up again.”

“Pretty sure it’s a Federacy crime to broadcast those kinds of pictures,” Jack muttered without thinking, and heard Safiyya gasp.

But she was already mulling it over, thinking about major news outlets that, even if they could never show the pictures themselves, could raise enough of a stink about their mere existence to prevent anyone from being able to sweep it under a rug. Especially if it was obvious that Makarov was also the bomber every law enforcement agency in the Tangiers system was seeking...

What if some random perv reached out to law enforcement and the press, claiming that the porn he’d been collecting starred the bomber, providing just enough examples to prove that multiple class-one felonies had been perpetrated by Makarov, and giving Pritchard’s Merc Network address as the original source...?

Nobody would find it even a little suspicious that the hypothetical sicko was using a brand-new, anonymized account to reach out from, given that whoever it was would have *enjoyed* those kinds of pictures and only came forward at all because of the bombing.

It could work. She’d just need another new tablet, because the one she’d do it all with would be forever contaminated—

The table, she realized, had gone deathly silent. She looked up. Everyone was gazing at her with similar expressions of sad comprehension and empathy. It was dangerous for her to meet their eyes right now. She focused on Ewan, on what she needed to tell him, avoiding his eyes and looking at his throat instead as she talked.

“Your pirate friend, the one who has Pritchard’s comm... you need to get word to him to get rid of it and get as far away from it as possible. It’s about to become serious hazmat.

Especially given the places he's been taking it."

"You gave it to *Robie*?" Usadden asked.

Ewan answered with a curt nod.

"It is not what you think," Usadden told her, "although under the circumstances, I can see why you might think it... and why it would fit a little too well. Dr. Robie is a gynecologist with the Tangiers Department of Health."

The absurdity of that—the mental image of a man, who looked like he belonged in an ancient Disney vid about Caribbean pirates, traveling by motorcycle from brothel to brothel to perform state-mandated *health checks*—startled a laugh out of Jack, a much louder one than was appropriate. She covered her mouth, trying to rein it in.

"I'll let him know." Ewan's voice was subdued, sober.

Nobody at the table was touching their food now. Fuck.

"I'm sorry," Jack said, getting up. "I didn't mean to say any of this. I didn't want any of you to have to know. I'm gonna... go get started..."

"You shouldn't have to do this alone," Takama said.

"Shouldn't..." Jack said in part agreement, wishing that even half of the *shoulds* everyone cherished so much could be real. "Have to."

She picked up the singing box of crickets, sitting on a small table by the courtyard doorway, and left before things could get even more complicated.

There was a scorecard attached to the box, she noticed as she carried it upstairs.

How Many Crickets?

The title had been written in both English and Tamazight. Different names had different tallies. Izil had two numbers beside his name: 3 and 5. Tafrara had 7 and 4. Ewan had 8 and 5. Kyra had a 4 by her "Dihya" name. Lalla had a 9. No numbers were by Jack's name—well, "Tizzy"—yet, but they'd given her a line.

It wasn't how many crickets were in the box, she realized, but how many would jump onto her when she opened the box. That was what she would need to write in.

Except I know how to make it a zero... It'd give her a chance to practice her new trick.

Sebby leapt onto the bed, bouncing and chittering with excitement, when he heard the cricket song. Jack grinned at him and walked over to his tub, kneeling down and setting the box inside it, and then resting her hands on the box. She focused, for a moment, on the texture and dimensions of the cardboard under her fingers.

*The floor of U1, beneath my legs, supports me whether I am in U1 or Elsewhere, she thought carefully. And I am now in Elsewhere, too, and so is this cardboard box... but only the cardboard part, not any of the things inside it, no matter how hard they cling... and I am all the way in Elsewhere with the box **now**...*

The floor held her up. The box vanished from U1, staying firmly in her hands on the other side of the threshold. Within the tub in U1, hundreds of crickets spilled out, their chirps stilling for an instant. Sebby shrieked with delight and leapt into the tub, chomping the first crickets in easy reach of his mandibles.

Exhaling, Jack lifted the cardboard box away, stood up, and isomorphed back into U1 before opening its lid carefully.

No crickets had remained inside.

She found a pen in the bedroom's desk drawer and put a 0 by her name on the scorecard, setting the box next to the door.

She wished she'd known this particular parlor trick back when Pritchard had invaded the apartment. She could have dispatched him without Kyra even needing to wake up.

Yeah, but then Toombs and Logan would've been banging down our door because his comm's last-known address would've been our building...

And, as much as what she'd seen in Pritchard's account made her gorge rise, she'd never have gained access to it and wouldn't be able to let the worlds know who had bombed the spaceport.

It was sickening to think that the violence of that night, including Kyra getting stabbed, might have been the best possible outcome.

I need out of this life...

Not life itself, she amended. Just *this* one.

But Ewan was in this life, and Kyra, and Sebby, and this amazing family...

And I can't keep any of them. I'm gonna lose them all. Whether I stay or go, and if I try to stay it'll probably end up being a much worse loss. The thought left her feeling strangled.

As much as she needed to go home, a huge part of her never wanted to leave this place and the family she'd found. The thought that she might, possibly, never see any of them again was hard to face.

She gathered her things, everything she would need for the day—including, she decided, her telescope—and isomorphed over to Elsewhere before leaving the room. She wasn't in any condition to talk to anyone. She might start bawling her eyes out if she did.

The tide had only just receded, and was still close enough that she could hear it washing in and out nearby, as she reached the wet sand on the ground level. She hadn't needed to concentrate quite as hard, this time, to keep the surfaces of U1 supporting her. Soon, she suspected, she'd be able to do it subconsciously, and then unconsciously as she continued practicing the new skill.

Okay, first things first, she told herself, aware that she was suddenly procrastinating. Look around New Marrakesh for anything still floating in Elsewhere that shouldn't be... hopefully there won't be anything to find, but if there is, hopefully I can get to it before anyone from Quintessa does...

Once that was done, she'd pick up another tablet to use just for her incursions into the Merc Network, and other parts of what her father had always called the Dark Zone and admonished her to stay far away from. She'd set up an account for her fictitious pervert, populate it with "gifts" from Pritchard, and then have the "perv" reach out to a variety of law enforcement and news agencies with just enough evidence to set everyone onto Pritchard's and Makarov's trail.

But before she did that, she reminded herself, she had to make sure anything Pritchard had learned about her, or about the Tomlin-Meziane family, was long gone from his account and unrecoverable.

Bonus if I can find something in there that connects him to the Quintessa Corporation and rains fire down on their heads if it comes out...

She pulled out her telescope and got down to business.

An hour later, she'd found several items that she and Kyra had unthinkingly thrown out during their first days in New Marrakesh, including the wigs they had worn that had been ruined by their first high tide. It took another hour to finish reaching all of them and bring them fully into Elsewhere. Her ruined video screen from the *Matador*, which someone had apparently salvaged from the trash for parts, forced her to carefully climb the phantom steps of a twelve-story building in order to retrieve it and all of its little pieces, something that gave her mild fear of heights an extreme workout and made her wish she'd asked Kyra to accompany her. She got it done, though, and even managed to resist the temptation to kiss the ground once she'd painstakingly made her way back down. As the waters continued to recede in Elsewhere, she followed them down into town, searching for anything small and fencible that one of the orderlies might have helped themselves to.

Nothing.

Maybe they only made the move when they realized they wouldn't get another chance, she thought. *They were supposed to inventory the bodies and personal effects to get them ready for transfer to the Quintessa Corporation... maybe that's when someone decided to grab those earrings and the cash...*

It more or less made sense. Especially if the thief had control over the inventory sheets and could make sure it looked like the missing items had never been there to begin with.

She hoped that was the case. Her life would be a whole lot easier if that were the case.

She did one final look around, sweeping the telescope across the area. Othman Tower and Mansour Plaza were still clear; none of the survivors had left anything behind when they'd been evacuated from either of those buildings. Same for the hospital tower. She swept wider

...the fuck? ...

Something was downtown, in one of the areas that housed fancy government offices and high-powered corporate headquarters. She zoomed in on it as much as the telescope would permit.

Three stories up, within an elegant glass building, hovered at least a dozen small—Cubes.

"Fuck me," Jack muttered, putting away the telescope and heading downtown.

There were more apeirochorons in New Marrakesh.

Elsewhere's tide hadn't fully receded when she reached the glass building, and she had to slosh through its hip-deep waters as she crossed the final city blocks. It didn't come as a surprise to her that the corporate logo on the entrance was for the Quintessa Corporation.

Inside, the place looked almost like a movie set for one of the dystopian sci-fi vids her cousins had loved. Everything was shiny and brand-new looking, displaying none of the signs of weathering and use that even her mother's luxe legal offices had shown. A well-coiffed and impossibly beautiful woman—too beautiful and far too poised to be anything but synthetic—waited to greet people entering the building; well-armed security guards were stationed near every entrance and every doorway further in. An ordinary burglar would never have been able to get past the front doors, she suspected.

But did any of their security extend past U1? The boxes, after all, did.

She kept her movements slow and careful as she crossed the floor, studying everything. So far, nothing on the ground level seemed to exist outside of U1. At least, nothing existed within that space in Elsewhere except salty air and sloshing tidewaters over sand, rocks, and shells. Did they have any kind of map up somewhere, she wondered, as she tried to decide which doorway might lead to a staircase or some other way of reaching the third story without slipping back into U1.

There weren't any maps or floor plans where she could find them. Not even the ones usually required by Federacy fire codes.

It took her half an hour of quartering the ground level, as cautiously as she could, before she found stairs leading up, tucked into the back of the building. She climbed them with painstaking slowness, studying her surroundings for any sign of *anything* that could see or reach into Elsewhere, knots slowly twisting their way into her nerves.

Nobody knows I'm here, she thought. It was both reassuring—the Corporation had no idea it was being infiltrated—and distressing. *The whole family thinks I'm at the apartment building...*

Hopefully this wouldn't be as stupid a move as she suddenly worried it was.

She took a deep breath as she reached the third story. The floor held her up, but she was starting to feel the full effects of her intense level of concentration. She'd need to find some food to eat, and a place to sit quietly for a while, when she was done here. This shit was *taxing*.

The cubes floated ahead of her in the space of Elsewhere, hidden behind walls in U1. She passed through those walls easily, avoiding one area that she already knew contained elevator shafts. The walls, to her, were just phantom layers between her and her quarry. She just couldn't see what else existed in the space with the cubes until she was finally through all of those walls and inside the room that held them.

A laboratory. A laboratory inside a thick steel vault.

One of the cubes was sitting on a counter; the others were stored inside a large cabinet. The walls of the cabinet in U1 blocked her from seeing what else might be inside in that 'verse. In Elsewhere, the cubes simply hung in space, seeming to defy the laws of physics.

They were made of the same strange material as the one she'd encountered in the *Scarlet Matador*. Up close, they were even stranger. Metal? Stone? She couldn't tell for sure. Maybe both. Aware that there was a camera in the room, she bypassed the cube on the counter for the moment, reached through the phantom cabinet door, and tried to lift one.

*Light. Weird... given the fight the other one gave me, I was expecting it to be **super** heavy...*

But its density was not in any *one* universe, she realized.

An apeirochoron simultaneously exists in every universe, occupying the same isomorphic point in spacetime in each...

How did she know that?

With a chill, she realized that *they* had told her that at some point, in one of the dreams that she could mostly, but not completely, remember. They had shown her an apeirochoron when they'd asked her what kinds of locks she knew how to break. And, at some point, they had whispered the rules of its existence to her, most of which she still couldn't consciously recall.

But unlike the last one she'd encountered, *these* boxes, she saw, had *lids*. Unlike the sealed box of her dreams, and the one she'd played an almost-deadly tug-of-war with inside the *Matador*, they could be opened.

It was only after she lifted the first lid that she wondered if she'd just opened Pandora's box.

Now, that's just dumb, she told herself after nothing happened.

She put the base of the box back down, careful to set it exactly where she had picked it up from, held the lid up and away, and reached inside.

Her fingers touched something that felt like a large brooch or badge. It existed on both sides of the threshold, both in Elsewhere and U1.

Motherfuckers already had some souvenirs, she thought, shifting the object all the way into Elsewhere and pulling it out of the box and cabinet.

It was, she realized, a crew badge, complete with Captain's bars, that had belonged to Octavia Rehnquist, the late captain of the *Scarlet Matador*. She, along with the rest of the crew, had been among the eighteen dead, too deeply—and deliberately—sedated to save themselves when Elsewhere's high tide had overtaken their hospital floor. This wasn't a souvenir; it was a *murder trophy*.

You absolute fuckers...

She shoved it into her pocket. She'd take it away from the building before tossing it into Elsewhere's retreating sea, where hopefully nobody from Quintessa could ever find it.

Slowly, carefully, she opened box after box and removed the items inside: a baby's pacifier, a soldier's dog-tags, someone's *asthma inhaler*, a cigarette lighter, a signet ring, and much more besides. She stuffed most of the items into her pack after realizing there was no way she could carry all of it in her pockets. Just as she was resettling the lid on the last of the boxes within the cabinet, she heard a soft chime and saw the security panel by the massive steel door into the lab change from red to green. The door opened a moment later as she shrugged her pack back on and slipped the second-to-last of the murder trophies, someone's chrono, into her pocket to join the captain's badge.

*I got done not even a **second** too soon.*

Two technicians walked into the room, followed by the Quintessa envoy.

Bitch has a real thing for wearing white, Jack thought, studying her.

The woman was at least sixty years old, probably older. She was short, around fifteen centimeters, or six inches, shorter than Jack. The shape of her face was not all that dissimilar from Kyra's, although her nose wasn't as narrow and her chin had no hint of a cleft like Jack's sister's, and her cheekbones were a bit more pronounced. She had blue eyes and snow-white hair that was unusually thick and straight for someone with so much age on her face. She wore it long, barely contained by a loose, translucent off-white scarf worn almost like a *shayla* but crafted more like a *dupatta*. Jack wondered if she was wearing that as a perfunctory gesture to the local culture, or if it had any special meaning to her.

Surely, if she had any empathy for the local culture, she wouldn't have let her mercs dress in anything *but* white for Tomlin's memorial, though. It was enlightening to see that white was what she seemed to wear all the time; she hadn't been making any kind of special effort for the sake of Tomlin's family and friends. She still looked like she was dressed to upstage some wedding's hapless bride.

Only part of the envoy was in U1. As before, portions of the space she should have occupied were occluded by a malevolent darkness that no one but Jack seemed to be able to perceive. She hadn't been able to see it, herself, when she'd been fully present in U1 at the memorial. That had been a mercy.

"I'd like to begin right away with testing," the envoy was saying to one of the technicians in her Mary Poppins accent. "I need to understand what's so different about this incident. You're sure that containment has been holding for the last week?"

"Everything's been fine, Ma'am," the technician replied. "No anomalies recorded. The kirshbaumium is stable, as always—*almost* always, sorry. We waited for you before opening any of the boxes again, though."

Jack, feeling her heart begin to race, walked over to the box on the counter and stood next to it. Whatever was inside was the final item she needed to rescue. And it had nearly been too late to do so. She was glad she'd gotten to the other boxes first, though. If she did this right, they might never be sure that the contents hadn't simply vanished at the same time as the bodies.

"Let's begin," the envoy said, nodding toward the last—or, to them, first—box.

The technician pulled on a pair of protective gloves and picked up a large, heavy pair of forceps before walking over to where Jack waited. He lifted the lid on the box and slid the forceps inside, starting to draw out a pearl necklace.

As soon as there was room for her fingers, Jack leaned forward, snagged the necklace, and pulled it into Elsewhere.

"What the *hell*?" the technician gasped. "It was *here*! I *felt* it! And now it's—"

"Lock down the building," the Envoy snapped, going deathly pale. "I want no one in or out. I want a three-block cordon. Now!"

Clutching the string of pearls in her hand, Jack passed through the vault's thick walls and raced for the stairs, feeling suddenly like she was running for her life.

She took the phantom stairs much too fast, especially given that only the steps themselves were tangible to her. Fortunately, she was only half a story above ground level when she inevitably careened through the stairwell's phantom back wall, and the wet sand of Elsewhere cushioned her fall.

As she limped away from the scene of her latest crime, she hoped the pain in her ankle would be something she could walk off and wouldn't have to explain to anybody.

45.

Infinity Minus One

Where are you? Are you all right?

Ewan had sent the message to her tablet an hour earlier. Fuck. Everybody was probably freaking out.

Jack grabbed her massive sandwich and bit down as she keyed in a reply. She was *ravenous*.

I'm okay. Comm died. Don't ask. Not on record.

She'd have to delete any trace of their communications later, just in case. A reply appeared on her screen after a moment.

Understood. Be safe. Come home soon.

Be safe... This day, Jack thought, had gotten absurdly complicated.

The last artifacts from the *Scarlet Matador* had been disposed of, though. She had carried them down to the receding waters of Elsewhere and, one by one, had flung all sixteen pilfered *murder trophies* as far out to sea as she could. Then she had hiked—slowly, but her ankle had thankfully stopped bitching after half an hour—to one of the piers in U1. She'd picked a touristy pier open to the public, isomorphed back in a sheltered location, and waded into the surf, slogging through the actual waters of U1's Mutawassit Ocean before climbing onto the pier holding out her now-dead, dripping comm for everyone to see, muttering in Arabic about her stupid cousin Abu and no warranty against saltwater corrosion. Everybody in hearing range had given her sympathetic looks, one man suggesting she try putting it in a bowl of rice anyway, just in case.

She'd even done that, buying a bowl of uncooked rice from a chain restaurant that only English-speaking tourists seeking "Traditional American Cuisine" frequented, and that she'd also bought her ginormous meal from. The dead comm—which she'd deliberately immersed, herself, to create her alibi for how soaked her pants had gotten in another universe's ocean—sat in the bowl off to her side while she stuffed her face with everything she'd ordered, feeling ridiculously famished and exhausted.

Apparently isomorphing the way she had, controlling her presence in and interactions with two universes at the same time, took a *lot* of calories out of a girl.

Kilometers away, the news on her tablet reported that downtown New Marrakesh was dealing with another security incident. Jack imagined that the moment Ewan or one of his relatives had seen that the Quintessa Corporation building was at the incident's center, they'd begun trying to reach her comm. It had been a whole universe away at the time, and she'd

dunked it too quickly, upon her return to U1, for it to hook back up to the comm system and inform her of their calls.

She'd need to buy a replacement when she bought the third tablet, on her way back up to the Rif. All this cloak-and-dagger bullshit was hard on tech.

But first she needed to eat and drink her weight in food.

Shit, she thought moments later as Cedric walked into the restaurant, right as she was finishing her first sandwich. *I forgot to make the second tablet untraceable again...* Half the family had connections to military and law enforcement; they'd probably been waiting for her to reply so they could lock onto her signal and come find her.

Outside, she could see Takama and General Toal sitting in the front seats of a vehicle. She wondered which one of them had sprung for the tech to locate her.

Honestly, though, she wasn't sure why she hadn't just told them where she was and asked them to come get her. Other than the persistent, gnawing belief that she'd be *imposing* on them if she did.

"Welcome to the afterparty," she muttered as Cedric sat down across from her. "Y'want anything?"

"What happened to your comm?" he asked, gesturing at the rice bowl.

"Sploosh, into the ocean. On purpose. I needed a good alibi for why *I* was soaked to the waist." She stuffed several fries into her mouth before he could ask another question. While she chewed, she could see him taking in the size of her massive order—one "Mega Mac" down, one to go, and a "family size" order of skinny, salty "American Style French Fries"—and studying her more closely.

"You look exhausted. Why *are* you soaked to the waist?"

"I'll tell you on the way back? It's kinda..." She glanced around at the half-empty establishment—somehow, she kept missing lunch and then eating like a *fiend* to make up for it—before continuing. "...hush-hush. I swear, today I *could* eat my weight in crickets..."

"Miss? Can we get boxes and a bag for my daughter's order?" Cedric asked a passing waitress. "And if she ordered dessert, that to go, too. Did you order dessert, Tizzy?"

"Not yet. I was gonna get apple pie. Haven't had that in more than a year..." Damn, she was feeling sleepy.

"Do you have an entire pie? Actually, do you have two? I think the rest of the family would enjoy that too." Cedric took out his card and offered it to the waitress. "Please put everything on here."

"I'm hanging onto the fries for the ride," Jack told Cedric as he boxed up the rest of her food. To her amusement, he poured the uncooked rice into a paper bag and pushed the comm back inside it, adding that to the to-go bag.

Once everything had been paid for and gathered up, Jack followed Cedric outside and to the waiting vehicle, which had a military surplus look to it. Maybe the General owned it? He was behind the wheel. Takama had a device in her hand, switched off, that Jack suspected had been used to find her.

"We are quite eager," General Toal said once the vehicle was in motion, "to hear about your adventures today."

"Which," Takama added, "do not appear to have taken place anywhere near your old apartment."

“Yeah... about that...” Jack shook her head. “I was getting ready to go there when I remembered I still needed to check for anything else that was straddling universes before Quintessa could find it.”

“There was more?” Cedric asked.

“Yeah. K—Dihya and I—”

“You can call Miss Wittier-Collins by her real name when we’re alone,” the General said as he turned a corner. “We all know it.”

Hoo boy. Just as long as they hadn’t figured out *her* real name...

“When Kyra and I first got here and were just figuring out the rules, a bunch of the stuff we brought with us got wrecked by our first high tide. We didn’t understand the significance of that yet when we threw it all out. I had to track all that stuff down. Then I was using my telescope to look up into the towers all the other survivors stayed in, in case they left anything behind, when I saw something in the Quintessa Corporation building that was *definitely* straddling universes.”

“And what did you find there?” The General asked. This, Jack realized, was a *debriefing*.

“Sixteen apeirochorons.” It was only at that moment that she realized she’d unconsciously counted them as she liberated their contents.

“What is an apeirochoron?” Takama asked. “Ewan mentioned that the other day, but I do not know what it means.”

“It’s a geometry term, I think,” Jack said. “It’s a cube. But it’s not a three-dimensional cube. It’s an infinite-dimensional cube.”

“Infinite dimensions?”

“Yeah. Like... it exists here and now in a very specific place in our universe... and it exists in that same location of every *other* universe at the same time.” The *Apeiros* had described it to her without language, or maybe in the less articulable language of pure mathematics itself, and she was struggling to find the right words. “There was one on board the *Scarlet Matador*. When I managed to push it out of *this* universe, I broke that one. Nearly broke *me*, too.”

“How did that break it?” Cedric asked.

“What’s infinity minus one?” Jack countered.

“Still infinity, according to mathematics.”

“Yeah, but what if it *isn’t*?” She argued, trying to explain something that she had learned in one of her not-dreams and that still hurt her head. “What if, by taking away that *one*, you’ve made the infinite *finite*?”

“This is not a hypothetical situation you’re posing, is it?” General Toal asked as he wound the vehicle up toward the Rif. “This is what happened to the box you found on the *Matador*. When it ceased to exist in this universe...”

“I don’t know for sure, but the *Apeiros* think it’s collapsing in *all* the universes now.”

Like a knitted scarf slowly unraveling once a single stitch was lost...

“Is that why they didn’t want you to do it?” Takama asked.

“No, they were afraid doing it’d kill me. They seem to think it’s a good thing that it’s collapsing. I think. It’s hard to tell with them sometimes.”

“What about these new boxes you found?” The General asked after a moment. “Is the new security situation because you broke one or more of them?”

“Unh-uh,” Jack said, swallowing the last bit of the cooling fry she’d been chewing while the General spoke. “That would’ve knocked me out *cold* again. Or maybe dead. But these ones weren’t sealed. They were being used to hold items the Corporation stole from the hospital after the first high tide got everybody evacuated. Stuff everybody’d lost when they left or died, that didn’t get taken to the morgue. Stuff that could’ve been analyzed to learn more about Elsewhere.”

“‘Stuff’ that I presume you liberated?” General Toal couldn’t quite hide his smile when she nodded. “And that’s why they locked down a three-block radius around their building. And you spent your next hour...”

“Throwing it all as far out to sea as I could, putting a few clicks between me and downtown before I returned to U1, and making up a plausible explanation for why I was soaked.”

“Her explanation,” Cedric said as the General pulled into the *ait Meziane* garage, “was that her comm fell into the water by the pier and she had to fish it out. Which is why she still wasn’t answering our calls once she returned to this universe.”

“Sorry,” Jack muttered, and then ate the last of her fries.

“Are you always so hungry and tired after a venture into Elsewhere?” the General asked as he parked.

“Only when I do something big. Like moving a whole fu—freakin’ spaceship or making a floor in one ’verse hold me up in another...” Jack yawned. “Shit, I still have so much to do...”

“I think your other ‘mission’ can wait until this evening-day, yes?” Takama said. “In fact, that gives Dr. Robie more time to get away from the comm he has been carrying around.”

“Yeah... I think it’ll have to wait,” Jack admitted as Cedric helped her out of the vehicle and led her toward the stairs. “I need my second sandwich...”

And then a nap. A long nap.

“I have Tislilel!” Cedric called out as they emerged on the ground level of the house. “And apple pie!” He pitched his voice lower for her sake. “You may have a slice before or after your sandwich, as you please.”

“I’d better give you guys a head start on the pie or I might eat the whole thing in one *gulp* ___”

An instant later, she had been lifted into an almost-crushing hug by a pair of strong arms, only her toes still touching the ground.

“I was so worried about you...” Ewan whispered, holding her tightly to him.

Her reaction had *nothing* to do with worry.

Kyra cleared her throat loudly nearby.

“Zdan!” Safiyya said sharply. “Let the poor girl breathe.”

Ewan released her, looking like a man just coming to his senses after blacking out for a moment. “Sorry...”

Everyone, including Kyra, was giving him charged *looks*, but nobody was saying a damn thing.

The elephant in this room is fucking ginormous, Jack thought, *now* feeling breathless, and could feel Kyra suppressing a laugh in response.

Cedric led the way into the dining room while Jack caught her breath and Ewan got his embarrassed blush under control, everyone pretending that they couldn't see either of them even as *they* tried not to look at each other.

"So. What kind of adventure did you have downtown?" Safiyya asked as she set out plates and forks for everyone.

Jack threw a pleading glance at Cedric as she lifted her second "Mega Mac" out of the bag.

For the next few minutes, while she concentrated on eating, Cedric retold her story with a fair degree accuracy and even more flair. Jack found herself thinking that it was much like listening to her father narrating one of his probably autobiographical *Adventures of Jack B. Badd*, back when he'd still told her bedtime stories. It all sounded like such a charming scrape now, but she remembered being more than a little scared the whole time...

...not to mention feeling an infuriated disgust at the idea that the Corporation, or even just the envoy, was keeping trophies from their victims...

Kyra turned and gave her a knowing look. *Better they think it **was** a charming scrape than we give them another reason to want to lock us up for our own good, right?*

Yeah... "I know it all sounds really impulsive... but... only because I didn't think to mention that I needed to finish that job first before starting on my next one. And 'cause I had no idea I'd need to go after those boxes to do it."

So yeah, she admitted to herself, *really impulsive...*

She was glad she didn't have to tell them about her ankle. And at least, she suddenly thought, she could eat. She'd probably have had no appetite at all by then if she'd gone with her original plans. Maybe that was why she'd found an excuse to put those plans off...?

"We're just glad you're safe," Lalla said, setting a slice of the apple pie in front of her. The rest, she realized, had been divided among everyone else at the table. Probably for the best.

"Thank you." She was, finally, beginning to feel like she might be approaching full... but not until she had at least some of her pie.

"There is, however," Tafrara said with a stern voice, "another matter that we need to discuss with you."

Uh oh...

Tafrara held up the scorecard, pointing to the 0 Jack had put next to her name. "Really? Really? We're going to need an instant replay of this."

Judging by the sighs and laughter around the table, Jack wasn't the only one feeling sudden relief. It occurred to her that *everybody*, including Kyra, was trying very hard not to scold her for scaring them *yet again*. Had they worried Tafrara was about to break some agreed-upon approach for dealing with her?

Definitely not telling them I fell off the stairs... Or, well, through a wall. She was suddenly twice as glad that her ankle hadn't even been sprained.

Kyra's breath hitched and she turned a searing look on Jack. *Don't make me take their side... **Jeez**. Can't leave you alone for a **minute**...*

Jack napped for a few hours, Sebby insisting on sleeping beside her head the whole time, and woke shortly before dinnertime. The sun was shining directly into the courtyard, still about six hours away from actual high noon, but summer-intense enough already that nobody

wanted to actually walk through it and instead took longer detours through the house to reach the dining room. Her ravenous appetite was back.

Thanks to her excursion, she learned, and also to her nap, she had missed two of the Tai Chi sessions that Ewan and Tafrara had started up for Kyra. That, it turned out, had been the big surprise Tafrara had hinted at the night before.

"It's *so* good, Tizzy, you need to try it," Kyra said, seeming to prefer that sobriquet to Jack. "It's *slow*, didn't pull my stitches at *all*, but after we were done, I felt like I'd had a real workout."

"You had," Ewan laughed. "Slow and controlled takes as much effort as any other kind of action. More, sometimes."

Usadden picked that moment to swallow wrong. Jack wasn't sure why both Ewan and Tafrara promptly shot him glares.

"That sounds amazing," Jack said. Usadden, still sputtering, excused himself from the table and went into the kitchen for a moment.

"We'll hold another session after the overnoon sleep," Ewan told her. "Perhaps you can join it before you go off on your next, hopefully easier, adventure."

"I'd like that." She'd seen vids of people doing Tai Chi and had wondered about its slow pace. If Kyra said it was the real deal, though, it undoubtedly was.

"So," Tafrara said as the table was being cleared, "it's time for us to settle the matter of the crickets. Definitively."

Izil and Ewan both began laughing.

"Yes, we need proof of this," Izil agreed.

"Okay..." Jack felt herself struggling not to smirk. "C'mon up... you can watch and learn."

Kyra began snickering.

Everybody wanted to see. Practically the whole family, plus the General, followed Jack upstairs as she carried Sebby's singing box.

This, she thought to herself, was going to be *fun*.

Sebby was a little bit nervous when so *many* people came into the room, but it was *dinnertime* and that part had him ecstatic. While he bounced on the bed and shrieked at her to hurry, she knelt down in front of the tub and lowered the cricket box inside. Winking at Kyra, she isomorphed herself and the cardboard into Elsewhere, letting the crickets spill out into the tub and vanishing from everyone's sight except her sister's.

The room erupted in gasps of astonishment. Sebby hesitated for a second and then leapt into the tub to begin the carnage in earnest.

Jack stood up, holding the box in front of her, and reappeared in U1. Opening its lid, she tilted it forward so that everyone could see that it was empty of any crickets. "Tah-dah!"

"You *cheater!*" Ewan exclaimed, his expression one of pure delight.

"That's not cheating," Jack told him, laughing.

"Oh no?" He stepped forward, his smile wide and giving the lie to the faux scowl he was trying to effect. "How is that not cheating?"

"Cause it's *skill*," she replied, walking toward him in mock challenge. "I got *skill*."

"Skill at *cheating*," he teased back, eyes dancing with humor as he stepped closer. "I'm calling *foul* on this..."

“Oh yeah? What’s the penalty?” She found herself grinning up at him, inches from him, daring him to...

...to what, exactly?

“The penalty is... tickling!” He laughed, his hands going for her ribs and startling a *squeak* out of her!

The rush of feeling that exploded through her was almost nothing like being *tickled*, though—

Kyra coughed loudly.

“Okay, enough of that,” Cedric said with strangely forced levity, moving between them. Jack found herself backing up and then sitting down abruptly on the foot of her bed. How had she gotten so out of breath *again*? Her heart was racing—

“What do the judges think of the instant replay?” Tafrara asked everyone, her tone odd. Ewan had turned away, nodding at something his father was murmuring in his ear.

“I think the score is valid,” General Toal said. “Zero and zero.”

“Agreed,” Lalla said. Izil nodded.

“Perhaps we should allow our ‘cricket champion’ to rest,” Safiyya said, ushering everyone out of the room.

Jack was still regaining her equilibrium as they left; they were gone before exactly what had happened really sank in.

“I swear, you two are like... some kind of dangerous chemical *reaction*,” Kyra said, sitting down next to her on the bed.

“My cousins and I teased each other all the *time* that way,” Jack found herself protesting. “Nothing like *that* ever happened when we did...”

“Like I said, it’s the combination of the two of you,” Kyra replied. “Never seen *anything* like it, myself. If you could bottle it, people’d pay *billions* for it.”

“This sucks,” Jack grumbled. “We’re *trying* to just... be...”

Friends? Siblings? Cousins? Something, anything that would let them retain the powerful *emotional* connection that had blossomed between them without it veering into hormonal chaos. But the chaos kept taking over.

“Maybe, in five years or so, you can come back and see if those crazy-huge sparks still fly,” Kyra said.

“If we can break our trails well enough,” Jack sighed. Why did that suddenly stir a tickle of fear in her? The hungry ache Ewan’s touch had awakened in her had abruptly disappeared.

“That video of yours probably will,” Kyra chuckled. “Everybody’s gonna be looking for our trail on Shakti Four now, right? It’d probably be a bad idea for either of us to ever go there.”

“A very bad idea,” Jack agreed, glad that the subject had, more or less, moved on. She shivered against a sudden chill. “It’s a big world, though, right? Plenty of places Riddick and his two... *hench-bitches*...”

Kyra laughed. “That’s us, yeah.”

“...could go to ground for *years*. Aside from one or two big cities where most of the population lives, it’s all wild frontier. I could see him liking a place like that.” It should have been a comforting thought, but somehow it wasn’t. Her mouth felt weirdly dry. The cold

seemed to be deepening, even though it was a bright, hot day outside. The hairs on her arms, she noticed, were standing straight up.

"I could see *me* liking a place like that, too," Kyra sighed. "Damn."

"So mercs might spend years looking for him on that one world..." Jack continued, trying to slow down her heart—which had begun racing again—and quiet the growing sense of foreboding that was filling her, "and we can go anywhere else we want, maybe even—"

Whatever Jack had been about to say next was lost in a sudden surging flood of panic.

"Tizzy? Tizzy, are you okay?"

She felt ice cold. Her heart was hammering. Pure terror was flowing into her, not her own, but from somewhere close by, somewhere...

"Something's wrong!" Kyra shouted.

No, no, no, please no... no... please don't make me... please... no more...

Those weren't her thoughts. It wasn't her terror. But it was consuming her.

I'll die, I'll die, please don't make me...

"*Something's **wrong!***" Kyra screamed, from far, far away.

Jack could hear footsteps and shouts as people poured back into the bedroom. She could see the ornate ceiling above her, feel the bed beneath her back...

But she was somewhere else. Somewhere dark, cramped, shot with pain...

Screaming. Not her. Only a tiny thread of sound could escape her constricted throat.

The *Apeiros* were *screaming*. The spangled darkness behind her eyes was full of their terror.

Help me... please help me...

Jack flung herself forward, reaching out toward the voice.

I'm here! I'm here! I—

The world went dark.

Break it open... do it now...

We will keep you safe...

You will not die...

...yet...

We will not let the demons find you.

Stone that wasn't stone cracked, splintered, shattered into dust and vanished into nothing. Ripples spread out, twisting across dimensions. Something tiny but enormous clutched her hand.

Floating... drifting in a shattered oblivion...

Rest now, little larva. You have done well.

Something was unraveling, an impossible equation breaking down before her not-eyes.

Infinity minus one...

Infinity broken.

You will not die.

Long, black legs, tipped with claws, emerged from the gaping tear in reality.

Sebby hissed beside her, rising up, stinger flailing...

"It's okay, Sebby. She won't hurt me..."

He slowly backed away, stinger still lashing with agitation, as *She* approached, void-black appendages reaching toward Jack's face. A thousand eyes gazing down upon her... A million eyes... infinite eyes...

Infinity unchained, uncontained...

...this infinity unbroken and...

...rising.

Little larva, what you have done will never be forgotten...

Her obsidian skin contained the shine of galaxies.

...by us.

One delicate tarsus touched Jack's forehead... and something vanished. There was an empty space where once there had been terrible knowledge, peace where there had been crushing anguish.

One day, you may remember, too.

The door to the bedroom opened.

Reality twisted and *She* was gone.

Takama entered the bedroom, carrying an I-V pole. Usadden and Ewan followed behind her, both carrying I-V bags and monitoring equipment. They stopped, their morose expressions dissolving into astonishment.

Jack sat up in bed, yawning, wiping at her wet cheeks. She looked around. By the shadows, it was nearly high noon. Had she fallen asleep? The last thing she remembered... was...

"*Baraka*," she heard three voices say in unison. A saline bag dropped from Ewan's hand to the floor.

Sebby climbed onto her lap, his stinger tucked away. She thought that it had been out a moment ago, but that made no sense. Had he been trying to protect her from something? She stroked his carapace, and he caressed her arm with his antennae. She'd been feeding Sebby, she remembered, and then...

She'd been dreaming, she thought. A strange dream about demons in the darkness—no, *of* the darkness—and a creature whose *n*-shape was both impossible to look at and too beautiful to look away from...

...and an unraveling scarf?

"Hi guys," she said, wondering why they were staring at her so strangely. "What's going on?"

As if things weren't already weird enough, a loud, rumbling *boom* struck at that moment. The emergency alerts on three comms and one tablet started going off a few seconds later.

46.

Heirs to the Caldera

The official story, which began circulating an hour before Jack and General Toal left for the old apartment, was that the second of the two Star Jumpers irreparably damaged in the spaceport explosion had also been compromised worse than anyone had realized. One of the reactor cores powering its sublight ion drive had slowly destabilized until it ruptured almost exactly seven Tangiers days later... a little under two of the planet's long days after a similar rupture had allegedly destroyed the other damaged Star Jumper, the ill-fated *Scarlet Matador*. Jack, who knew exactly what had really happened to the *Matador* and where to find it, rolled her eyes and saw Ewan doing the same thing.

The unofficial story, which General Toal said was only being whispered by a handful of eyewitnesses, was that the ship had abruptly imploded some five hours after the Quintessa Corporation had tried to run an unexplained test... one that had begun at almost exactly the same moment as Jack's strange fit toward the end of the morning-day. The test had ended not long after it had begun with everyone involved fleeing the ship, but no warnings of an impending crisis had been issued until the implosion itself occurred hours later. What little of the massive vessel was left was disturbingly friable, even its protective hull plates disintegrating when touched.

"They tried to use its Isomorph Drive to open a bridge to U322A," Jack said when the General finished his update. The family had insisted on bed rest for her, but cabin fever was already building and making her antsy. Everyone crowding into the bedroom to listen in just added to the weird near-claustrophobia. Sebby, chittering in annoyance, had already retreated under the bed.

"You know this?" the General asked. "You remember?"

She shook her head. "I don't remember much of anything after feeding Sebby." She actually *did* remember the abortive tickle-battle, and the conversation with Kyra that had followed, but it seemed like everyone was more comfortable thinking that had been lost to her, too. "Just... we took away every other potential bridge they had, so..." She shrugged, wishing she could explain where her certainty came from. Usually she could, but there was a strange fog in parts of her mind that had never existed before.

"Yes," Ewan said. "When we were going to the *Scarlet Matador*, you said that would be the only way for them to gain access to Elsewhere once everything else was gone. But why would they want to?"

"The envoy said she wanted to understand what made this Level Five Incident so different from all the others," Jack mused. Sometimes, she felt like she knew, or *should* know, much more, but when she tried to chase the feeling down, it evaporated.

"Hopefully, having her attempt to re-establish a connection end in another disaster will deter her," the General said. "Perhaps there is a way to make her believe that it's a problem

with that universe, itself.”

“Won’t that get any shipping route that uses U322A for a Jump suspended?” Cedric asked, frowning.

“Likely. But they can route around it. They have, in point of fact, done so several times in the past with other universes, and with Jumps they decided were too long. Better that than the realization that there might be a human mind behind so much of their ill fortune, or even two.” The General’s gaze on Jack, and on Kyra, was speculative.

“You think *we* did *this*?” Kyra asked him, looking shocked.

“Well, that’s the interesting thing,” he rumbled, his voice contemplative. “Neither of you ever left this house. And *your* whole focus, during that period, was your adopted sister. I don’t think *you* did anything...”

His gaze moved to Jack.

“...and you don’t seem to remember anything that happened while you were under.”

Under...

...beneath, below, under...

Yes, a soft voice murmured somewhere far away. *You may know and tell that much... it will do no harm.*

“I think I was with the *Apeiros*,” Jack answered slowly. “Whatever was happening... they were afraid. Terrified.”

“Do you think U322A, your Elsewhere, might be their home? Perhaps the bridge would have endangered it.”

She shook her head after a moment’s careful thought. Navigating her memory, at least where this was concerned, felt like jumping from one steppingstone to another, but instead of water between the stones, there were vast, fathomless gulfs of strange emptiness. She’d never experienced anything like it before in her life. It was unnerving.

But, strangely, there were other things that she knew with iron certainty now, which had never been in her head before.

“They call us ‘little larvae,’” she told everyone, “because our five-dimensional shapes are so small... only two universes wide. They’re much bigger...”

...tiny but enormous...

“I don’t think *they* could think of Elsewhere as *their* world any more than...” She cast about in her head for a suitable comparison. “...than you could think that chair you’re sitting in is *your* world.”

“And yet, whatever it was the Quintessa Corporation tried to do this morning-day, bridging U1 and U322A perhaps... terrified them and incapacitated you.” His eyes turned to Kyra.

“But not you.”

Kyra shook her head. “Tizzy told them they were forbidden to talk to me anymore unless I talked to them first.”

General Toal looked fascinated. “You were able to *forbid* these beings to do something?”

Jack shrugged. “I told them they were hurting her. I guess they didn’t want to do that.”

“So they let her be...?”

“I *think* so. But...” She looked over at Kyra. “I think I remember you screaming that something was wrong.”

“Yeah, because *you* were having a fit.” Kyra shook her head. “Whatever it was, I didn’t feel any of it except what I could feel coming off of *you*.”

“And what was that?” Takama asked.

“Something was screaming for help and she was trying to go to it, in her head. And then she was *gone*.” Kyra shuddered. “I swear, it was like she wasn’t even in her body anymore...”

“Completely unresponsive,” Usadden murmured, and Jack saw *him* shudder, too.

“Except,” Ewan spoke up, “the brain-wave readings my portable scan got were off the *charts*.”

“Please tell me I don’t have to go get another CT scan,” Jack groaned.

“No, that would be ill-advised indeed,” General Toal said. “Were her readings like that after the last... incident, Ewan Zdan?”

Ewan shook his head. “They were normal... but those were readings I took afterwards, not during. She might have lit up the scan the same way if I’d used it when she was moving the *Matador* out of our universe.”

“Perhaps you should scan her again now.”

Ewan looked at Jack, a question in his eyes. She nodded, watching him get the portable scanner back out of his field kit. Kyra tensed a little as he came over to Jack’s side, as though she expected both of them to fall under each other’s thrall again.

After all, he had almost needed to be pried off of her earlier.

Even as the alerts had begun to go off, he had dropped everything he’d been carrying onto the chair and raced over to her, landing beside her on the bed and pulling her into a hug so tight that she almost *hadn’t* been able to breathe. Sebby had screeched and begun posturing threateningly—snapping his pincers like rapid-fire castanets but, at least, not brandishing his stinger—until Kyra, hurrying in after the others, managed to calm him down. Although intensely and inappropriately aware of Ewan’s powerful torso pressed to hers, Jack had found herself even more aware that he was *shaking*. It had taken a long moment for Usadden to get through to him and convince him to let her go... and then convince *her* to let *him* go when her mixture of concern and desire made her clingy. Only then did Jack find out that, for the prior few hours, she had appeared to be comatose.

Now, though, Ewan was all business, running his scan the way he had undoubtedly done countless times when he had worked as a paramedic. “Much closer to normal. But...” He swallowed and shook his head. “When I still worked for the UMA, I had been instructed that if I ever saw readings like this, I should refer the patient for Quantification.” He shook his head again. “They didn’t look like this last time.”

The General looked as if a suspicion had been confirmed for him. Ewan, giving Jack an apologetic look, put the scanner away and returned to the chair he’d been sitting in. He was keeping his distance, but she could feel how much he didn’t actually want to.

“Okay,” she sighed, sitting up. “Brain is *normal*...ish. No signs of physical injury, right?” Usadden nodded.

“Then can I *please* get up? I have a lot I still need to do. Today.”

“Perhaps it should wait until things calm down—” Tafrara began.

“No, I think she’s right,” the General said. “While all eyes are pointed at this new disaster, she may have an easier time insinuating herself into the systems she needs to access, in order

to plausibly get the word out about Makarov. I will accompany her to the apartment and watch over her.”

At Jack’s request, he took her to a nearby tech shop to purchase a tablet she could use just for the purposes she had in mind, before driving her to the apartment building. The place was almost entirely empty and still; most of the tenants had moved out after the owners had been unresponsive and uncommunicative in the wake of the spaceport bombing. None of the shattered west and north windows had been repaired, although a very few had been boarded over on the lowest levels. Jack led General Toal up the filthy, stinking stairway, more conscious than ever of how nasty it was; if it bothered him, he showed no sign.

“So,” Jack asked as she unpacked the tablet, sat cross-legged on the floor—she refused to ever touch the couch again—and began to configure it, “why are you really here?”

He sat down in the chair they had left behind, steeping his fingers. “You are getting very good at reading people, Tizzy. I do, indeed, have an ulterior motive for wishing to speak with you alone.”

Maybe that should have scared her, but it didn’t. She knew that, as a military general, he was undoubtedly a dangerous man in at least some way... but she’d been associating with dangerous men for months, starting with Riddick and Johns. She just looked over at him and nodded encouragement.

“You have always had some esper ability, haven’t you?” he asked.

“Seems like it. Nothing obvious, but...” She restarted the tablet to let some of her custom configurations take. “...I think there were signs when I was little. Strange stuff. Nothing too freaky, though. Nothing that couldn’t be explained away.”

“But since the *Scarlet Matador*, and since your communions with the beings you call the *Apeiros*, it has grown considerably.” It wasn’t a question.

“I guess,” Jack said, busy armor-plating the tablet against incursions with the protective systems her father had liked best. “It’s... hard to tell. Like Ewan said the other night, I don’t know where my limits are until I crash into them—”

Oh, oops. Nobody but Kyra knew she’d heard that.

General Toal only laughed softly. “In truth, you *would* make an extraordinary recruit. An Operative who can stand among her targets, listening to their whispered secrets, without them ever knowing...” His expression grew serious. “That *is* what I needed to speak to you about.”

“You gonna try to recruit us?” The tablet was almost ready. Jack glanced over at the General. “Kyra might be interested if it means rescuing girls from the shit *she* was put through, but—”

“No, I am not,” he said, surprising her. “I have worked with Operatives before. Officially, slavery is illegal within the Federacy... except where *they* are concerned.”

Well, *that* wasn’t a chilling statement or anything... “Why?”

“Your own abilities would terrify most people, child. You can spy on any discussion without people knowing you’re standing among them. You can come and go from a locked and impregnable fortress as you please, regardless of its security systems. You have made bodies disappear from a morgue, hidden valuables vanish from a high-security vault, and a twenty-thousand-ton Star Jumper travel from one universe to another with a touch of your hand. And may, possibly, have imploded another Star Jumper in your *sleep*.”

Jack opened her mouth to protest... but...

Holy fuck. She really had done all that. Phrased that way, she sounded scary as *shit*. And that wasn't even touching on what Kyra could do, killing people without any sign she was anywhere near them...

"What government would ever allow such power to go unchecked?"

His rhetorical question sent an icy wind blowing through her. "What... would they do?"

"Espers are taken to a secure facility for training and conditioning. I don't know exactly what happens there. They will not speak of it. But every Operative I have met is mentally and emotionally *incapable* of exercising their powers except under orders. Their ability to *improvise*, as you two do so well, has been taken from them, something that has cost more than a few of them their lives when situations went pear-shaped, the chain of command broke down, and there was no one left with the authority to tell them how to use their abilities to save themselves or others."

"That's..."

"Not a fate I could ever wish for you, no. I serve the Federacy to serve humanity, and this is one of the great conflicts between those two callings. I will not tell them about you or Kyra."

"Th...thank you. What... is that all they would do? Psychological conditioning?"

The General shrugged. "You would have a tracker implanted in you... one with an explosive device inside, just in case you found a way to break through that conditioning and tried to escape. I know of only one Operative-in-training who has ever managed to successfully remove it and flee captivity. *You* have met him."

It took a moment to find her voice. "Riddick."

"They point to him, his kill count and the various crimes he has committed—or allegedly committed—in the last decade, whenever anyone objects to the way espers are handled. Did you ever see him use his abilities?"

"I don't think so..." But there had always been something preternatural about him, about his speed and timing and the way he hadn't even had to look behind him, most times, to know who or what was coming. He wasn't invulnerable—he'd very nearly *died* on the crash planet—but...

She had watched him take a knife and cut his own neck open to remove the explosive tracker that Chillingsworth had ordered implanted in him, and had found herself thinking that it wasn't the first one he'd removed that way...

"Espers were much rarer even a generation ago," the General told her, "before the Furyan Diaspora. Many of the orphans of that... disaster... have turned out to be quite powerful. It's something about their world itself, it seems. The powers have even appeared among the children of the relief troops who were stationed at the Caldera Base on Furya in the aftermath —"

Jack's breath caught. Her father's last tour of duty in the Corps of Engineers, the year before he met her mother, had been on Furya. He had shown her pictures of the Caldera, and the base that sat beside it, and had told her it was the strangest world he'd ever visited. But it was also the world he'd chosen to return to when he re-enlisted.

Was that where all of this came from?

General Toal was watching her with interest. He'd figured her out, knew she had to be the daughter of some member of the Service who had been stationed on Furya... where she had been headed, herself, before everything went wrong. What would she have found there, she wondered, if she had made it?

Except...

"I... don't think Kyra has any ties to Furya..."

"No. The sublight colony ship she was on never passed that way. But the files on her are extensive. Did you know she was born on late twenty-first century Earth?"

Jack nodded.

"Before her mother joined her father's church and gave up such things, she was a performer of some renown. Minerva Kirshbaum-Wittier, better known to her world as Minnie Sulis. A stage magician whose act included mind reading, levitation, and teleportation. Most such acts are elaborate trickery of course, but the records indicate that many of her signature 'tricks' could be neither replicated nor debunked. When she converted to the Church of the New Christy Pilgrims, though, she quit the stage and claimed that she had turned her back on the devil."

"So she was probably an esper the whole time," Jack mused.

"One who became convinced what she was doing was witchcraft, it seems. But yes."

"You... need to tell Kyra all of this, too."

The General nodded. "I will, yes. It's important that both of you protect yourselves from discovery. Tomorrow evening, when I come to Ewan Zdan's send-off party, I'm bringing each of you a very special device. A neurofeedback training unit. It will help you learn how to control your own minds, and the readings your brain scans produce, so that you can hopefully beat a Quantification test—should you ever be subjected to one—and pass as normal."

For a long moment, Jack was rendered speechless. He was giving them something incalculably precious... and incredibly dangerous to *him*. If anyone ever discovered that he had helped two espers hide from the Federacy, it would be the end of more than just his career.

"Thank you," she finally managed, wishing she could say something that would convey how much she knew he was risking, how much generosity he was showing.

"You're welcome, Tizzy. Now... another reason I came here today is to help you deal with these terrible files you have found. I understand why you don't want anyone else to have to see them," he said as he walked over to sit down beside her on the floor, crisscrossing his legs with the limberness of a man a third his age, "but I have served as a judge on a great number of courts martial, and have reviewed evidence of the worst war crimes human beings can perpetrate. Please allow me to help you with this. I am far more inured to the trauma that even pictures of such things can cause than you should ever have to be."

Jack felt relief suddenly untying the knots in her spine. The idea of looking at those images again, of sifting through them for examples that could be sent on, that would show enough to provoke outrage without being too graphic to ever be published, had been on the very edge of bearable. To look again at the misery and agony in the faces of those women and girls...

"I'd... really appreciate that. Last time I looked at this stuff, I ended up puking up everything I'd eaten for the last *month*."

“I’m truly sorry that you had to see such things at all.”

Kyra, she thought, had lived *through* such things, which was immeasurably worse. Sometimes she had to remind herself that, for every man who was capable of such egregious brutality, for every Red Roger, or Duke Pritchard, or Javor Makarov... or even a William Johns... there were men like General Toal, like Cedric, Gavin, Ewan, and all the men of *ait Meziane*... like Riddick. Men who, although perhaps fearsome in their own ways, had too much honor to ever engage in such hideous, sadistic acts.

Men who possibly needed protection of their own from the schemes of monsters like Pritchard and Makarov.

“There’ll be stuff we need to delete, too,” she told the General. “Aside from following Kyra and me around to try to get to Riddick, he was helping Makarov track Toml— Gavin Brahim. I don’t think we want *everything* he recorded about that where people can nose into it... and I don’t want any of the pictures he took of Kyra and me getting out.”

“Agreed. We will curate this collection carefully.”

Jack logged them in and they got to work. It wasn’t long before she let him take over almost entirely, looking away as he examined the different image collections that Pritchard had assembled and chose examples from each collection to include in their fictional pervert’s stash.

“Hmm,” he said at one point. “I recognize three of the women so far. Former fugitives now serving prison terms... I think their sentences may end up being vacated on the strength of this evidence.”

“That’s... good, right?”

General Toal sighed. “Possibly. Unfortunately, I doubt they will receive much compensation or assistance, aside from being released and having the relevant crimes expunged from their records. Few in their positions do.”

“Is there anything you can do to help them?”

He shook his head, looking somber and a little regretful. “I suspect that this release of information is as much as I can personally do for them. Any overt intervention on my part could draw too much attention to what I might know about Pritchard and Makarov, myself... and how I might have learned it.”

Shit. “Yeah...”

Maybe, she thought, someday there would be something *she* could do. Her father had told her about working with various NGOs, when he was stationed on different worlds, which had provided targeted aid to groups in need. Maybe she could join, or if need be create, one that would help victims of these kinds of crimes—

“Dear God.”

“What?” Jack looked over at General Toal. “Something bad?”

The General was frowning, advancing through a series of pictures. Bracing herself, Jack leaned over to look.

Nothing remotely pornographic was on the screen anymore. Instead, a surveillance camera showed a man dressed in traditional Amazigh attire, a *tagelmust* covering his head and obscuring most of his face, exiting a swanky-looking restaurant, the image taken from behind him. It vanished and was replaced by a new shot, from a different angle—

Jack recognized this frame. The surveillance camera it originated from had been covering the entrance to the pilots' lounge. The same man was emerging from the lounge, partly turned as though waving goodbye to whomever had brought him as a guest. She remembered watching him leave the lounge when she'd reviewed the footage.

Glancing at her, his expression suddenly a little wary, the General closed the folder without advancing through further pictures. "I don't understand why they would be so interested in collecting stills of the people they murdered that day," he said. "I may wish to examine this more closely... but I think its presence would cloud the investigation we wish to see pursued."

As she watched, he took a chip out of his pocket, connected it to the tablet, and transferred three folders to it—none of them from the "Bad Kitties" folder—before deleting them from Pritchard's account.

Jack had the strange feeling that some kind of sleight-of-hand had just occurred, but at the same time, she didn't feel any ill intent coming off of the General... more a sense that he had just done something to protect someone else. Maybe it was, as she'd pondered earlier, someone who would be harmed by the scrutiny that even drawing the two mercs' interest could generate. One of the other folders, she realized, was the one that contained the surveillance pictures of her and Kyra.

He already knows who we are, and he's risking a shit-ton to hide us from his own bosses...

Whatever else he was hiding, whoever else he might be protecting, she'd let it slide. It probably wasn't any of her business.

"There is," he said slowly, pocketing the chip again, "one more thing I need to discuss with you while we're here. If you and Kyra haven't already begun to plan your exit strategy off this world, now is the time to do so."

"Why?" Jack already had her exit in place, but his words sent a chill through her anyway.

"Because it's only a matter of time before a formal investigation of the repeated calamities at the spaceport is initiated by the Federacy," he told her. "Such investigations always include at least two esper Operatives. One of the things *they* will be looking for..."

He locked eyes with her, and she could feel him willing her to understand how serious the matter was.

"...is evidence of someone like you."

47.

Princess With a Thousand Enemies

“You hear back yet from any of the places you reached out to?”

Kyra glanced over at Jack as she slipped off her shirt. For a brief moment, she seemed to hesitate. “One or two. Why?”

Jack felt an odd mixture of relief and concern. Kyra seemed to be hiding something from her, but she wasn’t sure what. “General Toal told me that we shouldn’t waste any time getting offworld if we can help it. He thinks all the disasters that have happened here in the last few weeks are gonna bring down some esper-hunters, in addition to the Operatives he mentioned at dinner.”

Kyra grimaced. “That does *not* sound good. Does that mess with *your* timetable?”

“It shouldn’t. I leave for New Casablanca in three morning-days. And I’ll be offworld before—”

“Hold up. Don’t tell me.” Kyra’s smile was wry. “I’m not supposed to know, remember? We can’t spill—”

“What we don’t know, yeah,” Jack sighed. The idea that she was leaving Kyra behind, and couldn’t even know for sure whether her sister’s future was secure, bothered the hell out of her. Especially now that she had the sense that Kyra was hiding something *more* from her than just a chosen destination. “How about you?” she asked after a moment. “No specifics, but... what’s it looking like?”

“I’m giving it one more day,” Kyra said. “My first choice hasn’t responded yet... so I’m gonna give them a little more time before I accept an offer. Not too much, though. I don’t want the other offers going away, especially if our timeline is tight all of a sudden.”

Jack tied the sash on her bathrobe and looked around. “Have you seen Sebby?”

“Not since he plowed through his crickets before dinner, no.”

The cricket tub was completely empty.

The initial search of the bedroom turned up nothing until Jack, mindful of Sebby’s fondness for playing under furniture, looked under the bed. What she pulled out stunned both her and Kyra.

A complete, Sebby-shaped exoskeleton with a large hole in its front.

“Holy shit,” Kyra breathed.

“Sebby *molted*?” Jack looked around, carefully setting the exuviae on top of the bedspread. “Where is he?”

“Sebby?” Kyra called out. “Baby? Where are you?”

Reeeeeeeeee... The bathroom.

Now the size of a large housecat, Sebby had managed to open the shower stall and was trying, with very little success, to crawl up the wall to turn on the faucets. Jack leaned in and

turned them on for him, getting the water to his favorite temperature. He began to bounce and wriggle beneath the stream, doing what she and Kyra had come to call the Sebby Dance.

“We’re gonna need a bigger cricket tub,” Jack marveled.

“Shit, Tizzy, what are we gonna do about him? I don’t think *I* can take him with me. Can you?”

“No,” she sighed. “And there’s still so much we don’t know about him, isn’t there? Part of me is tempted to ask Cedric and Safiyya if they can keep him, but...”

“But not after what the General told us tonight, right?” Kyra looked stricken.

General Toal and Jack hadn’t returned to the *ait Meziane* house until almost dinnertime, well after the story they’d carefully planted had begun to break wide. They had spent several hours monitoring its development and giving little nudges to some of its aspects as things progressed. Astonishingly, she’d managed to eat the light lunch Takama had packed for them, but keeping it down had been difficult at times.

Confronted with the compelling—and horrifying—evidence about the identity of the New Marrakesh Spaceport Bomber, and the nature of his other heinous crimes, the news agencies had begun scrambling to scoop each other and be first to report as many salacious details as they could legally spill. Law enforcement had initially been far more cautious, but within an hour, the names Javor Makarov and Duke Pritchard were circulating freely in both news reports and law enforcement press releases about two “persons of interest” in the bombing... and other crimes, besides.

Soon after, Amnesty Interplanetary’s local chapter issued its own press release, disclosing that it was investigating allegations of human rights violations the two suspects might have engaged in while transporting fugitives and prisoners.

It took less than half an hour beyond that for law enforcement to secure a warrant for the data files of the fictitious pervert Jack and the General had created, which contained a larger and more damning cache of images than had originally been sent out to the news agencies, along with a cross-section of Pritchard’s favorite videos. That cache contained more than enough explicit detail to give investigators probable cause to serve the Merc Network itself with a new round of warrants.

Right as Jack and General Toal were preparing to leave the apartment and return to the *ait Meziane* house, the story exploded. Several of the pictures their fictional sicko claimed he’d been sent by Pritchard, and one of the videos, “starred” a girl who had just been identified as Luljeta Kamberi. She was a high-profile murder victim from the Tito System, a girl who had disappeared from New Kosovo three years earlier and whose mutilated remains had been discovered a year later. Jack remembered reading about her and seeing the wave of Stranger Danger PSA vids that had circulated in response. She hadn’t recognized the girl’s face in Pritchard’s vile image collection because the pain and terror twisting it had distorted it too much from the sweet, smiling portrait always shared in the media.

Both Pritchard and Makarov, according to the backroom law enforcement chatter Jack and the General had been monitoring, were known to have been bounty hunting in New Kosovo at that time, pursuing a woman who “starred” in another violent image and vid collection... and whose bounty was still open and unclaimed. There had been no further sightings of *her* since approximately the same time that twelve-year-old Luljeta had vanished.

The phrase “sexual predators” had begun to give way to “serial killers” in the backroom chatter. Soon after, someone leaked the Luljeta Kamberi connection to the press.

“This...” General Toal had said with some trepidation, “just escalated to a Federacy case. Their crimes now cross enough planetary jurisdictions that no one else can claim authority. I think nothing the Mercenary Network tries to do now will prevent law enforcement from gaining access to those accounts. Not when so much evidence is appearing that these two men have been using the Network’s resources, for *years*, to commit some truly heinous atrocities. Not when every planetary embassy on Tangiers Prime begins demanding access to see if any of *their* worlds’ missing daughters are featured in similar collections. I had honestly believed all their victims were alive *somewhere*, but this discovery changes everything.”

“That means Operatives are definitely gonna be coming, too, doesn’t it?” Jack felt chilled and hollow, aware that she and Kyra had come all too close to sharing Luljeta’s grisly fate. Not one of the nauseating threats Pritchard had made to her had been empty.

“I imagine they will be here within the week, yes. And they will be going over everything that is known about the events leading up to the spaceport explosion.” He’d bored into her with his gaze as he said that. “We need to make absolutely sure there’s nothing left that can lead them to you, or your sister, or the family we both care about that has been protecting you.”

“Is there any way to prevent that last part? I mean, their whole mission that day *was* to murder Colonel Tomlin.”

“I honestly don’t know. But we must conceal any sign that he was anything more than an inconvenient witness to the cover-up of a Level Five Incident, and *especially* that he was protecting and hiding survivors of the Incident.”

Or, in fact, that there had been any survivors at all.

Dinner table conversation, that evening as the sun set, had centered around the different handles that might still be sticking out to point investigators toward the *ait Meziane* tribe and the Rif in general. That was also when the General had, as gently as he could, informed everyone that neither “Dihya” nor “Tislilel” could remain on Tangiers Prime for much longer. The other *Matador* survivors were to stay hidden, in as remote parts of the New Atlas range as possible, but the two espers in their number had to put as many light years as they could between themselves and the unfolding investigation... and the Federacy Operatives who would soon be part of it. And, most essential and terrible of all, none of the people they left behind could know where they were going or how to reach them.

Most of the family had looked stricken; Ewan had looked devastated. It had been hard for Jack to meet his eyes, and even harder to look away once she did.

Everything connected to Elsewhere, they all finally—if reluctantly—agreed, needed to be gone from New Marrakesh before the Operatives arrived. Including the driftwood, coral, and shells Jack and Kyra had collected. Including Sebby.

Now, Jack reached into the shower and carefully stroked Sebby’s still-hardening new carapace. “We’re gonna have to take him home. Morning after Ewan’s send-off... we need to take him back to Elsewhere, where he belongs. Before anybody in the investigation hears about him and realizes he doesn’t belong to this ’verse.”

She felt like something had reached into her chest, gripped her heart, and begun crushing it.

“Yeah,” Kyra agreed, her voice cracking. “I don’t see anything else we can do.”

“I figure he’s from somewhere up in the heights,” Jack managed to continue after a moment. “Some ninety meters above sea level. That’s where the wave must’ve caught him. We get some good elevation maps, and we can figure out the best spots to try. Maybe, once we’re there, he’ll know where to go.”

“Maybe...” Kyra leaned against her and reached in to pet Sebby, too. “What if he doesn’t? What if he’s too domesticated now?”

Jack winced. It wasn’t a thought she liked. “Then we bring him back with us, and we ask Takama to have someone take him to the other *Matador* survivors and have them take care of him. Some of them know how to switch between ’verses pretty well. They can... I dunno... do a soft release once he gets used to his own world again...”

Sebby turned and crawled onto their kneeling legs, trying to nuzzle both of their abdomens at the same time. His *reeeeeeee* was oddly plaintive.

“Oh... *fuck*...” Kyra gasped. Jack could feel tears starting in her own eyes as she watched them sliding down Kyra’s cheeks. “He knows... he knows what we’re talking about doing...”

Jack nodded, struggling not to start crying as she stroked the length of Sebby’s soft new exoskeleton. The tears slipped out anyway. “We love you, Sebby. We don’t want to leave you, but... bad things are happening and we’re going to have to go somewhere we can’t take you. I promise you, we’re going to find you a good place to be, first. A place you can be happy...”

Reeeeeeeee... Jack thought she could almost hear real words in it. Happy with you...

Had *Riddick* felt like this, she wondered, when he was preparing to leave her behind? Was *that* why he’d slipped away like a thief in the night rather than say goodbye?

She and Kyra both took extra-long showers so that Sebby could keep dancing in the water at their feet. Jack wished she had eight more legs so that she could do the Sebby Dance along with him properly.

There would be no record of this dance, except in her and Kyra’s memories, after they parted. General Toal had been clear. No pictures, no vids, no souvenirs. They couldn’t take any with them and couldn’t leave any for the *ait Meziane* family to remember them by. Anything that could ever link them to this time and place had to be destroyed or left in Elsewhere. When they left, they had to vanish like ghosts.

Jack, at least, wouldn’t need pictures or souvenirs to remember these moments clearly, but she could see how distressed everyone else was... especially Ewan.

And she could *feel* how upset Kyra was behind her deadpan... until her sister began inexplicably blocking the connection between them.

Maybe *that* was because of the awful anecdote that the General had also shared with them.

“Many years ago,” he’d told the group at the table, “I heard the story of a young woman who had been a witness to a terrible crime and was placed in protective custody until she could testify against its perpetrators. She was hidden away, and only allowed periodic, controlled contact with her family, through elaborate channels designed to keep anyone from tracing her whereabouts. Her mother worried a great deal about her and, as time wore on,

became increasingly desperate to make sure that she was all right. *She* began to beg her daughter to tell her something, anything, about where she was or how she was doing.”

His gaze had swept the table, fixing on each person as he continued. “Eventually, the young woman caved. Her handler did not discover it until much later, but she told her mother the name of the city she was living in.”

Cedric, Ewan, and Usadden all winced.

“For a while, nothing seemed amiss,” General Toal continued. “But her mother subscribed to the city’s local news service, checking its headlines and weather reports every day. After a time, that ...*quirk*... came to the attention of the wrong people. They now knew which city to search for their quarry. After a few more weeks, they found the young woman they had been hunting. And then, not long after that poor, worried mother saw a headline about a fatal house fire in the feed she had subscribed to, she learned that it was her own daughter who had died in that fire.”

The table had remained silent, everyone seated at it looking aghast.

“I’m telling you this story so that you will understand how important it is *not* to know where either Dihya or Tislilel have gone, and not to try to find out. As difficult and painful as it is, and I do understand how painful it is...”

After all, Jack had thought, his own son’s been missing for almost a decade.

“...*all* ties between you and them must be cut, for everyone’s safety.”

Safiyya, in particular, seemed to be struggling to find an argument against that. Ewan looked exactly the way he had when Jack had first seen him at his brother’s memorial: crushed by loss.

“They do not have to leave tonight,” the General continued. “That would be precipitous and might draw attention to the fact that they were fleeing *something*. But they should stay no longer than another week, and should time their departures to coincide with those of other family members who are going back to the New Atlas range... or returning to their duties after taking time off for Gavin Brahim’s memorial.” His eyes fixed on Ewan for a moment.

Everyone had been quiet and somber for the rest of the evening, even as those departures were being solidified. In one Tangiers day, after night fell and Qamar was in the right part of the sky, Ewan would be returning to the flight academy. His grandparents, Izil, and Lalla would be leaving for the New Atlas mountains the evening-day after that. And, the General decided, he would escort the two of them to the high-speed rail station the following morning-day, where they would depart for destinations no one could know.

Jack, who had told him about her ticket to the New Casablanca spaceport, was not allowed to ask what Kyra’s destination would be. Kyra had already known about that ticket, but wasn’t allowed to know where Jack was going from there. In fact, General Toal had forbidden her to tell *him*, either. It all made sense...

But she was plagued by the terrible suspicion that Kyra didn’t *have* a destination yet. Was that what her sister was hiding?

The whole thing had become terribly, depressingly imminent. Even though Tangiers Prime had always been intended as just a way-station, even though Jack had been reminding herself since before Tomlin’s death that she couldn’t stay and needed to move on...

The prospect of leaving was still far more painful than she’d ever expected it would be.

It took her a long time to fall asleep.

She dreamed, at first, about wandering empty halls and rooms, seeking someone, anyone. Some of the rooms were from the *ait Meziane* house, others from her mother's house or her father's apartment; once she even found herself back in the apartment she and Kyra had shared. But all the rooms were empty. No people, no furniture, no life.

Everything, it seemed, had been lost.

Except, on one floor, she found a poster lying face down. She turned it over.

Minnie Sulis
A Night of Magic
One Night Only

A SOLD OUT sticker had been plastered on top of the ticketing information. The face of the woman on the poster stunned Jack.

Kyra. An older, slightly curvier Kyra with gold hair and thinner, lighter eyebrows, dressed in a sparkling, multicolored corset and top hat. A dove crouched on the raised palm of her left hand, wings spread and preparing to take flight. Above the cupped fingers of her right hand, a glowing crystal sphere hovered.

Kyra's *mother*, Jack realized. Minerva Kirshbaum-Wittier, better known to late twenty-first century America by her stage name, much as her real esper abilities had been concealed behind the mannered artifice of stage magic.

General Toal still hasn't told Kyra about her mother, Jack thought. *I have to remind him to...*

But Kyra—actual Kyra, but just a little girl—was lifting the poster out of a box. The room was no longer empty. It was small, cramped, dominated by a large bed. The box had come out from deep beneath it. The windows were shut, but through them Jack could hear a low roar, like the ocean but steady rather than tidal. She walked to one window and looked out.

Gray, gray, gray. Gray buildings towering on every side, rising up to blot out the sky. Gray pavement below, choked with vehicles, the source of the steady roar and the periodic, strident sounds of horns. Gray *air*, putting a hint of a metallic taste in her throat. Gray sky peeking through the spaces between skyscrapers, haze making the buildings themselves fade away into nothing at their peaks.

New York City, 2087. The year Kyra had said goodbye to the world of her birth.

Kyra set the poster aside, lifting up the spangled corset beneath it and running her fingers over its gemmy beads and sequins. The moment was charged with magic and nostalgia; to her, there were no riches or treasures in the 'verse that could compare to the glittering fabric in her hands, and there never would be. She put it in her lap and surveyed the other treasures in the box: a crystal ball, a tarot deck, a set of playing cards tipped with sharp metal edges, a compressed black top hat—

"What are you into now?" a man's scolding voice said behind her. "Oh, for the love of—Min! *Min!*"

Kyra, curled up on her side on her own bed, head pressed to her pillow, a stuffed bunny clutched to her chest with one hand while the other pressed over her exposed ear, trying to blot out the shouting.

"You said you'd gotten rid of that devilry! Now you're letting it corrupt our daughter!"

“It’s just—”

“You can’t bring it with us! Either you belong to God or to the devil, Min! Choose!”

Min... *Mommy*... crying later when she thought no one would hear...

The box, when Kyra next sneaked into her parents’ bedroom to pull it out again and play with the things inside, was no longer there.

Filling a small box of her own, not long after, as her father lectured her. “We can’t take much, but we don’t need much. God will provide. Take only what’s most important... why are you packing *that*?”

...the stuffed bunny, worn and much beloved, lying forlornly on the bed as she left her bedroom for the last time and struggled not to cry... another lost treasure that no worldly riches could ever compare to...

Lost.

Forever.

Gray, and more gray, more than two years of gray, wandering the cramped halls of a stern and chilly spaceship. The other children were so alien to her, so different from the kids she’d known at her first school, mostly pious cookie-cutter duplicates of each other and dull to talk to. Her school lessons were alien, too. She was still learning to read, now from a book called *Bible Stories for Children*, but the other subjects, the ones she’d liked most, were gone. No art period, no gymnastics, no learning about plants and animals...

The *boys* got to learn about plants and animals. Her older brother played with construction and chemistry sets she was forbidden to even touch. The boys got to run and jump, tumble and kick, and throw and hit balls. But she wasn’t allowed anymore.

The gray world of the colony ship was a coffin.

Green, at last. The green world her father had said God promised them. Yet somehow all the grown-ups were angry about it. Even as they talked about God’s providence, even as they told the children to rejoice at having real grass under their feet and real trees above their heads... nine-year-old Kyra could feel how furious they all were. They felt *cheated* somehow. Her mother hushed her when she asked why, fear sparking in her eyes.

Chores, endless chores to make the days turn gray again. Washing and cooking and cleaning, none of which her brother ever had to do. Gardening, at least, wasn’t bad. But if she let the dirt stay under her nails, her father shouted at her. “Unclean” was an epithet that meant God would hate her. When she figured out what she needed to do and be for God to like her, she wasn’t sure she wanted Him to.

She would steal away after each day’s chores to learn the things that her brother was allowed to learn, but that no one would teach *her*. It was painstaking work, with no one to help her figure out her mistakes. She resolved that she just couldn’t make any...

...Disappearing into the green, whenever she could get away, to climb the trees and follow the animals’ trails... to run and tumble and kick unseen by anyone but those who could never betray her secrets...

...Sometimes she stole paper and pencils so she could draw detailed pictures of the plants and animals she had seen in the woods, try to capture the beauty of the valley that spread below Canaan Mountain, or reproduce the faces of her family and the few people she considered anything like friends. She kept them hidden from everyone, and learned how to switch hands and hold the pencils in a variety of ways when her father sharply queried her

about the writing callus she was developing on one finger. As a girl, he said, she didn't need to learn how to write, or read anything more than the Good Book...

One day, as she sketched the valley from the perspective of a high tree branch, twelve years old, huge vehicles began to arrive, arraying themselves around the Enclave. Tense-looking men emerged from one vehicle and marched toward the gates...

Her mother, still so beautiful but her face increasingly lined with sorrow, stress, and murdered dreams, gathered her into a fierce hug when she stole home later. "Where have you been? I've been so worried..."

The vehicles remained arrayed around the Enclave. Kyra wasn't allowed out anymore; none of the children were. Bad men were outside, she was told, and they would do terrible things to her if they caught her.

But first, they must catch you...

Her mother had read that to her once from a book she'd found and pilfered from her cousin Joren's library shelves, back on Earth, because it had rabbits on the cover. *Mommy* could only read her parts of it when no one else was home, but her father had snatched it away from them, shouting, when he'd come home early and caught them with it. Kyra still didn't know how it ended. The book was connected, in her heart, to that lost and mourned stuffed bunny, whose official name had been Patches but who, secretly, she'd called El-Ahrairah...

But first, they must catch you.

She knew all the hidden ways through the forest around the Enclave, and had known how to get in and out, unseen, for years. The *bad men* never caught her, never even saw her. ...until...

Fire. Smoke. Blood. Screaming. Kyra reloaded, aimed at one of the *bad men* and pulled the trigger, watching just long enough to make sure he fell and didn't rise. She moved on before anyone could fire back, finding another place to aim from, another *bad man* to aim at...

...Struggling in their grip as they dragged her into a courtyard, her shirt torn away and one of them painfully twisting her hair in his fist. Her mother, cornered by three more of the *bad men*, had her hands out, holding them up in a gesture that Kyra remembered from a time when she was little and, one day while her father and brother were both away at some church event, the brooms had danced. But her face crumpled and she began to cry.

"No..." Min—*Mommy*—sobbed. "I won't... I can't... I won't let the devil back in me..."

The men laughed.

"You're gonna have *my* devil in you in a minute, bitch," one of them said, reaching forward to grasp the fabric of her dress—

"Oh God... MOMMY..."

Jack woke up with a start.

Kyra, next to her on the bed, whimpered again. "Mommy..."

Her dream, she realized, had been *Kyra's* dream, now morphing into a terrible nightmare as the standoff and massacre unfolded again in her mind.

"Kyra," she murmured, touching her shoulder. "Wake up. It's okay. You're not there..."

"No," Kyra whisper-sobbed. "I have to save her... have to save us..."

But there had been no way for twelve-year-old Kyra to *do* that... and there was no way now for sixteen-year-old Kyra to do it either.

Is she going to be ruled by these nightmares after we're separated? Oh fuck...

Only knowing that she had to do *something*, Jack leaned close, put her arms around Kyra, closed her eyes...

...and dove back into her sister's mind the way she could dive into the mindspace the *Apeiros* inhabited.

She was back in the New Christy Enclave. She froze the moment and rolled it backward, feeling Kyra's initial resistance and then assent. Turn back time, turn it back, please undo what was done...

The battle began, all over again.

But now it was different.

As Red Roger's *bad men* poured into the Enclave...

...Riddick rose to meet them.

48.

Tizzy the Terrible

“You’re mine now,” Ewan murmured into Jack’s ear. “I can’t let you go... ever...”

He began to move against her, his hands pinning her wrists to the bedroll he’d spread out beneath her. She wrapped her bare legs around his naked waist, letting him have his way, groaning softly at the pleasure he was stirring in her. He’d taken her from the house without warning, without a word, and brought her into the mountains, refusing to accept that they might never see each other again. Now her past and future fell away and there was only this moment, only him—

“Tizzy. Tizzy. Keep it *down*...”

Jack’s eyes flew open.

The tent canvas that had been above her just seconds ago was gone, replaced with the ornate tiled ceiling of the bedroom in the *ait Meziane* house, barely visible in the gloom.

Kyra, herself only half visible in the predawn darkness, was sitting up next to her and watching her with a smirk. “Damn, girl, that dream of yours got *me* all hot and bothered, and I don’t even *like* sex,” she snickered.

Fuck.

“Please tell me I didn’t call out his name.” Jack groaned, now with embarrassment.

“I woke you up before you could, but I think you were about to.” Kyra’s smile was positively *merry*. “I figured you wouldn’t want that to happen.”

Jack sat up in the bed, aware that she’d been on the verge of feeling something incredible, which had now receded unfulfilled. “Thanks, I think...”

“Yeah, sorry about *that*. But you’re really gonna need to learn how to not talk in your sleep before you return home, you know.” Kyra’s smile turned wry. “Gonna have a bunch of people, who are *very* interested in picking up any clues they can about where you’ve been, listening in once you’re there.”

“Fuuuuuuck...” Jack flopped back against the pillows. “Is that something I can even learn how to do?”

“Probably. Maybe you can ask the General if that device he’s bringing us will help you do that. Who knows?” Kyra lay down next to her again, sighing. “I’m sorry you can’t stay, you know. I wish we both could. It’s all happening so fast now.”

That, weirdly, had been the driving force behind the dream. She’d “awakened” in it to find Ewan beside their bed, taking her hand and putting a finger to her lips when she started to ask what he was doing. He’d led her down to the garage and to a large, rugged vehicle, strapping her in without speaking, and driven them out of the city and into the mountains. Rather than give her up, he had decided to abandon his career and reputation and claim her as his own *right then*...

It was all very wish-fulfillment but was absolutely the opposite of what the real Ewan would ever do, she thought. Even given how devastated he'd looked after dinner.

"God, part of me wishes that hadn't been a dream... that it had been real..."

"He wouldn't be the man you're hung up on if it had been, you know," Kyra sighed next to her. "Part of what you're in love with is the fact that he'd never do something like that. Never actually hurt you. And doing that *would* hurt you. Trust me, it really would."

"I know..." Jack grumped. "I really do know that. Sometimes."

And sometimes, she thought ruefully, she started to convince herself that she'd be able to handle it, that she was plenty adult enough to offer and receive such things. Only after those moments passed would she realize, yet again, that those were some of her most childish thoughts of all.

She'd had similar fantasies about Riddick, half a year earlier. Sometimes she wondered if that was why he'd disappeared on her, because he knew what she felt for him and was worried that, if she offered herself to him the way she'd sometimes fantasized about doing, he might take her up on it. Had crushing on him driven him away?

I just wish he'd said good-bye...

But part of her was dreading how hard it was going to be to say good-bye to Ewan.

Another part of her wished she'd never started crushing on *him*, either, or whatever it was she was feeling. She missed Ewan's hugs, missed resting her head against his chest or shoulder and having him hold her close, missed the affection, teasing, and intuitive understanding of each other's ideas that they'd been able to share those first few days... before any touch, any glance, had started setting her body on fire. The desire she felt, and couldn't control, had become a barrier that was cheating her out of one of the most powerful *emotional* bonds she'd ever found.

And now it was too late to find a way to fix that.

"Time fixes it," Kyra said, as if replying to spoken words rather than her thoughts. "You won't be a bundle of hormones forever. Or maybe you'll just figure out how to handle them. Not sure. I read up on some of that stuff at the hospital, and actually talked about it with one or two of my therapists. Mostly I was trying to figure out why *I* feel so *dead* inside about the whole thing... turns out a lot of rape survivors do. But I read about what *normal* sex drives are supposed to be like, too, especially when they've just kicked on... and it'll get easier to handle. In time."

"Fuckin' time," Jack groaned. "I'm almost out of that..."

"Nuh uh," Kyra snickered. "You're just going home for a while. Once you learn how to handle it all, and the 'verse says you're a legal adult... look out worlds, here comes Tizzy the Terrible!"

"Oh, my *God*..."

"Hey, it's a step up from Jack B. Badd. Isn't that really your dad, anyway?"

"Yeah," Jack admitted, laughing. "The more I think about it, the more I think I stole *his* childhood nickname."

"And now you have your own," Kyra grinned.

She had to admit, she *liked* being "Tizzy..."

"I can't take it with me, though," she found herself musing. "It'd connect me to here. When I get back home, I can't ever be either 'Jack' or 'Tizzy' anymore."

“Yeah, not if you want to ever come back here someday,” Kyra said after a moment. “I can’t take ‘Dihya’ with me, either. Fuck, I’m gonna miss that name...”

“Maybe one day you’ll get to use your own name again, though,” Jack said. “Once you’re eighteen, New Dartmouth law says your criminal record as a minor gets sealed, even if the statute of limitations isn’t up and even if they haven’t had a chance to prosecute yet. I looked it up. Once you turn eighteen, they can’t touch you. So, like, two years from now... you can tell the whole ’verse your real name if you want.”

“Yeah,” Kyra replied, her voice wistful, “but the whole ’verse already knows who that is. It’s still gonna be the same deal... they’ll think I *should* be in jail anyway. And if I want to come back here in a few years and try to network with those officer friends of Tomlin’s, it definitely can’t be as *me*. Toombs made sure of that.”

“Fuckin’ Toombs...” Jack found herself wishing she’d sent him on his wild goose chase on a much more inhospitable world than Shakti Four. There was a frigid, desolate, barely habitable planet she’d heard about a while back, UV-6, that would have been perfect. She could have made him freeze his ass off the whole time he was chasing his own malodorous tail. Too late now, though... “Well, maybe in a few years, Kali Montgomery can do that networking instead, right?”

“Yeah, she’s even got a military background. It’ll all work out...” But Kyra was shielding her thoughts from Jack again. She could feel the barrier that had gone up.

“Are you okay with me knowing that name?” Jack asked, wondering if *that* was the problem. “Because I can show you how to make a new ID if you want.”

“Nah, it’s all good.” Kyra shook her head and quirked a smile at Jack. “I like that name. Picked it myself. It’s fine. I’m really not worried about *you* getting caught and interrogated. You’re an escape artist. People go to grab you and whoosh, you’re somewhere else. That was true even before you learned how to isomorph.”

“Okay.” Jack sighed, still wishing she knew what Kyra was hiding. “Are you okay with what I did last night?”

“What’d you do last night?”

“When you were having a nightmare. And I stopped it.”

Kyra frowned quizzically at her. “I had a nightmare? I don’t remember. Well, thank you for stopping it, anyway. But I just remember having a really... nice dream.” An almost-goofy smile crossed her lips. “Nearly as nice as the one you had.”

Maybe that was the only part she remembered?

When Jack had taken over the dream, she’d depicted Riddick single-handedly slaughtering all of Red Roger’s men, drawing from the spectacular combat moves she’d seen him use when he’d battled the shrylls, and then gutting Roger Fiennes himself while Kyra watched. Then he had offered her his hand and told her that he was taking her away from Canaan Mountain and the New Christy Enclave, enacting every facet of the rescue that she’d always wished for.

At that point, she had let Kyra start “driving” again and withdrawn from her sister’s mind. Where they’d gone from there, she didn’t know. She’d needed some sleep of her *own*. Steering someone else’s dreams like that had turned out to be hard work.

“You’re welcome,” she told Kyra, grinning. “As long as you got a good night’s sleep, right? I was thinking... when we take Sebby back—”

Reee? Sebby lifted his head. He had been sleeping down by their feet.

“Yeah, you, sweetie. Don’t worry. We’re gonna take good care of you, I promise. But I was thinking we could ask Tafrara where she buys the plants she puts in the courtyard, and buy a little olive tree to take with us. Maybe even two. So Sebby can eat olives forever.”

Kyra’s eyes lit up at the idea. “Oh my God, Tizzy, that’s *it*. That’s also the way *we* can leave something behind *here* for the family. We can plant something in the courtyard, and to everybody else in the ’verse it’ll just be another plant, but *they’ll* always know it came from *us*.”

Sebby squeaked and bounced up the bed to them, catching their enthusiasm and chirping happily. Jack could tell he had olives in mind now, and that they’d better bring some up for him when they came back from breakfast with his crickets.

“Oh *shit*. I don’t think Izil is gonna buy enough crickets!” Sebby had more than doubled in size, after all.

“He will if we catch him before he goes,” Kyra said, climbing out of bed. Jack hurried after her.

Izil had already left, but Lalla, hearing the problem, put together an “appetizer” plate of Sebby’s favorite *human* foods for him, including an abundance of olives, to compensate. Breakfast was still half an hour off, but almost everyone was up, and they all wanted to see how Sebby had grown and take a look at his exuviae. Jack led the way, carrying up the tray, while Kyra talked to Tafrara about buying some olive trees and the idea of planting something special in the courtyard.

Focusing on keeping the tray balanced, Jack didn’t realize that Ewan was the one walking beside her until he opened the bedroom door for her. He seemed unusually subdued.

“You okay?” she asked as she went through the door, forcing herself *not* to brush up against him in passing.

“Yes...” Ewan’s smile was dim in comparison to the ones he usually flashed her. “I just didn’t sleep very well.”

Sebby chirped in curiosity as everybody filed in. He seemed a lot less nervous about the whole family crowding the room.

“*Baraka*, he’s grown so big!” Takama marveled.

“Izil needs to see this when he gets back,” Safiyya laughed. “His degree is in zoology. He will love this.”

“He’s going back up into the New Atlas Mountains soon, isn’t he?” Jack asked. When Safiyya nodded, she turned to General Toal. “Can... can I give him Sebby’s exuviae to take with him? Would that be okay? It wouldn’t be anywhere near New Marrakesh, and it doesn’t have any quantum connections to Elsewhere.”

How, she suddenly wondered, did she know that last bit?

“As long as he can be discreet about it,” the General answered slowly, “that should be all right. Sebby’s morphology is quite alien, in truth, but if he is willing to claim that it was sent to him from somewhere offworld, and promises not to publish any articles about your pet...”

“We’ll make sure he agrees to that,” Cedric told the General.

If for some reason they couldn’t return Sebby to Elsewhere, Jack decided, Izil should be the one to take custody of him. He was, after all, a zoologist, he’d been fascinated by Sebby

from the beginning, and he'd taken it upon himself to keep their rambunctious crustacean well fed. She glanced at Kyra and saw her knowing nod of agreement.

Sebby, meanwhile, was happily chomping olives and squeak-mumbling softly to himself.

Breakfast was subdued, the mood from the prior evening carrying over. Kyra and Tafrara continued discussing plants and refining the idea for the garden. They decided that she and Jack should each pick out a plant for the courtyard when they went to get an olive tree or two, and once they had picked out their plants, Tafrara would determine the best locations for each one in the courtyard.

"We can never tell anyone outside of the family who planted them, of course," Takama said as they finished solidifying the plan, "but it will be a nice thing for all of us to know. I have spoken with the other tribal representatives in the Rif, and they have all agreed to our story. Two distant cousins from our tribe, Dihya and Tislilel, came to town in preparation for the engagement Moussem, which of course ended up being canceled after the explosion. In an unhappy turn of events, they then fell ill with Atlas Fever shortly after Brahim's memorial and had to be sent home once they recovered enough to travel. And that is as much as anyone in the Rif will ever say about you... aside from that you were lovely, pleasant, polite girls whenever you came to the market. Which at least means they will have something true to say."

It felt, to Jack, like an *epitaph*. By the look on Ewan's face, he felt the same way.

Izil joined them at the end of the meal, cricket box under his arm, and was immediately excited to hear about Sebby's molt. Kyra led him upstairs to see, telling Jack that she'd been practicing the isomorph trick and wanted to try it with the crickets herself. Jack, Ewan, and Tafrara followed not long after.

Izil and Kyra were sitting by the tub, watching Sebby play with his food and talking quietly. Izil stood up as Jack entered the room.

"Dihya tells me that you two feel, if you are unable to return Sebby to Elsewhere next morning-day, that I should take him with me into the mountains when I go," he said, taking her hand. "I am honored. I *do* hope he can be released among his own kind, but I promise to take very good care of him for you if he cannot be."

"Thank you." It was a relief to know that, no matter what, Sebby would be safe. Now she just had to figure out a way to stop worrying so much about Kyra.

"After dinner," Tafrara told her and Kyra, "we will go pick out plants. My favorite nursery is open into the overnoon hours and that's the best and quietest time to find things, so we'll go there shortly before we plan to retire for sleep ourselves. In the meantime..."

"We want to spend as much time with you today as possible," Ewan said, his eyes on Jack.

She could see how hard he was trying to hide the full depth of what he was feeling. For a moment, she imagined she saw an echo of her dream in his eyes.

The first thing they did was Kyra's physical therapy session, which now incorporated Tai Chi. Jack was fascinated. Ewan led them, while Tafrara moved between her and Kyra to correct their balance and posture. He began with breathing and balance, and then had them lift their arms and legs into specific positions, holding them and slowly moving from one to another. The way Jack felt herself concentrating reminded her of the way she had focused to keep the floor of U1 beneath her in Elsewhere.

An hour passed, almost before she knew it. As Kyra had said, she could *feel*, in the aftermath, how much work her body had actually been doing, even though each moment had felt easy and natural. She didn't feel it in an achy or uncomfortable way, though. She felt as if she'd tapped into something powerful.

No wonder meditating kept Riddick from going crazy in his cryotube... Maybe the way that meditation condensed time had countered the way that cryosleep drugs stretched it out.

I need to keep doing this. She wondered if there were classes back on Deckard's World.

"So, what would you two like to do next?" Tafrara asked.

"Tizzy's been telling me the story of the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash," Kyra said. "I was hoping she could finish telling it before we have to split up... although maybe she should start over if you guys are gonna hear it, too?"

It was, Jack thought, a *kind* of souvenir she could leave behind with Ewan, Izil, and Tafrara: the story of the accident that had ultimately brought her, and Kyra, to their doorstep. A truth that few knew, given the lies that had begun to circulate since then. They could be trusted with it. And who knew; one day, one of them might come face to face with Richard B. Riddick himself, and the story they knew might just save their lives.

She didn't start from quite the same place that she had with Kyra, though. General Toal had made it clear that she wasn't allowed to reveal anything about where she had come from or where she had been trying to go, after all. So...

"I would have come to the Tangiers System on the *Hunter-Gratzner* a few months before I ended up getting here, if it hadn't crashed," she began instead. "But it came out of one of its Star Jumps and crossed a comet's path on its way to the next Jump Point, and got holed by a bunch of micrometeors. That's what the inquiry afterwards figured out. Most of the crew died in their tubes, except for the navigator and the docking pilot. The ship crash-landed on a planet with an outpost that had lost contact with the Federacy about twenty-two years ago. But I didn't know any of *that* until much later. The first thing *I* knew, I was waking up in my cryotube, lying on my side, and couldn't get the doors to open..."

This time, as she spoke, she conjured vivid mental images for Kyra, matching them to her words. Pounding on the box, wondering if it was now her coffin, until Shazza and Zeke had appeared through the glass and begun cutting her out...

Kyra had her eyes closed, focusing on the visions Jack was feeding her.

Jack skipped over some things, like some of the conversations she'd had with Paris while they rummaged through his storage compartment for supplies and, later, weapons once Riddick escaped into the desert. For some odd reason, she felt weirdly possessive of that relationship, maybe because she'd begun drawing upon some of the things he'd told her about running museum heists for her own excursions into burglary. Plus, more practically, those were conversations she'd portrayed as happening *before* the cash, the first time she'd told the story to Kyra. As she retold the parts Kyra had already heard, doing imitations of each person's voice and mannerisms as she reproduced dialogues, Kyra began saying *her* lines for her.

"How do I get eyes like that?" Kyra asked softly, as Jack described Riddick glancing over at her after his chained lunge toward Fry.

"You gotta kill a few people," Jack answered in her Riddick imitation, not bothering to correct her sister's wording this time, either.

“Okay, I can do it...”

Maybe it should have worried her, but it was fun to have Kyra participate that way. She let it slide, moving forward with the tale.

The eclipse had descended over the crash planet, Hassan had died, and the survivors had adopted Fry’s plan to return to the settlement as the lunch hour approached in New Marrakesh. Now she was coming up on the part of the story that still had her fuming, all these months later.

“We got to work making as much light as we could, from everything we could find. Paris had me find him a bunch of these weird tubes that he could use to make wicks for the liquor bottles. And Fry told me to start pulling these big, glowing fiberoptic cables out of the bulkheads,” she said, unable to keep a grumble out of her voice. “Those things were glowing *really* brightly, and there were a *ton* of them, and I thought maybe there’d be enough light to use them to power the Sand Cat. They were talking about pulling everything on a *sled* and draping the cables over our shoulders as we ran, and nobody’d stop to listen to me, even if just to tell me they’d already thought of it and it wouldn’t work...”

“Fry,” she’d said, holding up a glowing coil, “don’t you think this’d be enough to run—”

“No, Jack, pull it all down. We need all of it.”

“That’s not what I—”

“El-Imam, I need to talk to you for a second,” Fry said, walking off without another word to her.

“Johns,” she’d tried again. “I was thinking if we coiled enough of this up around the—”

“Look, kid, I’m busy. Talk to Fry if you need something.” He had one of his shotgun shells, a bright red one, in his hand and was turning it over and over as if that was the most important task in the universe.

“But she—”

“Talk. To. *Fry*.” The glare he’d given her had driven her back.

“Paris, I was wondering—”

“Just who I wanted to see. Do you think you can carry some of the food supplies in your backpack? We won’t need them until we get to the skiff.”

“Sure, but—”

“Brilliant. Here we go. Now, I still have to figure out how we’re going to bundle up and pull all of these bottles.”

“But that’s what I’m trying to t—”

“Must run. So much to do before we set off...”

“Imam, I have an idea—”

“Child, have you finished coiling up the cables? We really are in a hurry.”

“But we won’t *have* to be if you would just—”

“Stay on task. Suleiman!” He switched to Arabic, which she hadn’t understood at the time but now could parse from memory. “Have you disconnected the secondary power generator? Hurry!”

“I just wanted to tell them,” Jack concluded for her audience, “that the fiberoptics could produce enough light to switch the Sand Cat’s photovoltaic collector back on *and* probably have enough left over to ring its perimeter. We could’ve *driven* the whole way back if they’d just stopped to *listen*...”

“Didn’t *Riddick* listen to you?” Kyra asked, odd longing in her voice.

“He was busy, too,” Jack moped. “He passed by me once, talking to Fry as he went. He *did* say something to me, but he was gone before I could reply. He said ‘check your cuts. These bad boys know our blood now.’ I didn’t have any *cuts* but... I think he knew I was having my period and was warning me that the things outside would know, too. Fuck, I hate being too young to be listened to...”

“We will always listen to you, Tislilel,” Ewan said. His hand on her shoulder, for once, didn’t send a jolt down to her core but filled her instead with wistful yearning for the peace he was offering. She had less than one Tangiers day left before he would be gone.

“Yes,” Izil agreed. “Always.”

Kyra took Jack’s hand and gave it a squeeze, maybe feeling her sudden, stricken longing. To find this kind of acceptance and respect, and to have to give it up, leave it behind...

“Would it have worked?” Ewan asked Tafrara. “Using the fiberoptics?”

“I think it would have,” she said after a thoughtful moment. One of her degrees, Jack had learned, was in Engineering, much like John MacNamera’s. “They had their own power source, yes? Which you had to drag? I’ve seen the kinds of fiberoptics you speak of. They could have been more than sufficient. Especially with direct application, coiling around the collector as you describe. What color of light was the photovoltaic engine designed to work under?”

“All colors, I think,” Jack sighed. “The twin suns were red and yellow, made everything look real orange when they were up, and the third sun was blue like the fiberoptic light. It ran under both kinds of light, so it should’ve been fine. I figured if we piled enough lit coils onto the collector...”

“Yes,” Tafrara told her, looking sympathetic and a little sad. “It would have worked. What did they do instead?”

“We put the generator powering them onto this sled they made out of a piece of the ship’s outer hull,” Jack muttered, trying hard not to *whine* about it. Her eyes and nose were stinging. “Along with the rest of the power cells we needed to launch the skiff, and a bunch of Paris’s liquor bottles, some flashlights, and other stuff they’d scavenged. It was so heavy. Then we wrapped the fiberoptics around our bodies, all connected to that one generator. Riddick ran ahead, and Imam and Johns grabbed onto rope handles on the sled to drag it, and the rest of us ran alongside the sled to keep up with the generator and surround each other with light. And we followed Riddick into the darkness...”

And, she thought miserably as she followed everyone downstairs for lunch, four more of the crash survivors, three of whom she had genuinely bonded with, had *died*.

But what was worse, she thought as she sat down at the table, was that even if maybe they *should* have listened to her about the Sand Cat, what happened after that...

...was all *her* fault.

49.

Sacrifice Play

“That is such total *horse shit*,” Kyra exploded.

Jack, who had just finished describing Paris Ogilvie’s death, found herself staring in confusion at her sister... as did everyone else in the room.

Ewan, Tafrara, and Izil had come back up with the two of them after lunch to hear more of the eclipse story, this time bringing tea with them. Ewan was, at that moment, helping Kyra through her physical therapy stretches; he had frozen in place, looking between her and Jack with growing concern.

“She thinks it’s her fault that Paris guy died,” Kyra added in response to the quizzical looks she was getting. “Jesus *fuck*, it’s one of the reasons she slashed her *wrists*. What the *hell*, Tizzy?”

“It *was* my fault—” Jack began.

“Why? Because he dropped a flashlight and you tried to pick it up?” Kyra rolled her eyes.

“Trying to pick up that *flashlight* cost us all of the fiberoptic light,” Jack protested.

“Because *he* panicked and pulled the power generator over!” Kyra argued back.

“He wouldn’t have panicked if I’d just—”

“Hold on, Tizzy,” Tafrara said, her voice gentle. “Dihya. Both of you. Am I understanding the chain of events correctly here? Paris used up the fuel for the cutting torch, carrying it as a secondary light source while already fully protected by fiberoptics, yes?”

Jack nodded slowly.

“And when it went out, he immediately grabbed for another *unnecessary* secondary light source, knocking one of the flashlights out of the bin he’d reached into?”

“Yeah...”

“And he made no effort to pick it up?” Tafrara continued.

Jack, feeling more and more like she was trapped on a witness stand, shook her head.

“No...”

“And then you said what, again?”

“I said, ‘wait,’” Jack admitted, starting to see where Tafrara was going.

“Did they?” Izil asked, joining in. Sebby was snoozing on the zoologist’s folded legs.

“Not right away...”

“If they had waited when you asked,” Ewan asked, “would you have needed to remove your fiberoptic coil to reach the flashlight?”

“I...” Jack closed her eyes, recalling that moment, feeling Kyra exploring it in her head as she did. She had already begun to turn back for the flashlight, which had still been within the protective halo of light surrounding them, when she’d felt the coil tightening around her; the others weren’t waiting. She had shrugged out of the coil, dropping low to the ground to

present less of a target and struggling to let her eyes adjust as she reached for the flashlight, where it had rolled into what had become deep gloom. “No...”

“When *did* they stop?”

Jack didn’t know for sure. Her fingertips had just touched the barrel of the flashlight when she heard Imam shout and felt him tackle her, even as something monstrous shrieked above her and they rolled to the side. Everything after that had been a blur, gunshots echoing, Imam asking her if she was all right, Paris babbling nearby—*this can’t be happening, this can’t be happening*—and then the crash of the generator as it toppled over, its whine as it shorted out and powered down, and the coils she was shrugging back into going dark...

Silence had fallen over the group for a terrible moment, and then she’d heard Paris’s final whisper. “I was supposed to die in *France*. I never even *saw* France...”

Fire had exploded in the night and she’d caught one last glimpse of him, collapsing, surrounded by the monsters that had been following them... following *her*.

Jack wiped at her eyes. Thinking of his death still *hurt*. Kyra and the others might think of the story as somehow being all about Riddick, and she’d been telling it that way for Kyra’s sake, but before their deaths, *Shazza and Paris* had been the stars of *her* story, the two adult survivors whom she had spent the most time with, bonded the most closely with, and felt the most powerful connections to. Both of them had spoken of helping her reach her planned destination once they got off of that godforsaken rock... and each of them had also offered to take her with them and watch over her if she *had* no destination.

Paris had even offered to cut her in on the Mona Lisa heist if she wanted to travel to Earth with him. He’d had little fear of the deadly security systems surrounding it, had been excited by the challenge of facing them down... but the unpredictable organic threats of the crash planet had turned out to be more than he could cope with.

Feeling him being devoured alive by the monsters had nearly undone her. Feeling Riddick’s gaze shift to her, knowing he was thinking *it’s her they’re after*—

She’d thought, at the time, that she’d been imagining all of that. Now that she knew better, it just made everything worse.

“They got him because they were after *me*,” she said, switching arguments even though she knew she was doing something her mother called *moving the goal posts*. “They weren’t following the rest of the group. Just *me*. They could smell my blood. *That’s* why it’s my fault.”

“Because you were menstruating?” Ewan asked. His matter-of-fact question startled Jack; back on Deckard’s World, boys and men seemed to go to great lengths to avoid thinking, much less talking, about the messier aspects of female anatomy. A few months before she’d run away, some of her nosier classmates had discovered that she had tampons in her backpack and had *freaked out*...

She nodded, still not fathoming why he seemed so relaxed about the subject. She’d thought for sure it would disgust him and Izil when she’d mentioned having to find a way to sneak off for a few harrowing minutes to deal with her period, but both men had acted as if the only disturbing elements of that sequence were the creatures that could have been lurking in any shadow. “I’d run out of tampons right before the eclipse, and by the time we were ready to run, I was on my last pad. All I’d had was my emergency stash. And my flow was just starting, so it was super heavy.”

There *were* more pads that she'd found in the settlement and stashed on board the skiff, but hadn't had a chance to grab, although they were a few decades old and she'd been dreading using them. She'd been right, too; after twenty-two years of abandonment, gritty desert dust had insinuated its way into them and it had felt, a few times, like putting sandpaper between her legs—

“And asking someone to help you find more, or an alternative, would have broken your masquerade.” There was no judgment in Ewan's voice. Why did she feel like there should be?

“Yeah,” she muttered, wishing she could disappear into a hole.

“So, let's get this all straight,” Kyra said, her voice brisk and a little hard. “These people barely listened to a word you said a lot of the time, and a few of them were practically at each other's throats, but you were supposed to trust them enough to tell them you were really a girl and that you needed more tampons—assuming there even were any to give you—just in case Riddick was right about the monsters smelling blood?”

“I...” When Kyra put it like that...

“And this Paris guy *wasted all of the cutting torch's fuel*, even though the group might need it to actually *cut* stuff with,” Kyra continued, “and when it was all gone, he lost one flashlight while trying to grab another one... and it's your fault he was being wasteful and panicky?”

Jack didn't know what to say.

“And then, when you called out ‘wait,’ to the rest of the group, and they *didn't*, and you had to take off your own light protection to reach the flashlight as a result, it's what... all your fault?”

Yes, her inner voice insisted. She'd put that one flashlight ahead of all the rest of the light...

“Oh for God's sake,” Kyra grumbled. “I can *hear* what you're thinking, you know. C'mon. Admit it. They told you before you started running that every bit of light was valuable and you should conserve it all carefully, right? Which is what you were trying to *do* even as Paris was doing the opposite.”

“You would make an excellent lawyer,” Izil chuckled, pouring another round of mint tea for everyone while stroking Sebby's exoskeleton.

“So now, let's see,” Kyra went on, quirking an eyebrow at Izil as she stretched over and picked up her cup. “*You* get attacked, that hoodoo realizes in time and manages to save you, Johns starts firing his shotgun into the darkness at them even though they're still *staying away from the light*, and it's your fault that Paris flips his shit and starts scuttling away from the safety of the sled and the light? And drags the whole generator contraption over and breaks it in the process?”

“The very thing you avoided doing by taking your light coils off, I'd like to add,” Tafrara said.

“It's just...” Jack didn't know how to explain it now. Everything they were saying made sense to her head, but the rest of her was insisting that it was all her doing, her fault.

“I know you don't like hearing this, and God knows, we all have a hard time remembering it about you ourselves,” Ewan said to her, locking eyes with her, “but you're only thirteen years old. *You* were not supposed to be responsible for *their* well-being. I know you were

trying very hard to pull your weight without any complaints after the way Johns tried to use your fear as an argument against the run. Weren't you?"

Yes, Jack realized. That was a huge part of it. She'd tried to buck up, *butch* up, be as helpful as possible... but after how unwelcome her attempts to suggest a way to revive the sand cat had been, the thought of confiding in any of them that she was bleeding had been daunting to the point of nausea.

"*You* held your own while one of the adults in charge of the situation went to pieces over a threat that hadn't even been aimed at him," Ewan continued. He was all she could see now, his eyes holding hers in their thrall. "That kind of panic *can* happen to anyone. Soldiers panic under fire, too. In my field training, we were taught to move as a unit, to retreat as a unit... to never, ever, break formation and run. But the first time you're under live fire, there's no telling what will happen, and there's almost always someone who panics. It's usually not who you'd expect, either. Sometimes the steadiest-seeming people can lose their minds. I'm not trying to shift all the blame onto Paris, here. *But*. If he was that close to all-out panic, and it does sound like he was given the other mistakes he was making, something was inevitably going to trigger it."

"But it was *me*," Jack heard herself saying. "Why did it have to be *me*?"

Ewan looked at Kyra, and then at the others, a question in his expression. When they all seemed to assent, he moved to Jack's side, sat down behind her, wrapped his arms around her, and drew her into his lap. She leaned against him, struggling for a moment not to cry before giving in and letting him hold her through it. For once, her stupid hormones didn't get in the way, although she almost wished they would if it might have broken her dark mood and driven off the tears and misery.

He seemed prepared for everything, giving her a handkerchief from his pocket to use to wipe her eyes and nose. His arms stayed around her even after she recovered. Things were, she thought, almost like they'd been before that *moment* on the beach. She rested her head against his shoulder, glad that she could just... *be*... for a while. When he brought her teacup to her lips, she sipped gratefully, feeling at home and at peace in a way that she hadn't in a long time.

"So I'm guessing that nobody knew how to fix the lights, and you had to switch to all of those liquor bottles," Kyra prompted, managing to time her question for right when Jack began feeling ready to tell more of the story.

"Yeah," she said. "Fry lit a flare, and the rest of us used the bottles after she lit them for us. We dumped the fiber optics and the light generator off the sled and kept going... a little faster now that Johns and Imam didn't have to carry as much weight. It felt like we were walking forever. I asked Fry if we were getting close to the settlement yet... and that's when we reached the sled tracks."

"Wait..." Izil said.

"Shit," Kyra muttered.

"Your sled's tracks? You had gone in a circle?" Tafrara asked.

Jack nodded. "Everybody thought Riddick had gotten lost. But it was worse than that. We were almost at the canyon... and it was *full* of those creatures. He said he'd 'circled once to buy some time to think.' And I guess he'd decided my secret wasn't going to keep anymore. He told them I was bleeding. He told them I was a *girl* and I was *bleeding*."

“*Tayr-iw*, I am so sorry,” Ewan murmured in her ear. Tafrara gave him an odd look.

“I tried to explain it... why I’d done it... I mean, posed as a guy... When I was *twelve*, back home, these older guys started hitting on me all the time, asking gross stuff like what I had on under my skirt, and did my ‘carpet’ match my ‘drapes’ and shit, until my mom would come roaring out at them and threaten to have them arrested for messing with a kid. A lot of girls at my school were getting picked on like that, some of them were even getting *groped*, and I thought, maybe if nobody knew I was a girl, *especially* a girl on her own...”

“You’d be safer, yes,” Ewan nodded. “Somewhat, at least.”

“And after Riddick warned me about my blood, back at the ship, I was afraid they’d just *leave* me there if they knew. Fry said she wouldn’t do that, but I could *see* the way everybody else was looking at me, like I was a whole different person.”

“Shit, that’s *it*,” Kyra gasped. “That’s what changed.”

The others looked at her inquiringly.

“I’ve been trying to figure out why that Imam guy went from being so nice to you and protective of you to being... well, the total dickhead *I* saw at the hospital, nothing *like* how you’ve been portraying him. It all started changing when you weren’t a boy anymore, didn’t it?”

Did it?

After Fry had left her alone with Imam in the cave, he’d seemed unable to meet her eyes most of the time. It had been awkward, waiting to find out if they would live or die, with a strange wall up between them. She’d just thought maybe it was his grief over the other boys, or the circumstances of their possible last moments, the chance that the cave might become their tomb...

...but it had never really gotten better after that.

He’d taken it upon himself to act as a chaperone between her and Riddick the rest of the time the three of them had spent together—as if Riddick was lying in wait to defile her the moment his guard dropped—to the point where the two of them had begun coming up with elaborately sneaky ways to steal conversations with one another whenever the Holy Man slept. Riddick’s hearing was every bit as acute as hers, and they’d sometimes spent hours conversing in the tiniest threads of whispers just so they could speak freely.

If I’d managed to tell Riddick about the sand cat, would he have made them listen?

He had, after all, spent a great deal of time on the skiff listening to her, and telling her things that “responsible adults” would have found questionable but that he apparently felt she needed to know about the big bad ’verse she was venturing out into. *His* attitude toward her, inscrutable as it sometimes was, hadn’t really changed. But—

“I think you’re right,” Jack told the family, *her* family, surrounding her. “I think... once Imam knew I was a girl... he didn’t know how to relate to me anymore.”

The revelation had broken the group, too.

“Fry decided she’d been wrong, the run wasn’t going to work, and we should head back to the crash ship. But Johns...” She swallowed. This was the ugly part. “Now *he* wanted to keep going.”

Kyra, reading from her mind the truth she was preparing to spill, gasped. “Oh, that motherfucking son of a...”

When she trailed off, Ewan drew in a breath.

“Don’t you *dare* say it,” Tafrara scolded him.

There suddenly seemed to be a hidden wellspring of laughter between sister and brother, in spite of the fierce scowl she had aimed his way.

“Say what?” Jack asked.

“Ewan Zdan brought home some really *filthy* phrases after he attended the basic training segment of the Tangiers Military Academy,” Izil explained, his eyes twinkling. “There’s one in particular that he still sometimes says about someone he truly reviles.”

“Okay,” Kyra said, grinning. “Now you *have* to share.”

Tafrara rolled her eyes and then nodded at Ewan, sighing.

Ewan’s expression was pure mischief. The Tamazight words that rolled off his tongue were the same ones he’d used the other night when he’d apparently been maligning Toombs, the words that had made every woman at the dinner table glare at him.

“Okay,” Kyra said after nothing else was forthcoming, “and... it means?”

“You want me to say that in *English*?” Ewan asked, looking mock-scandalized.

“It means,” Tafrara grumbled, “‘he fucked his pig mother to death and then ate her bacon the morning after.’”

“All I was going to add to what Dihya said was ‘side of bacon,’” Ewan insisted, his expression the picture of innocence.

“That motherfucking son of a side of bacon...” Kyra began to cackle with delight.

Jack couldn’t help snickering, too. “Nice,” she said, tilting her head to look up at him. “You’ve got incest, bestiality, matricide, cannibalism, and *haram* all rolled into one insult there.”

“Exactly,” Ewan laughed, his gaze upon her turning heart-stoppingly wicked just for an instant before he adopted a look of cherubic innocence again.

“You see now just how much trouble my baby brother truly is,” Tafrara snorted. “So. Now that we have established the heritage, proclivities, crimes, and dietary practices of this ‘Johns,’ why did he want to keep going and what made it so awful?”

Stifling a groan, Jack described the verbal battle that had followed, as Johns threw everything Fry had said to him—*ever*—back in her face and attempted to annihilate her authority by revealing that she’d panicked during the crash and almost jettisoned the passenger compartment. Even now, that was something Jack couldn’t bring herself to believe about Fry, but the pilot had never *denied* it, Johns’ words driving her instead into a frenzy so desperate that she’d tried to physically assault him and had ended up knocked to the ground.

That time, it had been Imam who had stepped in—“*You’ve made your point. We have all been scared!*”—before Johns announced that the matter was decided and they were going through the canyon. What little bit of democracy the group had possessed had, seemingly, been swept away.

“You think that’s your fault, too, don’t you?” Kyra asked, almost glaring at her. “You think you gave him that opportunity to take over. Tizzy, he was gonna come up with *something* to use an excuse to make his move. Like you keep telling me, mercs’ll use up anybody for a percentage.”

“It was still...” Jack stopped. She could see that none of them agreed with her.

“Didn’t anybody at that damned hospital help you through *any* of this?” Ewan suddenly asked.

Jack shook her head. “They were too busy trying to get me to ‘admit’ that none of it ever happened, and that Riddick had killed everybody else and taken Imam and me hostage.”

“...The *hell*? The official investigation report says that there *is* hostile life on that planet.” Ewan’s arms tightened around her a little. He looked outraged. “Granted, it also tries to claim that Riddick used that as cover for some murders and took you hostage, but... they tried to deny *every* aspect of your story?”

“She never got a chance to tell it,” Kyra sighed. “They started bulldozing her from the get-go. You know, there were actually a bunch of *really good* therapists on the staff, like this one woman named after a Greek muse who asked me to just call her Polly—”

“Oh, I met her,” Jack grumbled. “Maybe she’s great for actual *survivors* of sexual abuse like you, but she walked into *our* sessions trying to get me to ‘face’ the ‘fact’ that Riddick had raped me—”

Against her back, she felt Ewan tense up.

“—which is a load of bullshit because I’m still a virgin and he never so much as *looked* at me that way.” She felt Ewan relaxing again. Whew. “He never threatened me, or any of us. The whole time we were on that planet, the only person he ever tried to hurt, let alone kill, was Johns.”

Which brought her, at last, to the merc’s... *bacon* lineage.

And an admission of just how good her hearing actually was. Somehow, whether via her crazy-acute hearing or something *else* that she hadn’t consciously known about herself back then, she’d overheard every word Johns and Riddick had said to each other.

She replayed the entire conversation for everyone, as the merc attempted to buddy up to his former captive with a promise that Riddick would survive the journey and go free if he cooperated with the “sacrifice play” Johns wanted to run: kill one of the four civilians and use their body to draw the predators in the canyon away from everyone else.

Even then, Jack had known that Johns wanted it to be either Carolyn Fry or her, and the only really logical choice would be *her*. If he had any plans of stiffing Riddick, he’d still need Fry to pilot the skiff.

Riddick was playing coy. She wasn’t sure why at first. But he kept doing things—expansive gestures and turns to look back at the group—that seemed designed to draw the others’ attention... clue them in...

“I think Riddick was trying to warn us,” she said after a moment. “I’d asked Imam what they were talking about. I don’t think *he* could hear a damned thing. Or if he could, he didn’t want to admit it was anything that bad. He told me they were probably talking about how to get through the canyon.”

Which, technically, was true, but...

Finally, Johns had enough. He gave up dancing around the subject, since Riddick was refusing to be his dance partner. “*You do the girl, and I’ll keep the others off your back...*”

“Yeah, right,” Kyra snarled. “Not that he ever *would* have, but if Riddick *had* killed you, nobody else in the group would’ve trusted him, ever again, or lifted a *finger* to stop Johns from taking him back into custody. *He* was probably counting on them helping him put Riddick back in chains when they *got* to the skiff.”

Jack, who had earlier described seeing Johns furtively sneaking a set of restraints onto the skiff hours before the eclipse, and who had found them crushing half of her gritty sanitary

pads when she finally went to get one before the launch, just nodded.

Maybe that was the only reason Riddick had balked. Maybe he'd known his chance of ever being a free man would be lost if he added *her* to his kill count. Maybe that was all defending her, in that moment, had meant to him. While part of her still clutched at all the many small kindnesses he had shown her, he *had* still outed her to the others and then abandoned her in the repressive al-Walid household. It was hard to reconcile those two Riddicks and divine which one had turned to Johns and said, "*I'm just wondering if we don't need a bigger piece of bait.*"

Four voices whooped with vindication and triumph, cheering him on, when she said that line in her "Riddick voice."

The moment the two men began to fight, the moment Johns' shotgun started firing into the night, Fry had pulled them all into a headlong sprint away from the battle zone. Jack hadn't been wrong; the strange tension between the three of them was ending in bloodshed, which might spiral out to encompass all of them. Just how long they ran she wasn't sure. With no idea where they were going, they had followed the tracks of the sled itself, blindly and unthinkingly...

...and, of course, they had circled the way it had, and found themselves confronted by Riddick.

"Back to the ship, huh?" he'd asked. "Just huddle together 'til the lights burn out? 'Til you can't see what's eating you? That the big plan?"

Johns was dead. Jack didn't know whether Riddick had killed him or whether the creatures had, and she didn't dare ask. None of them did.

"We're gonna lose everybody out here," she'd found herself saying, no longer bothering to try to drop her voice down into a 'boy' range. "We should've stayed at the ship."

I should've let them leave me behind...

"Oh goddamn it, I fucking *heard* that, Tizzy..." Kyra groaned. "You still think everybody'd have ridden off into the sunrise if they'd just abandoned you? Or sacrificed you?"

"It's a kind of magical thinking," Ewan murmured, one hand stroking her hair. "I've seen it before, usually with people struggling with survivor's guilt. You get basic counseling training when you're a paramedic, or at least I did, and we were warned that this was something that we might see happen to someone trying to cope with fresh trauma... the wish to trade places with the ones who were lost. People in crisis often want to find something they can offer as a sacrifice, bargain away, to make everything go back to normal. Sometimes, those dealing with survivor's guilt want that sacrifice to be themselves, so that everything will be *right* again and the guilt they feel will be absolved. But Tizzy, it's an illusion, both the blame you're taking on and what you wished to do to fix it. The world will *not* become better if you are lost from it."

"Especially not for any of us," Tafrara agreed, her voice soft and sad.

Jack nodded as Ewan held her, trying to believe, wishing she *could* believe. It was probably better consolation than she'd gotten months earlier, when Riddick had been the one trying to tell her something that maybe he'd thought would be reassuring—"*He died fast, and if we have any choice about it, that's the way we should all go out*"—as he walked up to

stand scant inches behind her. She'd felt the heat of his body radiating against her back, felt his eyes on her, felt his hand reaching out toward her for a second before it withdrew.

This is it, she had thought. *If he's gonna kill me, this is when it'll happen.*

But his voice, dark and rough and yet somehow *gentle*, had filled her ears instead. "Don't you cry for Johns. Don't you dare."

And he'd walked away.

She didn't know what was more disturbing now: the fact that she had been prepared to let him cut her throat without a fight, if that was his plan...

...or the fact that part of her had been disappointed when he *hadn't*.

"Fucking shit, Tizzy," Kyra groaned. "Fucking *shit*."

50.

A Trickster God for a Call Sign

“We’ll leave to choose the plants right after dinner,” Tafrara said as they walked down to the dining room, “and then we can plant them together after the overnoon sleep, before it’s time to get ready for Zdan’s send-off party.”

“And Tizzy,” Izil added, “can tell us the rest of the story while we’re planting.”

Jack had advanced that story to partway through the canyon run, describing how everyone had let go of everything that wasn’t absolutely essential to their escape offworld and how Riddick had rigged up a rope harness to drag the precious fuel cells himself. Jack’s own backpack, along with the boomerang Paris had lent her, had been discarded along with most of the sled’s contents. The plan had been simple enough: run like hell with all the light they could carry and nothing else to weigh them down.

Imam had insisted on praying with each of them ahead of the run, something that had left Jack feeling awkward and bewildered. Her family hadn’t been especially religious, observing major holidays with a more secular zeal than anything else. The idea of closing her eyes and reaching out to an unseen and powerful entity had seemed weird to her...

...at least, it had until recently, when the *Apeiros* had reached out to *her*.

They weren’t gods. She knew that much already. They were powerful, but it wasn’t *that* kind of power, and she had a sense that they would eschew any such labels.

But she had been left feeling off-kilter after Imam’s prayers until he’d walked off to find Riddick, and Fry had muttered “whatever” under her breath... and then she’d overheard Riddick mocking the cleric’s beliefs. It had been a relief to know that she wasn’t the *only* one struggling to connect with his attempts at bonding through prayer.

It came as an even bigger relief when Ewan, chuckling, admitted that while his family was nominally Christian, they were every bit as secular as she’d been raised. She was *very* glad that she hadn’t given him—or any of his family, really—offense with her admission.

The start of the run itself had been frenetic and crazed, little to narrate beyond impressions and Riddick’s periodic roars of “Move!” when they faltered. But then, above them, the monsters had begun battling in the air, blue blood raining down on them and bodies—and body parts—falling from the sky.

Takama came to the guest room door to summon them to dinner, and deliver Sebby’s cricket box, right as Jack described reaching the collapsed pile of massive bones that Shazza had driven through. It was as good a place to break off as any.

Tafrara and Kyra were talking about gardening plans as they walked down the stairs together. Jack felt a sad pang move through her; in Kyra’s dream, that was one of the only chores she’d enjoyed doing in the New Christy Enclave. It struck Jack yet again what a perfect fit her sister was with this family, and how terribly unfair it was that she couldn’t just

stay with them. She wouldn't even be able to circle back to them until she'd broken her trail, something that could take *years* to be sure of.

And what about *her*? Could *she* find a way back here as Audrey MacNamera?

Tangiers Prime, she thought, had several excellent universities. She could apply to one of them, maybe. Return as a college student with a completely plausible and unconnected reason for traveling to New Marrakesh and "meeting" the *ait Meziane* tribe for the "first time..."

It might work. She'd have to look into which schools had programs that interested her. She couldn't do it if she couldn't make the choice to apply feel completely in character...

"You seem suspiciously deep in thought," Ewan said beside her. "Should I be worried?"

She glanced up at him, catching a hint of a teasing smile... but also concern. "I was thinking about when we might be able to break our trails and come back. What kinds of covers we might need to come up with, to make us showing up for a second time seem plausibly like a first arrival."

"I'm sure you'll come up with something good," he said, his smile widening. "We will be standing by to meet you, for the *very first time ever*, when you do."

If she picked a university in New Marrakesh to attend, she thought, she might even be able to visit with the family frequently. She wondered where Ewan would end up based out of once his flight training was over, and how often he might be back at the house.

It was tempting to ask, to try to make plans, but she didn't dare. It would be at least five years before she would be able to return. He might be married by then, or living on a base in another part of the system. General Toal had warned her that any long-term plans or promises would be red flags to people like Toombs, or to Operatives seeking her or Kyra. As much as she wanted to ask Ewan to wait for her—a hazardous thing to articulate *anyway*—she couldn't. Even if it didn't have the potential to draw dangerous attention to them... it would be cruel to him when she had no idea what might actually happen between that moment and an uncertain future that was years away.

She wished she could close her eyes and skip forward in time, but then she'd still be just as young.

"Are you all right with telling us your story like this?" Ewan asked. "I really should have asked this sooner, but after the way the last sections affected you—"

"No, it's good," Jack told him. "It's, uh... it's the first time I've been able to tell anybody other than Dihya about it. And it's the last chance I'll get to tell anyone, too."

Ewan, pulling out a chair for her, blinked and then nodded. "Because after you leave here, you won't be able to admit to anyone that you were the girl who survived the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash."

Jack nodded back as he pushed in her seat and took the one beside her. "Gotta speak now or forever hold my peace, I guess."

Ewan's expression was sad. "You have so much pain attached to it. I worry it's going to be left unresolved."

He and Kyra, and Tafrara and Izil, had tried so hard this morning-day to help her with it, but while they'd given her a lot of things to think about, most of it hadn't really sunk in yet and she knew it. She understood what he was saying—one conversation wasn't going to *do* it and yet that might be all she'd ever get—and she could feel his wish that *he* could sit with

her, over time, as she worked through it all. It was another If-Only on the large pile that had formed, part of a life and future she desperately wished could be hers but could never claim without going far away from it first.

"Maybe one day," she told him once she was sure she could keep the wobble out of her voice.

He nodded, looking as morose as she felt.

"Tell me about piloting," she asked him, wanting something brighter to talk about for a while. It was the right move.

Ewan's eyes lit up as he described flying, both in air and in space, and the thrilling terror of launches and re-entries. A part of him came alive that she'd never seen before, and she found herself falling for him all over again. He had completed almost all of his primary training, but the most demanding part—advanced combat flight, both in atmosphere and in space—was ahead of him and would begin a week after he returned to Qamar, once he was recertified as flight-ready and took a final test that had originally been scheduled for a few days after he received the news of his brother's death.

"I'm behind the rest of my class right now," he said with a rueful smile. "But hopefully I won't stay that way. Fortunately, I won't have *two* weeks of catch-up to do. Just one. Everyone got a few days off after that test. I had originally been planning to meet up with my brother then."

The shadow of his grief flickered over him for a moment before he seemed to put it aside and focused on her again.

"Are you ready for the test?" Jack asked, feeling concern. As far as she knew, he hadn't been getting many opportunities to study and review things.

He grinned and nodded. "You're not the only eidetic at this table," he told her, winking.

"Really?" Was that part of why the two of them had bonded so quickly? Within her own family, only one of her uncles had displayed that same kind of recall. Well, and maybe her dad, given how the only things he'd claimed to have forgotten were always suspiciously convenient for him— "Wait, how'd you know I am?"

"The way you narrated your story, especially if it's your first time telling a lot of it. Your wording and delivery is *exact*." He leaned closer, murmuring. "I got the feeling that when Kyra was repeating some of 'your' lines, she wasn't being nearly as precise, and it was bothering you a little."

"Wow," she whispered back to him. "You can read me like a *book*."

"What are you two whispering about over there?" Takama asked. Although her tone was mild and playful, there was something under it that—

Oh. Oh. They were still being chaperoned, and had gotten a little *too* close to each other for anybody's liking. Ewan gave her a rueful smile as he pulled back to a more acceptable distance.

"Tizzy has been telling us the story of the crash of the *Hunter-Gratzner*," he answered his aunt. "One of the other survivors was planning on going to Earth to try to liberate artworks from the Louvre. I was saying that some of the things she's been doing here in the last week would have been great practice for that job." He winked at Jack from the eye his aunt couldn't see.

"You see?" Tafrara said, laughing. "My baby brother is pure *trouble*."

At least, Jack thought, everybody had stopped worrying—for the moment, anyway—that they were somehow going to do something scandalous at the dinner table.

In five years, nobody would care if they invaded each other's space that way, whether innocently or less so. What a moment to have to put the two of them on the spot, though, forcing Ewan to lie to avoid possibly hurting Kyra's feelings, just out of a worry that the two of them might be... what, exactly? Plotting an overnoon fling in the broad daylight?

They kept a more seemly distance from each other for the rest of the meal. Kyra and Tafrara were deep in a discussion about adapting Earth plants to the growing cycle of a world with 44-hour days and 32-month-long years. Jack could feel her sister's fascination, her desire to soak up all the information and personally explore it.

Damn you, Alexander Toombs, she thought. Kyra, at least, might have been able to stay if he hadn't spent so much time and effort painting a bullseye on her. Maybe to become a soldier, or maybe to finally get to rekindle the love of learning that had been brutally quelled by her father and New Christy, and get a degree in something like xenobotany...

"What's wrong?" Ewan murmured.

Jack looked over at him, glancing Kyra's way again. "She's so happy here," she murmured back. "And I don't know if she even *has* somewhere else to go..."

Understanding and empathy sparked in his eyes... and worry. "But you do, yes? You're not just... throwing yourself out into the darkness?"

She nodded. Of *course* he'd have the same concern about her. "I have relatives waiting for me. I just have to reach them in a way that makes it look like I never tried to take the *Hunter-Gratzner* as part of my itinerary."

Some tension left his body when she said that. "And you'll be able to?"

"Yeah," she told him, feeling her lips quirk up into a smile that would have stirred an *uh oh* or an *I know that look* from Kyra. "I have a plan."

It might take most of the resources she would earn from flying the *Nephrite Undine* to Deckard's World. Possibly even all of them... but she knew how to get more if she needed to. General Toal had put the idea in her head.

Many years ago, I heard the story of a young woman who had been a witness to a terrible crime and was placed in protective custody until she could testify against its perpetrators. She was hidden away, and only allowed periodic, controlled contact with her family, through elaborate channels designed to keep anyone from tracing her whereabouts...

What if the witness had been a kid, and her handlers had been far too worried about her being indiscreet to let her have contact with her family at all? What if any sign that her family even knew she was safe somewhere could have tipped off the people she was hiding from? And what if, even after she had given her testimony and she was allowed to return home, the threat of potential reprisals was so great that she still wasn't permitted to tell anyone where she had been or why? Deckard's World's law enforcement community used enough of her father's security protocols that she was pretty sure she could make it look like that was what had happened to her, and like only someone with a much higher level of clearance—Federacy level, maybe someone of a similar rank to General Toal himself—could access information about where she had been.

It was a project she planned to work on while she was traveling back to Deckard's World: creating the scenario, making sure there were no holes in the public side of it, and building a

hidden side that would allow her to maintain and defend the story against any and all scrutiny...

"I can see you *do* have a plan. One day, I hope you can tell me all about it." Now Ewan's voice was wistful.

She wanted to promise him that she would, but she knew she couldn't. General Toal had been clear. No plans, no promises. Nothing that could be used against them or turned into a lie.

"How'd you switch from being pre-med to being a military officer in the flight academy?" she asked instead, genuinely curious. She knew the story of her father's path into the Corps of Engineers already, and couldn't figure out where Ewan would have found the time to fit in both and still only be twenty-two.

"Ah!" He smiled, his expression clearing. "Yes. Things work a little differently from one part of the Federacy to another. While we do have 'Military Academies' here, the founders of this world were concerned about... well, back on Earth, there had been so many military coups at different points in history. They feared the development of a culture, within the armed forces, that was too disconnected from the rest of the populace to understand and prioritize its needs. So while yes, I did get shipped off to a Military Academy when I was sixteen—"

"To keep you out of trouble," Tafrara interjected from across the table.

Ewan nodded, wincing and smiling simultaneously. "I was quite the bad seed back then, yes. Even so, I was expected to attend a normal four-year university, with civilians, and to complete much of my combat training with a mixture of both officer candidates and normal enlistees. To ensure that I would always be connected to and bonded with more people than just other officers. I wasn't sure, for a long time, whether I wanted to be a combat medic or a fighter pilot. And until I turned twenty-one, there was a restraining order keeping me from flying—"

"A *what*?" Jack stared at him in amazement.

"On his sixteenth birthday," Cedric chuckled from further down the table, "he and some friends sneaked onto an airfield that was hosting a large air show. He'd somehow memorized the controls for the replica F-14 Tomcats that were flying in the show, and took one on a two-hour joyride. Enrolling him in the Military Academy was part of the plea deal that would let him ever fly again."

"Fortunately, the Tomcat *was* undamaged when he landed," Safiyya sighed. "I had the feeling that half of the visiting brass wanted an excuse to *confiscate* him from us and *keep* him."

Kyra looked like she was ready to burst with repressed laughter. *You two really are perfect for each other.*

It sure as hell explained why he hadn't hesitated, even for a second, when she'd dragooned him into the morgue heist. Some of the stories people had told about his older brother at the memorial had been fairly similar, if a little less felonious.

Ewan was blushing. "Yes, I... really was a lot of trouble back then."

"Back then?" Tafrara laughed.

"I wasn't allowed within a half-kilometer of *any* aircraft or spacecraft," Ewan continued, still blushing and shaking his head. "For five years, I had to watch all of the airshows from

the roof here. I couldn't enter the spaceport, or travel anywhere that required boarding a plane, shuttle, or starship. Which meant a lot of vacations in the New Atlas range."

"Or biking around with that crazy health inspector friend of yours," Izil snickered.

Ewan's blush had, improbably, deepened. "But it also meant that I couldn't study more than the theoretical classroom aspects of being a pilot until last year. So I focused on a pre-med track for a while, which both Usadden and my 'crazy health inspector friend' were thrilled about... and worked for the UMA as a paramedic, for field experience."

"Which is how you *met* Robie in the first place," Usadden laughed.

Jack had a feeling she'd better not ask how wild the rides they'd gone on had *gotten*.

"On Ewan's twenty-first birthday," Cedric picked up the tale, "Gavin had recovered enough from 'Enza that his *civilian* pilot's license had been reinstated, so the first thing he did that day was take his baby brother flying. They were gone most of the morning-day, and when they got back, we could all tell that Ewan was *never* going to become a doctor."

"I resigned from the UMA and spent every waking minute playing catch-up so I could qualify for the flight academy when I graduated. I just *barely* squeezed my way in, too." Ewan said.

"Proving that you have plenty of discipline when you wish to," Takama teased him in her driest voice, but her eyes were sparkling with amusement and pride.

"It did help that Gavin had been top of his class when *he* passed through the flight academy," Cedric said. "And that Ewan's joyride in the Tomcat had been talked about for *years* among the staff. They threatened to give him the call sign 'Maverick.'"

"Fortunately, that one was already taken," Ewan said, smiling.

"What *is* your call sign?" Jack asked.

His smile widened into a grin. "Loki."

"The Norse trickster god?" She found herself grinning back at him. He actually resembled one of the first actors to play the character in centuries-old movies, if darker-complected. "I like it. It suits you."

"A little *too* well at times," Tafrara laughed. "Come, we should wash up and go to the plant nursery."

It ended up being a family excursion, almost everyone accompanying them. The plans for the following morning-day were evolving in unexpected ways: Tafrara and Izil both wanted to accompany them to Elsewhere when they tried to return Sebby, and had already expressed that wish. Now Usadden, who had that morning-day off, wanted to join them as well. Takama, Cedric, and Safiyya were discussing whether they should come, too. It might be, Jack realized, everyone's first and last chance to see what New Marrakesh looked like in an alternate universe.

"Plus, you'll need extra hands to help with the olive trees and the planting equipment," Tafrara told them. "Especially if you're traveling uphill."

Ewan, shoulder to shoulder with Jack in the back seat of the same rugged all-terrain vehicle Jack had dreamed about overnight, sounded wistful again. "I wish I could come with you."

"I wish you could, too," Jack told him back, leaning her head against his shoulder. She suddenly wondered if he meant another trip into Elsewhere, or her trip home... and which one *she* meant.

Of course, she could no more take home a 22-year-old fighter pilot with a trickster god for a call sign than she could take home the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain...

Proof, she thought, that the universe had a bent toward the cruel.

By the time they reached the nursery, though, it had been decided: “Tizzy” and “Dihya” would be accompanied into Elsewhere by almost the whole family, who would help them plant olive trees for Sebby if he could be successfully released. They would take at least a pair of young trees that were already capable of fruiting, so that the little crustacean wouldn’t have to wait long for treats. While Takama took charge of discussing the trees with the nursery owner, Kyra and Tafrara split off to find a suitable courtyard plant... and Jack found herself walking with Ewan through another part of its gardens, looking at flowering shrubs. They still weren’t alone, but for the moment, it almost felt like they were.

“Do you have anything specific in mind for your plant?” Ewan asked her as she looked over a selection of bushes that she knew had come from other parts of old Earth than Morocco.

“I’m not sure yet,” she told him. “Something that smells nice, I think. And... I don’t know, something that, if we’d all been born in actual Marrakesh back on Earth, might have been native.”

“A desert or steppe plant, then,” Ewan told her. He grinned at her look of surprise. “Old Marrakesh was much further inland than New Marrakesh is. In fact, our latitude and longitude correspond more with old Casablanca on Earth... but ‘New Casablanca’ was already taken by the first settlement here, even though it’s much further north and east. The original Marrakesh, though, was hot and dry. It was closer to the old Atlas Mountains than Casablanca, and the New Atlas Mountains are practically on top of us, so maybe that’s why they chose the name. Let’s see...”

He looked around the nursery, and then nodded.

“I see some of the plants that came from arid parts of Morocco on Earth. Shall we?”

Jack let him lead her to another part of the nursery, where the plants were... well...

A little disappointing. They weren’t at all lush, looking scrubby and spindly instead.

“In the dry climate of the desert,” Ewan told her, in response to the crestfallen expression she hadn’t been able to keep off her face, “a large, broad leaf is a bad idea most of the time. It would dry out too quickly, and with as much sun as deserts tend to get, light collection is easy enough with a small leaf or even just a stem. But if you’d like, we could look at something else.”

But that was when the sweet scent of ...*something*... reached Jack’s nose and captivated her. She’d never smelled a perfume quite like it.

It took her a moment to locate the scent and discover the tiny white blossoms scattered throughout a bush that looked like a living, green broom. Each flower was smaller than her fingernail. She bent closer to get a better look. Tiny, five-petaled, white with a broad green stripe running down the center of each petal, each miniscule anther and stamen tipped with fuchsia, they smelled heavenly.

“What is this?” she asked, looking to see if it had a label.

“*Calligonum comosum*,” Tafrara said as she and Kyra approached. “The fire bush.”

Kyra was carrying a small potted tree—a fig tree, with a little fruit already growing on it—in the crook of one arm.

“The fire bush?” Jack asked. “Why’s it called that? Does it start fires?”

Tafrara chuckled. “No, it’s named after these,” she said, gesturing to another bush beside the one Jack was examining. It had the same physical structure, but instead of white blossoms, it had clusters of branching, brilliant scarlet tendrils, each cluster bristling around a small fruit. They almost looked like tiny coral reefs. “The white flowers give way to fruits that mature to look like these. Once the fruits appear, a dune covered in these bushes can almost look like it’s on fire.”

Jack realized that there were several fire bushes surrounding the one she’d been looking at, all apparently further into their “seasons” than the one she’d spotted. The tiny white flowers were only present on the one bush. “They’re beautiful.”

“Dead useful, too,” Ewan commented. “They’re popular for sand dune stabilization, feeding livestock, and in medicine. They’re used a *lot* in folk medicine, and compounds from several parts of the plant are in prescription meds.”

“Wow.” Jack touched the plant carefully. “Is this something we can plant in the courtyard?”

“Yes,” Tafrara said, “but an even better location for it might be on the rooftop.”

“What about the taproot?” Ewan asked her. “I’ve read that it’s very long.”

“I have a spot in mind for that,” Tafrara said with a smile. “Remember the chimney opening we had to cover when you were Tizzy’s age? After the *incident*?”

Ewan’s own smile had gotten huge. “You want to fill it with sand? We’re going to need a lot of sand.”

“Not so much as all that,” Tafrara said. “But it’s also right by the place where you loved to sit and watch the air shows. A perfect location.”

“What was the *incident*?” Jack asked, once she was sure neither of them had anything more to add.

“Remember when you asked what happened when a burglar gained access to the house via the roof?” Ewan asked her.

Uh oh. “Yes...?”

“He tried to enter through a large chimney that hadn’t been used in years. The fireplace it led to had been bricked up before I was even born.” Ewan was *trying* to tell the story with a straight face, but his lips kept twitching toward a smile. “He *survived*, but just barely. I think he spent two days trapped inside before we realized he was there and broke open the fireplace to get him out. And then had it rebricked immediately, and made sure the news reports included how close he’d come to dying from his burglary attempt.”

“The chimney *had* been capped, of course, to keep birds from entering,” Tafrara added. “He had removed the caps. So we covered it... but it would be perfect for a long taproot, and could be the centerpiece for an area featuring desert plants.”

“And filling it with sand would definitely ensure that no one ever tries the same stupid stunt once everyone’s forgotten about that last attempt,” Cedric said, joining them. “I’ll go order the sand now. I think we can have it ready for us, and waiting on the roof, before we wake up from the overnoon sleep.”

“Wow,” Jack said, impressed. “That fast?”

“I know a bloke.” Cedric winked and walked away, taking his comm out of his pocket.

Picking up the bush that still had the white flowers, Jack closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and smiled. This scent, she thought, would always remind her of New Marrakesh. She wondered if anyone made a perfume with it.

Once everything had been paid for, Jack and Kyra loaded their plants into the back of the large vehicle they'd come in. Four olive trees already sat in the bed.

"Four?" she asked.

"One from you, one from Dihya, and two from us," Safiyya explained. "Sebby's quite captured our hearts, too, after all. Now, I'm up almost past my bedtime, so we should head home."

The heat was getting intense, and Jack realized that she was feeling sleepy as well. The roads were almost deserted as they drove back to the *ait Meziane* house. Once they were back in the garage, Cedric instructed them to leave the plants where they were for the moment, as it was time for everyone to get ready for bed.

Ewan walked by her side as they went upstairs.

"It occurs to me that you and Dihya both chose plants that are reflections of yourselves," he commented.

"Really?"

"Yes. Do you know how fig trees fruit?"

Jack shook her head.

"They never appear to flower. Instead, they produce a round structure called a syconium. All of the flowers are hidden inside. A small wasp crawls inside the syconium to lay her eggs and pollinates the hidden flowers. Her children are born inside the fig and help it ripen, and then they depart, carrying its pollen to other syconia, while their former home matures into the 'fruit' we eat." He quirked one eyebrow at her. "There is no fruit without the wasp."

It *was* Jack thought, a good, if complicated, metaphor for Kyra.

She was at her door; Kyra was already moving around inside their room. Ewan kept walking toward his own room. Tafrara, ahead of him, had turned to look back, still acting as a chaperone.

"Ewan?"

He had reached his door and turned to look at her, for an instant seeming surprised that she was no longer beside him. "Yes?"

"What about me? What does the fire bush symbolize?" *Aside from being spindly and the youngest in its group...*

He hesitated for a moment before answering. "Easily underestimated... but a treasure beyond all reckoning."

Jack couldn't find a single thing to say in response to that.

"Sleep well, Tizzy."

51.

Who We Become in the Darkness

“What’s going on up there?” Jack asked, craning her neck to look toward the rooftop. Five stories up, somewhere out of sight, she could hear the shriek of a buzz-saw.

Ewan glanced up and then grinned. “Father said he was going to have most of the chimneytop cut away. Only a few inches will remain above the floor of the rooftop, just enough to help ensure that the fire bush has some boundaries. We’re going to let it form a small dune up there.”

“Will it?”

Tafrara, who was helping Kyra dig the hole for her fig tree, nodded. “That is what it does. We will let it make a little desert garden, and Mother is talking of putting a fountain nearby to give it an oasis. When you two return, I think the entire rooftop will have gardens around its length.”

Kyra’s breath hitched and she glanced over at Jack. *Ouch. We’re supposed to avoid talking about the future like that.*

Yeah, Jack told her silently. I know... but at least we know there’ll always be a welcome for us here, right?

I hope so, Kyra’s mental “voice” was subdued.

“So,” Izil said, emerging from the house with a gluttoned Sebby riding his back and peeking over his shoulder, “I hope you waited for us before starting up the story again.”

Jack felt instant relief. The silence, following Tafrara’s gaffe, had been growing awkward.

Ewan had set up a small canopy around the area where they were working, to keep the worst of the waning midday heat and light off them. Lalla had brought out a small array of snacks for them to enjoy while they worked through the evening-day’s “morning” period. Cedric, supervising the removal of most of the chimney-top and the pouring of a few tons of sand down the flue, had told them that it would be shortly after lunch before everything would be ready to plant Jack’s fire bush. Ewan intended to assist her in its planting, the way Tafrara was helping Kyra. And in the meantime...

Jack, who had finally mastered the trick of pouring tea from one of the long-spouted Maghrebi teapots, poured Izil a cup as he joined them. “We were waiting for you two.”

“Good. So you had reached the place in the canyon where the huge bones had fallen during your ride back to the ship?”

“Yeah. Riddick got in front of us and started hoisting them out of the way, to try to clear us a path. There was only one area that was really obstructed, and we almost got all the way through it. But all those monsters that had fallen from the sky, the ones I told you about... some of them weren’t dead yet when they hit the ground. One of them grabbed Suleiman’s leg...”

It was weird to realize, suddenly, how many of the deaths on that planet had been comparatively quiet. Owens and Shazza *had* both died screaming, and she suspected those screams would haunt her nightmares for years to come. Shazza had heard *Zeke* screaming, but Jack had been sorting through the contents of a locker in the cargo container at the time. But Ali... if he'd screamed, they hadn't heard it over the weird alien caterwauls of the creatures killing him. Mostly, death had seemed to come entirely too quietly. Not that *this* was the moment of Suleiman's death, but he had certainly thought it was going to be. Even now, having studied Arabic, she couldn't parse most of what he had been shrieking. At one point it had almost sounded like he was yelling "Daddy!"

The closest word she'd found, when she'd poked around in languages *connected* to Arabic, meant "Grandma" in Urdu. Had Suleiman been calling out for his grandmother? Maybe speaking in Urdu? Even now she could only guess at half of his sobbing words.

"It ripped up his ankle before they got it off him. Riddick was moving on, dragging the cells further down the canyon, while Fry and Imam were tying up Suleiman's ankle with Imam's headwrap. I called out to him, wanting to get him to wait. I mean, I know he probably figured we'd catch up with him..."

Had he? She silenced the doubts that tried to crowd into her head yet again before Kyra could hear them. She knew that, for Kyra, Riddick was the undisputed, undoubted hero of the story...

...and needed to *stay* that way.

"Before he could turn around, though, I realized I was just standing out in the middle of the canyon with no cover and nothing but a flashlight, and something was swooping down at me from above. I barely had time to get under one of the big pieces of bone before it was on top of me."

That had been the moment when she had, at least for a while, known that she didn't *really* want to die. Or, at the very least, not like *that*. Struggling to hold the bone up above her with the weight of a large, hungry predator on top of it, while the predator hammered at the barrier with its bony head, had unleashed her own desperate screams.

Ewan put his arm around her as she described it all, and she leaned against him. "I heard Fry yelling 'get off of her!' She was trying to use the flashlight I'd dropped to drive it away, but it must've been really hungry because it tried to fight her and managed to knock the flashlight out of her hand and smash it. I thought we were both dead, but—"

"Riddick to the rescue," Kyra breathed. When Jack glanced over, her expression was enrapt.

He'd let out a stunning, predatory roar as he'd lunged at the creature, catching both of its legs as it tried to pounce him. Neither she nor Fry could stop staring as the beast snapped at Riddick repeatedly. It reared back, but he pinned its wrists—ankles?—together and pulled out his shiv, gutting it while *it* screamed.

I knew he'd come to save us.

Where had that thought come from? It wasn't hers. She glanced over at Kyra, who had gone still and whose eyes were closed, focused on the visuals she'd been evoking of the battle as she described it, and who was smiling a soft, vindicated smile.

Us? Had that been *Kyra*? It sent a tiny chill through her.

“After he snapped its neck,” she continued, trying to put whatever that instant had been behind them, “he just stared at it for a moment and said, ‘did *not* know who it was *fuckin’* with.’ Then he looked up at us, like he was surprised we were there, like he’d forgotten all about us while he was fighting it.”

“Riding a combat high,” Ewan murmured.

Jack looked up at him. “A combat high?”

He nodded. “Adrenaline can have that effect. I’ve... felt that *rush*, once or twice, during really intense battlefield exercises. Some soldiers *chase* it, developing something called ‘appetitive aggression.’ A love of the fight, and the kill.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” Kyra muttered, settling the fig tree into its hole.

“It can be, when soldiers come home to civilian life still addicted to that high,” Ewan mused. “When combined with the numbing effects of battle fatigue, for some of them, moments of violence become the only times when they can feel *anything*. That combination can be incredibly dangerous for everyone if they start chasing the high again.”

Jack wondered how many times he’d been dispatched, in his role as a paramedic, to deal with the aftermath of someone who had.

Kyra’s expression, Jack noticed, had turned defensive. Jack couldn’t hear any of her thoughts now. Her sister bent her head, appearing focused on filling in the hole around the fig tree’s roots with dirt.

Was she reacting to a possible criticism of Riddick, or was she taking it more personally?

Time to get on with the story, either way.

“Suleiman was hobbling, and he needed to lean on Imam, but he didn’t need to be carried... not at first, anyway. Riddick was in front of us now, the whole way, dragging those four fuel cells. Most of the ground was clear now, but the canyon walls had gotten really high on either side of us. Then Suleiman suddenly fell and couldn’t get back up. Fry and Imam were trying to help him, and then I felt this plop of liquid on my arm. I thought maybe it was more blood from those things...”

“But it wasn’t?” Tafrara asked, helping Kyra fill in the hole around the fig tree.

“It was starting to *rain*,” Jack sighed.

“Oh no,” Izil groaned. Sebby squeaked in concern, reaching up with both antennae to touch his chin. He chuckled and began petting the cat-sized crustacean. “And you were down to just the flaming bottles by then?”

“Yeah, the only flashlights left were the ones on Riddick’s back. In under a minute, it was pouring. And Riddick started laughing like it was the funniest joke he’d ever heard...”

“*So where the hell’s your God now?*”

Keeping her bottle lit had become Jack’s top priority as they huddled against the cliffside. Fry’s flame had gone out, and they couldn’t get it to reignite. Jack’s whole focus narrowed down to keeping *her* bottle’s flame from guttering and dying, too, as she tried again and again to relight Fry’s soaked wick. Riddick had climbed up onto an outcropping to scan the path ahead, while Fry begged him to tell her that they were almost at the settlement. Jack still had no idea whether anyone but her had heard his murmured answer: “*We can’t make it.*”

“We hadn’t even noticed that one of those monsters was crawling down the cliff’s face until it wrapped its tail around Suleiman’s neck and dragged him away. He barely got out a choked kinda scream before he was *gone*. Imam... *lost* it. He was screaming up at the

darkness, begging for his last kid back. I don't know if he was begging the monsters or his God... he looked completely broken."

"I wouldn't doubt he was dealing with survivor's guilt as well," Ewan murmured. Kyra snorted derisively.

"Maybe. He did seem to get all gung-ho about prayer afterward. Like, *constantly* praying. Maybe he decided if he'd just prayed harder on the planet—"

"Never works," Kyra muttered. "I know that for a *fact*."

"Riddick had found a cave opening in the cliff face," Jack continued before things could get any more awkward. "He wanted us to hide inside it. But he didn't follow us in. Instead, he pushed this huge rock in front of the hole once we were inside. We were down to just my bottle. Fry's had some liquor left in it, but too much water had soaked her wick. I think..."

And now it was time to lie. To straight up, unflinchingly *lie*. Both about Riddick's intentions and about what she believed they were, then and now.

"I think he wanted to get the cells to the skiff and then come back for us. He couldn't drag them and protect us at the same time, but once they were there, he'd be able to keep us safe on the last part of the run. It was hard, waiting, with the light burning lower and lower. We added the liquor from Fry's bottle to mine so we could make the light last longer..."

She forced herself to resolutely *not* think about her absolute certainty that Riddick had no intention of returning, that he would leave them behind and take off on the skiff on his own, that none of them meant enough to him to come back. She didn't want Kyra picking up on it. Instead, she pretended—carefully, so that it wouldn't leak through—that it had been *Tomlin* on the other side of the rock, who had promised to return to save them all, and who would be prevented from keeping that promise by nothing less than death itself. The visuals that she let Kyra see absolutely did *not* include the moment she had turned to Fry and asked, "he's not coming back, is he?" and had seen the same dashed hopes in the pilot's eyes.

She did, however, describe the final guttering of the last liquor bottle's light, as the beasts prowled and sang their chilling songs just outside of the cave. As the last of the firelight died, she and Fry had clasped hands... and realized that they could still *see* each other's hands. There was a gentle, bluish glow surrounding them, making her wonder for a moment if the single blue sun had somehow risen and the terrible night was over. But above her, the cave ceiling seemed to glitter with stars, blue stars...

Imam had reached up and brought two of them down, revealing a pair of glowing, wriggling grubs.

The cave was full of them. It was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

Jack heard Kyra's breath catch as she shared the images of the glow worms spangling the cave ceiling with their soft blue light. "So beautiful," her sister whispered.

"We decided to fill up one of the two bottles, scrape its labels off, and make a lamp so Fry could go help Riddick get the skiff ready and then come back with him. Imam could barely push the rock away enough for her to squeeze out of the cave. I don't even know how Riddick had managed to move it. After she left, I kept collecting glow worms so we could try to fill up the second bottle, too. And then, when we were waiting, I heard it..."

Low groans, echoing through the cave from somewhere deep below. It was an animal sound, but deep and dark and terrible. Something enormous was rising up.

“Those huge bones from the canyon, and out in the bonefield? We hadn’t seen anything big enough to leave them behind, not yet. Johns thought maybe the creatures we’d already seen had killed them all off, but... I think he was wrong. I think it just took *them* even longer to come out in the dark than the other creatures... but they were coming.”

“A whole subterranean ecosystem rising up for a month on the surface,” Ewan breathed.

“A *month*?” Jack gasped.

Ewan nodded. “Yes. The crash investigators concluded that it took a month before the planets on either side of your crash planet finished the conjunction and light reached the surface again. Roughly two weeks after the eclipse began, things apparently got very rough for life on the surface, too, because the alignment became a true syzygy. I wonder if the huge creatures whose bones you saw, and whose voices you may have heard, used *that* to fly. The gravitational effects would have been both fascinating and terrifying to observe.”

Staying at the ship would have been death, Jack realized. A whole month in darkness would have ended them all.

“Bloody hell, I’d love to study that world and its life,” Izil muttered.

“You’d need to be armored like a *tank* to survive for very long,” Jack told him. “Those things were vicious.”

The low, rumbling groans of the beasts—

...why did the word *below* suddenly make her think of the *Apeiros*?...

The thought vanished a second later as if plucked from her mind.

—the beasts beneath the surface were growing louder when, with a harsh scraping sound, the rock in front of the cave fell away. For a moment, she thought that one of the rising leviathans had triggered an avalanche, until Fry’s smiling face appeared in the opening... and then she moved out of the way so they could see that Riddick was with her.

“*Never had a doubt!*” Jack had lied, pure relief coursing through her. The truth was, she was amazed by his return, but wouldn’t have blamed him for leaving them, leaving *her*, if he had.

They’d barely known each other then. If he’d simply left, flying away either so he wouldn’t have to watch them get taken one by one, or just because he didn’t care about their fates anyway, she wouldn’t have hated him for it or felt particularly betrayed. Maybe because a huge part of her had still felt like she deserved to share the fate that had befallen so many of her recent friends.

But, after a week of getting to know each other better on the skiff—not that she’d ever told him her real name or destination—having him vanish without a word and strand her in Imam’s household... that was what had hurt. That was what she still couldn’t reconcile. Leaving her to die on the crash planet would somehow have felt far less egregious than leaving her to wither in the harsh, dry emotional desert of Helion Prime.

Kyra’s breath hitched, and Jack realized that her thoughts of betrayal had seeped through their connection. She made herself focus back on the story and sent Kyra images of just how suave and dashing Riddick had looked, framed in the cave opening.

“*Anyone not ready for this?*” he’d asked, and in that moment, she’d felt ready to do *anything*.

Two glowing bottles held aloft had done a good job of covering the four of them as they made their final run. At times, Jack thought she could still hear the low, almost subsonic

sounds of the great beasts rising up under the ground. She hoped that none of them would rise in the settlement... at least, not until after the skiff could take off. The others seemed not to hear anything at all. Riddick led them to a steep incline, helping them over its top; she didn't realize he had fallen behind until they reached the bright, welcoming light of the skiff and he wasn't with them.

"Imam... well, we waited for a long moment inside the skiff, but Fry didn't come in after us. She was scanning the darkness for any sign of him. But Imam wanted to leave right then. He started telling her to come inside... he knew we couldn't fly off without either her or Riddick in the pilot's seat. She was starting to give up and turn back toward us when we heard Riddick scream somewhere out in the darkness. She raced off with one of the glowing bottles. I tried to follow, but Imam wouldn't let me."

That had been an awkward moment for the two of them in another, unexpected, way. As she had tried to push past him, Imam had put his hand on her chest to stop her—probably the way he would have blocked one of his boys—and his hand had ended up cupping her right breast for an instant. She'd shoved it away, but it had left both of them shocked and uncomfortable... and Fry, meanwhile, had vanished around a corner. There was no way to follow her. Imam had become even more stand-offish after that—

"Damn, you should've kicked him in the balls," Kyra grumbled.

"He didn't mean to do it," Jack argued, sighing. "I... think he always *meant* well..."

Ewan gave her a gentle squeeze. "You need to show yourself as much grace and forgiveness as you show others, *a tafat-iw*."

He'd called her that once before, she thought, but she had the weird sense that she'd been ...floating in space?... at the time.

"Sometimes I still wonder if," she continued after a moment, "if he'd let me grab the bottle and go after Fry, both of them would've made it back. Like maybe it would've been enough light to keep them safe..."

"Or maybe you'd have died, too," Kyra muttered.

"You could make an excellent First Responder," Ewan told her. She knew he meant it as a compliment; as a former paramedic, he'd often been one himself. "But only once you learn how to protect yourself a little better at the same time. How long did the two of you wait after that?"

"Seemed like forever," Jack sighed. "Imam... after a minute he started mumbling in Arabic that if they'd both died we were going to be trapped on that ungodly world. I didn't understand what he was saying at the time, but..."

Now that she was parsing it from memory, she was appalled to realize just how much he'd resented being left in charge of her, as opposed to *any* of the boys he had traveled with. His opinions of both Fry and Riddick weren't any better. If Fry returned, he would be surrounded by two females who didn't share his faith or understand true propriety; if Riddick returned, he would have to guard her chastity at all times; if both returned, he was convinced that the skiff would turn into a den of iniquity within hours of launching, that Fry had to have promised to indulge Riddick's undoubtedly perverted appetites to get him to rescue them at all. He'd wondered what terrible sin he had to have committed to bring on this onerous punishment. When she'd finally asked him what he was muttering, he'd told her "Just

praying, child,” holding up the beads that he’d somehow managed to hang onto during their run.

“Told you he was a douchebag,” Kyra grumbled. She had cleaned the dirt off of her hands—but not, Jack noticed, from under her nails—and was having a small snack with Tafrara. Sebby was creeping over to steal an olive, clearly thinking nobody would notice. The little pile he was stalking, though, had been placed there just for him.

“Yeah,” Jack admitted with a sigh. “But I think he was pretty traumatized by everything that happened...”

“But taking it out on you reinforced *your* trauma reaction,” Ewan murmured next to her. “And drove you to this.”

He lifted one of her hands, turning it palm up and running his thumb along the scar on the inside of her arm. She tried *very* hard not to react inappropriately to his caress, hiding the thrill racing up her spine, and saw a hint of a knowing smirk appear on Kyra’s face.

“I guess,” Jack said. Inside, it still felt to her like Riddick’s abandonment had been a bigger indictment than anything Imam had said or done. But maybe, she thought, he’d been struggling with his own guilt...

From the darkness, they had heard Riddick’s voice, calling out: “*Not for me!*”

Jack had known, even before he had staggered into view with the glowing bottle in his hand, that Fry was dead.

She described the takeoff from the planet as they cleaned up the gardening gear. Riddick had a ragged gash on his leg that Imam had insisted on treating before they lifted off, and Jack had discreetly changed pads while they were preoccupied, something that left her feeling profoundly uncomfortable afterwards when she discovered just how *gritty* the pad she’d chosen was. Once they were ready to launch, Riddick had delayed for a nerve-wracking moment, switching off all the lights so he could lure the lurking monstrosities close before burning as many of them as he could with the skiff’s engines. She’d felt his desire for vengeance, and a strange, burning guilt beneath it. She had her own suspicions of what that guilt might have been about, but she omitted it from the story she was telling and the visuals she was feeding Kyra. She’d let him stay the unquestioned hero of the tale.

“So we were out in space, at last, leaving the crash planet. Riddick seemed to know exactly what to do to get us to one of the Sol Track beacons. Imam was *praying* and pretending not to watch us as I went up and sat down in the copilot’s seat. But I needed us to get our stories straight, just in case we were found quickly.” She was, after all, an open Missing Person case, even if nobody considered her *Armed and Dangerous* yet. Knowing what kind of cover story Riddick planned to use could affect which one she needed to go with. “So I said to Riddick, ‘a lot of questions, whoever we run into. Could even be a merc ship.’”

Why she’d thought that, exactly, she still didn’t know. It had come to her with an odd sense of certainty. Later, she would wish she’d been certain of almost anything else.

She mimicked the shrug she’d given at the time as she’d looked over at Riddick. ““So what the hell do we tell them about you?””

She could hear Kyra murmuring her lines, like a distant echo.

“What did he say?” Tafrara asked as she started putting away the gardening tools.

“He said, ‘tell ’em Riddick’s dead. He died somewhere on that planet.’” Jack was pretty sure he’d meant it, too. He’d seemed to have felt that something transformative had happened.

Maybe he’d even have been right... if only she’d been wrong about the merc ship. But if he’d really intended to change his path, discard his identity and take on a new one, whether posing as William Johns or someone else altogether, their encounter with the *Kublai Khan* ruined that chance...

...and turned *her* into a murderer.

52.

Without Saying Good-Night

“He’s doing it again,” Izil said, beginning to laugh.

“Shh! He’ll stop if he realizes you’re laughing at him,” Tafrara scolded. “Everyone. Keep going.”

Ewan was struggling to keep a straight face as he lowered his body toward the ground, bending his right leg back and straightening his left leg out in front of him, right arm lifted and curved behind him while his left arm extended toward his ankle. Jack and Kyra tried to focus on replicating his pose... while Sebby did *too*.

“Dear *God*, I can’t believe I’m not allowed to record *this*...” Izil gasped.

Three of Sebby’s back left legs were bending back, their right mates stretched forward. His remaining legs were held out for balance as he positioned his pincers—and antennae—in a mirror-image mimicry of Ewan’s arms. Although he wobbled a little, he was holding the pose.

The little crustacean had apparently decided that *he* wanted to learn Tai Chi, *too*.

“This is the cutest thing *ever*,” Kyra whispered.

Jack felt like she was going to burst with emotion. Pride and love warred with the urge to laugh for hours at how adorably silly Sebby looked... and with a powerful ache at the knowledge that, as with Ewan, this was probably her last evening-day with him for years, possibly ever.

“It is very cute,” Tafrara agreed. “Now keep your focus on Zdan and let Sebby focus on him, too.”

Word was spreading. Izil had stopped for a moment to send out a message on his comm. Some members of the family had emerged onto their balconies to observe the session, and after a moment, Jack could see Lalla and Safiyya watching from the dining room doorway.

“We won’t be doing any more of the moves where you have to lift a leg off of the ground,” Ewan murmured as he shifted to another position. “I don’t want him to fall over.”

“Agreed,” Tafrara said as she corrected the way Jack was holding her right arm.

Ewan was gazing directly at Sebby as he changed positions, moving extra-slowly and carefully to make sure the cat-sized crustacean could follow along comfortably. His suppressed laughter had given way to even more powerful emotion, and Jack could tell that he was going to treasure this experience for the rest of his life.

“Sebby really is quite intelligent, isn’t he?” Tafrara murmured by Jack after a while.

“He is, yeah. I swear, he understands everything we say,” Jack answered as she tried to mirror Ewan’s latest movement. “Sometimes I think I understand what he’s saying, too.”

“Much more than a pet, to be sure.” Tafrara nodded, a sad smile on her face. “We will miss him. The house is going to feel so empty without the three of you.”

“Just the three of them?” Ewan asked, bringing his hands into a new position that Sebby promptly imitated with his pincers.

“You call us *all the time*,” Tafrara laughed.

“See if I will *now*,” he mock-grumbled at her, straightening up to stand, fully balanced, on both legs, bringing his hands together and bowing at all of them... and especially at Sebby, who bowed back with his pincers touching.

It was their last Tai Chi session with Ewan. In another hour, once they had all showered and changed, it would be time to leave for the send-off party. The day had flown by faster than Jack liked.

Her fire bush was planted, Ewan helping her get it properly situated in its special location while, all around them, his family worked on redesigning the rooftop area to make the bush into the centerpiece of a new, magical garden. It had been loud and chaotic enough that any hope of continuing her narrative, telling the story of the capture and escape from the *Kublai Khan*, had been lost. She might manage to tell Kyra that part before *they* parted ways, but Ewan wouldn't hear it unless—*until*—she returned in several years' time.

Her last hours with him were slipping away. Soon there would be a throng of well-wishers wanting to spend time with him, people who knew him far better than she did. They might not get to spend any more time with each other at all once they arrived at the party.

Somehow she was simultaneously dreading their good-bye and fearing she was going to be cheated out of it.

“There's no way he wouldn't say a proper good-bye to you,” Kyra told her as they prepared to shower, Sebby eagerly bouncing as he watched them change into their bathrobes. “You're worrying way too much.”

Jack sighed and nodded. “I know. I just... hate that time's running *out* like this. I know we didn't plan to stay much longer than this anyway, but...”

“Now it's real,” Kyra said, belting her robe. “And it sucks. When I was little and visited my mom's family, I always hated it when the visits ended. I always was afraid I'd never see any of them again. Eventually, I was right.”

Jack winced. Kyra's mom seemed like she'd originally come from some pretty normal people, before she'd decided her gifts were satanic and had followed her husband into... not to put too fine a point on it, but into a *cult*. If she and Kyra had stayed on Earth instead of setting out across the stars...

...Jack would never have found her way here, not at this time, maybe not at all. And, if Kyra had never left Earth later, in one of the Star Jumpers that came out in ensuing decades, would she have managed to find a happy life there? Most of the textbooks at Jack's schools had claimed that there was no happiness to be found on Earth by then, although her father had told her that things hadn't been that simple. But Kyra might never have seen a *green* world...

She had a sudden memory of her overnoon dreams, of hiking and hiding in a huge forest, sometimes with Kyra and sometimes *as* Kyra... with Riddick beside her...

Had those even been *her* dreams?

Weird. She'd also visited with the *Apeiros*, who had lots of questions about the story she'd been telling and the world she had described. That “dream” was as vivid as waking memory. But hiking with Riddick...

The images were impressionistic. He always wore the same thing, the clothes she'd shown him wearing on the crash planet. Sometimes she'd felt as if she was playing his role, walking beside Kyra and mimicking the way he'd said things, speaking with his voice and wearing his form. Other times, she'd seen everything from Kyra's perspective as they explored the forest together. At times, he had rescued Kyra from her oppressive life at the Enclave. But sometimes, the massacre had taken place, Riddick had rescued her from the aftermath, and they were hunting the men who had hurt her and murdered her mother, together, as a team. Sometimes he killed Red Roger for her, sometimes they killed him together...

Jack hadn't "driven" any of the dreams. She'd been an observer, a passenger, as a dreaming Kyra spun out scenarios in which her time in the wilds of Canaan Mountain had *not* been spent alone, but in the company of a deadly partner.

But, Jack told herself, at least Kyra hadn't ended up mired in any nightmares. *That* was good... wasn't it?

Sebby danced in the shower with each of them as they washed up for the party. When they emerged from the bathroom, fresh clothes were waiting for them on the bed, along with two of Lalla's wigs. Tonight, they wouldn't be "Dihya" and "Tislilel," who were allegedly still too ill to attend. They would pose as two college friends of Ewan's.

The dresses were beautiful, colorful beaded kaftans belted at the waist. They were obviously expensive, and Jack had almost protested when Takama had shown them the garments earlier.

"None of that," Takama had said before she could draw in a breath. "You know that we hoped to adopt both of you somehow. Let us at least have one occasion where we bought our 'daughters' something lovely to wear."

In spite of her earlier claims, that had visibly touched Kyra even more deeply than Jack; Kyra, after all, was the genuine orphan of the two of them.

Kyra's wig was curly and auburn; Jack's was dark blonde, shoulder-length, with bangs. When she settled it on her head, she felt a weird sense of predestination. This was a look she could see herself wearing in reality... and suddenly *wanted* to.

Especially, she thought, if Ewan liked it.

"What are our names again?" Kyra asked as she belted her brilliant maroon kaftan.

"You're Gwen, and I'm Mercia," Jack told her as she secured the wig's clips into her hair the way Lalla had shown her. "Tafrara had two college friends who visited a lot, who had those names and hair like we're wearing, so it'll be easy for them to remember our names."

Ewan, she knew, wouldn't have any trouble keeping his facts straight.

"Is anyone gonna buy that we're Ewan's age?" Kyra was attaching her wig's clips to her own braided-back hair.

"Maybe with you. I'm supposed to have started right when he was graduating. That's the cover story, anyway. They're not gonna say much, though. Hopefully nobody will ask or care. It's just in case."

Lalla and Takama arrived with a small banquet for Sebby just as they finished getting ready.

"You two look *perfect*," Takama said with a smile. "Almost like the real Gwen and Mercia. This will be easy to remember."

As Sebby settled into what might be his final dinner at the *ait Meziane* house, Jack and Kyra followed Takama and Lalla down to the garage.

Ewan, garbed in his military uniform and devastatingly handsome, waited by one of the large, elegant transports that the tribe seemed to have several of. The four olive trees were still resting in the all-terrain vehicle's bed, and no one had gathered near it. As they approached him, Jack found herself feeling very glad that she already knew how much Ewan cared about her, or she might not have found the nerve to talk to him. He looked *light-years* out of her league.

The expression on his face, however, was admiring. "Don't you look lovely, 'Mercia,'" he murmured. "'Gwen.' I hope you two will be riding with me?"

"Of course they will," said Takama. "We wouldn't dream of depriving you of a moment of their company."

Ouch. The subtext, that it would be his last chance to see either of them for a long time, was *barely* below the surface.

The shadows were growing long and the sun was nearing the horizon as they drove down toward the shore, heading south as they went, away from the spaceport. For a moment, Jack was surprised.

"Oh," she realized aloud. "Of course you didn't land at the spaceport. Not with what had just happened there."

"No, non-emergency traffic was extremely limited, but I was able to get special permission to land at Menara Field." Ewan told her with a smile. "The field is run by friends of the family."

"It's not the one where that airshow was held at, is it?" That would be crazy.

Ewan laughed. "No, that was in New Fes. Fortunately."

"He means," Tafrara snickered from the front seat, "he'd never have gotten to the Tomcat if he'd had to get past *locals* who *knew* him."

"I still have no regrets," Ewan laughed.

"And the send-off party's at the field?" Kyra asked.

"They have a lovely facility, yes," Tafrara replied. "We wanted to be able to say, if anyone inquired, that we couldn't accommodate anyone past those we had already invited. In case a certain person was still trying to get a look at the two of you."

The airfield, larger than Jack expected given her own visits to air shows on Deckard's World, was home to a variety of aircraft, and had a few landing pads for the occasional small spacecraft. As they walked toward the main building, Ewan pointed out at one of the pads. A small fighter, elegantly designed for both air and space, was poised on it, being fueled.

"That's my bird. I've been training in her for the last six months."

"It's beautiful," Jack said, wishing she could go for a ride in it.

Ewan must have heard it in her voice. "Perhaps one day, I can take you flying," he whispered, just barely audibly... and in Arabic. Words calculated for her alone. No one else but Kyra was close enough to hear, and *she* couldn't understand Arabic.

It was as close to a promise as either of them dared make. She met his eyes and saw a wistfulness in them that mirrored what she was feeling.

"Okay, you two. Don't make *me* play chaperone here," Kyra muttered.

"Sorry." Ewan gave her a rueful look.

“I forgive you.” Kyra favored him with an arch smile. “This time.”

Ewan put his arm around Jack’s sister and gave her a hug, kissing the top of her head.

“Thank you, ‘Gwen.’”

She snickered. “You realize you just kissed Lalla’s wig, right?”

He was, Jack reflected, one of the only men in the universe whom Kyra would allow to *do* that. She trusted him absolutely. And, because she felt an equally absolute lack of attraction to him, their relationship had genuinely fallen into a sibling-like domain. He made a far better older brother for her than the one she’d been born with.

Jack hoped Kyra wouldn’t have to wait *too* long to return to him and the rest of the family.

An elderly man greeted them at the building’s entry, clapping Ewan on the back as he welcomed them inside. A corridor with ordinary office doors stretched out in front of them, but through another door to the side...

...there was definitely a party in full swing.

The large room was *full* of people, who cheered and shouted welcomes the moment they spotted Ewan. Most of the men and women were his age or slightly older, people he had gone to school with or worked with, in all likelihood. Jack spotted General Toal and a few of the officers from the garden party mingling among the revelers. Robie was in the crowd, looking just one eyepatch and parrot away from an ancient Disney pirate captain. Most guests wore colorful Moroccan garb, but only a few of the women wore hijabs or shaylas, and Jack spotted just one woman in a full chador.

Within moments, Ewan had been swallowed up by the crowd. Everyone wanted a chance to talk to him before he left for Qamar. Jack could hear him switching flawlessly between Arabic, French, and Spanish as he went, favoring each conversation partner’s first language. Tafrara showed up a moment later to lead Jack and Kyra to the food tables, where a fascinating array of options made Jack resolve to try a small amount of everything at least once over the course of the night. Kyra gave her a wide-eyed look when she caught that thought.

“You are *definitely* getting ready to grow another two or three inches,” her older sister whispered to her. “Possibly on the *spot*.”

As always, Jack noticed, the alcoholic beverages that would have been ubiquitous on Deckard’s World were entirely absent. Instead, Maghrebi mint tea dominated, along with glasses of orange and pomegranate juice, avocado “juice” that Jack already knew from experience was more of a *smoothie*, *raib*, and even a few cups of *nous nous* despite the hour. Small tables dotted the room—there didn’t appear to be an area for dancing—and many of the guests had already filled plates and congregated around most of them.

With a filled plate of her own, Jack settled in to people-watch, trying not to think about how few hours were left until Ewan’s launch window opened and he left Tangiers Prime. Many of the men and women his age seemed to be using the party as an impromptu reunion, chatting in Arabic about what each of them had been doing in the last few years. Most seemed to be pursuing graduate studies of some kind. Several of the women—all distressingly beautiful—were staying close to Ewan and hanging on his every word. His warmth encompassed all of them.

Any of them, she thought heavily, might be his future wife. Any of them would be a more appropriate choice than a thirteen-year-old girl with a massive crush and four and a half years

to go before she was even *legal* on Tangiers Prime. She'd been deluding herself, reading too much into Ewan's kindness and brotherly affection. When she came back, she would have to be prepared to just be his little sister or young cousin, and to accept whoever he'd married as family, too...

"You seem to be lost in some sad thoughts," a deep voice rumbled beside her. General Toal sat down next to her.

Jack nodded, swallowing. "Yeah, saying goodbye is hard."

"You can return one day, 'Mercia,'" he told her, his voice gentle. "Goodbye does not have to be forever. I know that there will always be a welcome for you here."

It suddenly occurred to Jack to wonder if Riddick had ever planned to return to Helion Prime, and what he would think if he did and she was gone. But then, no promises of *any* kind had been made there, and neither he nor Imam had ever particularly cared to ask if she had plans that conflicted with the ones they apparently had contrived for her. Hopefully, if he did come back one day to find her long gone, he'd accept it as an inevitable outcome of their choice to exclude her from decisions about her own fate.

Just as she, she told the ache lodged in her chest, would have to accept whatever she found when she returned to Tangiers Prime one day. Nobody here could put their lives on hold just so she could go off and grow up first.

Full dark had fallen, and some of the guests were already departing. Ewan made sure to speak to each of them one more time as they left.

"Is it almost time already?" she asked General Toal, suddenly feeling stricken.

"No, child. Not yet. But part of the event is something that most of the traditionalists among the Muslim contingent would be uncomfortable with." He nodded at the departing guests, all of whom, Jack realized, were dressed in more conservative Muslim attire.

"What part is that?" she asked as Kyra sat down next to her.

"A bit of *Scottish* traditionalism," Cedric said, joining them. "Which all are welcome to partake in, if their faith allows them to. The Ceilidh."

Kyra looked startled for a second. "The Kaylee?"

A friend of hers, Jack remembered, had worn that name, and had died a terrible death.

"Ceilidh... C-E-I-L-I-D-H," Cedric explained. It *did* sound like he was saying *Kaylee*, though. "It's a traditional Scottish dance. We haven't had a chance to hold one for a while, and I think Ewan's looking forward to it. So we let all of the guests know that it would be one of the final events of the evening."

"Most strict observers of Islam follow a prohibition against men and women dancing together," General Toal added. "For many of them, even watching that take place would be deeply uncomfortable. American square dancing has many of its roots in the Ceilidh, I'm told."

Kyra, of course, had been born in America, and Jack had been born on a world that fetishized all things American.

Jack grinned. "My grade school taught us how to square dance. I don't know how similar it really is, but I'm in."

"My parents always said dancing was sinful," Kyra said after a moment, a mischievous smile spreading over her face. "I wanna try it."

“Good,” Tafrara said from behind them. “We can show you the steps. It’s really not hard at all.”

More than half of the guests had departed, and the tables were being moved to the edges of the room. Once anyone who might object had left, Tafrara and Izil began showing Jack and Kyra various steps and telling them their names.

“I’m never going to remember all of this,” Kyra groaned, even as she copied Tafrara’s footwork perfectly.

Jack, who could remember all of the names and the steps that went with them, was privately convinced that, in spite of that, she was going to end up stomping someone’s foot in a moment of pure klutziness.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tafrara laughed. “Go with the movement and let it carry you. We’re not doing competitive performances here.”

“There are *competitive performances*?” Kyra gasped.

“People will make anything into a competition,” Ewan said, joining them and casting the light of his smile on each of them in turn. “Are we ready? I’ve been waiting for this all night.”

The next thing Jack knew, he had taken her hand and led her out toward the center of the room. Kyra, hand in hand with Izil, followed. Other pairs joined them.

The elderly proprietor who had greeted them stepped up to a microphone, drawing everyone’s attention. He would be their caller, he told them. Many of the remaining guests seemed comfortable just observing as the dance got underway and Jack discovered, for the first time in her life, that bagpipes really could produce gorgeous melodies.

It was hard not to get lost in Ewan’s eyes when he was her partner, and she was always afraid that *his* would be the foot she tromped on. But he was an expert at the dance, and it never happened. She was whirled from partner to partner, sometimes dancing with Izil, sometimes Usadden, then Cedric, Robie, even General Toal... and then back in Ewan’s arms where time stopped once more. It *was* a lot like square dancing, although many of the calls were completely different. Whirling through figures felt almost like spinning through the spangled darkness with the *Apeiros*, but with *him* alongside her. She wasn’t sure how long it lasted, but she found herself wishing it would never end. Finally, however, the last of the songs ended and both the other dancers and their audience began to clap. She did as well, feeling a mixture of breathless exhilaration and forlorn longing.

Safiyya handed her a glass of something sweet with a hint of a grassy flavor to it, which Jack found herself almost *chugging*. “Wow, what is this?”

“*Aseer kasab*,” Safiyya told her. “Sugarcane juice. A good refreshment for after such strenuous exercise.”

Ewan was circulating again, and Jack realized that now he was saying his goodbyes to *everyone*, sharing hugs and claps on the back as he went. It was almost time.

“On the way back to the *ait Meziane* house,” General Toal said from beside her, “I have a small present for you and ‘Gwen.’ We spoke of it the other day.”

That reminded her. “Do you know if it could help me stop talking in my sleep? I’m worried about what people might hear me say.”

The General raised his eyebrows. “As a matter of fact, it does help train for that, too. I will show you the settings for that... as well as the settings for what we discussed.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Jack could see Ewan in earnest conversation with Kyra. The moment she dreaded was getting closer and closer.

“Thank you, General,” she said, trying to focus on the moment. “I really appreciate everything you’re doing.”

“It is no more than I would hope anyone in my position would have the honor to do, child.”

Child. The sum total of everything that had gone wrong on her run... no matter where she went, what she did, or how freakin’ *tall* she got, she was still a *child*...

People were leaving in droves now. The room was emptying out—

“Mercia?” Ewan asked. He was standing in front of her, holding out his hand. “May I have a moment with you?”

Here we go. Fuck...

Jack nodded, swallowing hard against the constriction suddenly wrapping itself around her throat, and took his hand, standing up.

Ewan led her toward a door to one side of the room. Usadden began to follow them. “We need a moment alone. Please,” Ewan said to his cousin.

Jack was aware of charged glances passing around. Then she saw Cedric nod. Ewan opened the door and drew her through, closing it behind them.

They were in a small office. She suddenly realized that this was the first time they were alone, unchaperoned, since they had returned from Elsewhere.

“I...” Ewan said, stepping close to her, and then faltered for a moment. “I don’t even know your real name.”

“Au—” she started, before his fingertips pressed against her lips.

“And you cannot tell me, not now. I can’t know your name any more than I can know where you’re going. One day... but not now.” Ewan closed his eyes and took a deep breath, taking her hand in his and pressing her palm to his chest above his heart. His eyes opened again and locked with hers, capturing her. “But here’s something *I* can tell *you*. Listen carefully, Tizzy.”

He recited a long string of numbers while she gazed up at him in bewilderment.

“Repeat that back, please,” he said when he was done. She did. “Good. That comm code will reach me, no matter where you are in the Federacy, and no matter where I am. I will always have it. If you find yourself in trouble, if you need my help, regardless of where or when, use that code. You only have to leave the message, ‘Tislilel needs you,’ and I will come to you. I know we’re forbidden to make any promises, but upon my life, I swear this. *I will come to you*. If I receive your call when I’m on my death bed, I will still rise up and come to you. But I hope you will return to us before then, of course...”

Jack couldn’t speak. There were far too many things she wanted to say to him, most of which she didn’t dare articulate. She was trapped in his eyes.

He pulled her into a hug, wrapping his powerful arms around her and holding her close. She found herself clinging to him, wishing she never had to let go. He murmured something in Tamazight, too fast for her to even try to parse, but she knew she would remember every syllable.

“Come back to us when you can, Tislilel Meziane,” he said in a shaky whisper after another moment. “You will always have a home and family here with us. No matter what

happens, that will always be true.”

Even if she could find her voice, she realized that she didn’t dare answer him. No promises were allowed, even if she wanted to promise him *everything*, to tell him she was his forever

The door opened. “Zdan?” Robie’s voice was gentle. “It’s time. The window’s opening.”

Ewan released her, took her face in his hands, and brushed aside her bangs before kissing her forehead, much as his brother had the last time she’d seen him. “Until we meet again, *tahbibt-iw.*”

She rose up and kissed his cheek before he could pull away. It was a struggle not to begin crying as she forced herself to let go, and not to try to press her lips to his. His eyes, on hers, were intense and shining. She still couldn’t get her voice to work, but she could see—could *feel* all the way through—that he already knew everything she was unable to say.

“Come,” Robie said, putting his hand on Ewan’s shoulder and steering him out of the room.

Kyra entered a moment later and wrapped Jack in a tight hug.

The family walked outside as a group a few minutes later. Ewan, now dressed in his flight suit and carrying his helmet in one hand and a duffel bag in the other, was striding across the tarmac, Robie and the elderly proprietor on either side of him. As they watched, he reached his fighter and spoke to both men for a moment. Robie put his hand on Ewan’s shoulder, saying something. Ewan shook his head and then donned his helmet, climbing into the cockpit. Robie removed the ladder from the spacecraft’s side, retreating with the old man as the fighter’s engines lit up and it began to roll toward the runway. They watched, as a group, as Ewan took off, no one moving until the light from the engines, a star rising upward into the night sky, finally dwindled and vanished.

“Time to go home,” Cedric said after a moment.

Jack felt strangely weightless and numb as they walked toward the vehicles they’d come in... one family member short. Robie and the proprietor had cut across the tarmac and were talking to each other in Arabic as they approached.

“...known him since he was a little boy,” the old man was saying, “and I know he’ll be fine... but I’d still like to know which of those lovely young women had the *audacity* to break his heart tonight of all nights...”

Jack felt like she couldn’t breathe.

“That’s none of your concern,” Robie said, his voice suddenly sharp.

“*Khara,*” muttered Usadden. *Shit.*

“Let’s get you girls home,” General Toal said, steering Jack and Kyra toward the vehicle he’d used to pick Jack up from the pier. “I have something for the two of you...”

“What is it?” Kyra whispered to Jack as they walked with him. “What’s wrong?”

She still couldn’t speak. Instead, she shared that moment mentally with Kyra... fully translated.

Oh, her sister replied silently. *Damn...*

They climbed into the back seat of the General’s vehicle, where two wrapped boxes with **D.** and **T.** on them waited. Jack felt completely hollow.

“I will show you how to use them once we are back at the house,” the General said as he drove them away from the airfield.

She nodded, still unable to talk, wondering if she'd manage to find her voice ever again. Kyra pulled her into another hug and held her as her tears finally slid free.

An orange glow lit part of the night sky, reflecting against the clouds. They were driving toward it.

"What *is* that?" Kyra asked as Jack wiped her face with the General's handkerchief.

The glow was growing larger and larger, illuminating a column of black smoke... which was rising from the *Rif*.

"It would appear," the General said, sounding completely unsurprised and unconcerned, "that your old apartment building is burning to the ground."

53.

Save a Last Sebby Dance

The blaze in Jack's and Kyra's old apartment building burned hot and hard, visible for miles. Even mostly upwind of it, as the *ait Meziane* house was, the smell of smoke reached them as they watched on the roof. General Toal didn't bother trying to pretend that he had no idea what was happening.

"All of its tenants moved out after its landlords did nothing about the damage it took two weeks ago," he told them. "I believe investigators will conclude that someone attempted to set up a methamphetamine 'lab' in one of the empty units. The explosion was quite large, and many of the other abandoned units still had flammable furnishings inside them. Plus, it appears that the landlords had done *nothing* to keep the building up to the city's fire codes in years. I highly doubt there will be all that much left of the building to sift through."

At least, Jack found herself thinking as she watched streams of already-steaming water arcing over the blaze, *he evacuates buildings before he blows them up*.

The last few tenants to leave would probably be too busy thanking providence that they'd left just in time to question where that providence had *come* from.

Just in case someone had a suspicious turn of mind, given everything that had happened in recent weeks, almost every member of the *ait Meziane* tribe who was in town had an iron-clad alibi, attending Ewan's send-off party miles away and dancing the Ceilidh when the blast had lit up the sky. The few who had stayed home were all far too old and frail to have taken up arson. Jack wondered briefly who the General had gotten to arrange the explosion.

But did it matter? He had decisively broken their trail where Pritchard was concerned, and that was what counted. If there were any leftover signs that the merc had broken into the their apartment, or that someone from that geolocation had been involved in the release of data on the Spaceport Bomber, the *who* and *how* were now thoroughly obscured. Toal had fought fire with fire... quite literally.

"Perhaps," Takama opined with a shrug and a knowing look, "the building simply fell to its own curse."

Jack did worry that Ewan might have seen the blaze during his launch, and feared for the Rif, but Cedric informed them—shortly before they went back inside—that Ewan had contacted him to report that he was safely on his way to Qamar—a several-hour journey—and had been surprised to hear about the fire.

"His mind was on something else," Usadden muttered before Izil elbowed him.

For the next hour, General Toal taught Jack and Kyra how to use the neurofeedback machines he'd brought them. The displays showed examples of "baseline" human brain waves, and then took readings of their waves as they first played with their abilities and then rested from doing so. Kyra was able, within the hour, to control her waves so that they

mimicked the baseline reading; Jack struggled to get anywhere close. It was hard to stay focused when all she really wanted to do was curl up in a corner for a long cry.

"It takes practice," the General told her when she was about to give up. "You use your abilities a great deal, so I believe your 'resting' state is more poised to make use of them than your sister's. She relies less on them, and has chosen not to communicate with the *Apeiros*. In time, you will be able to hide any sign of what you can do, too. In the meantime..."

He inserted a chip into her neurofeedback unit and tapped in some commands.

"...I downloaded the module for sleep-talking. It's somewhat different, and it will require you to wear the unit's EEG cap while you sleep. When it detects your speech centers engaging during REM, it will warn you with a tiny jolt of current. It's less neurofeedback than operant conditioning, in truth. But it should give you the results you need."

Jack decided not to try it that night. She wanted at least one more normal night of sleep and didn't want to alarm Sebby. But she intended to practice with both modules as frequently as she could, until she was sure that all of her deadly secrets would stay hidden. She wouldn't dare go back to her mother's house until she had that certainty.

The glow from the apartment fire could even be seen, a little, through the guest room's balcony doors as Jack and Kyra settled in for the night, Sebby snuggled down between them. The room had a dark orange cast to it.

The *Apeiros* were waiting when Jack finally managed to fall asleep.

Little larva, you are distressed. What has happened?

"I've been separated from someone important to me," she told them. Somehow, in this space, it had become easier to articulate her emotions than in the physical world. "I won't see him again for years. Maybe ever."

They had questions, odd ones, and after a few rounds of question-and-answer they seemed to still be confused about whether her connection to Ewan was familial or reproductive.

"That's okay," Jack sighed. "I'm confused about that, too."

She'd paid attention to the very limited instruction she'd received in school about such things, but a lot of it hadn't made sense. The frank and clinical answers she'd received from her Aunt Lena, her father's Registered Nurse sister, had been more useful, but still felt incomplete. She and Ewan, she tried to explain, were biologically compatible, and not closely related—or related at all, really—but even though she was probably physically capable of having a baby now, it was much too early for her to do so. And yet, she admitted to them, the relationship she really wanted with him was one that might ultimately lead to offspring one day. But even if the relationship never took that form, she would still want some kind of familial tie to him... anything to have him in her life. It was confusing, but at least, in this space, it wasn't quite as painful. The urge to cry forever and never speak again was held at bay for the moment.

A breeder making more filth... Apparently the Moribund had been listening in.

Hush. It is grieving.

"How do you reproduce?" she asked the *Apeiros*. Surely they bred too, didn't they?

We do not know.

"Really? But... how were you made?"

We hatched. We have hatched six times now. But we cannot hatch into our seven-shapes yet, not until—

It is not yet time. You will know when it is. You will see it.

“So you were hatched but you don’t know who laid your... eggs? Shells?”

Your species rears its young?

“Yeah, most of the time.”

Ours does not. We believe reproduction is our final act in life. But we do not know. When we seed ourselves into other species, though, it is our final act.

“You... seed yourselves...?”

Into other species. Yes. So that we do not truly die in this darkness. And so they might live, too.

And yet they never do.

*The demons of the dark find them and kill them in their hatchling state. But you **know** some have evaded them. And they have not found **this** little larva. It will grow too strong for them to harm soon. And it has hidden its broodmates from their sight. Can you not acknowledge its cleverness, even now?*

Let it tear down all of the cages and break the darkness, and we will agree it is not filth.

You are never appeased.

Why are you? You know what will appease us. In due time, we will make it happen.

The Moribund, Jack thought, was still intimidating in its implacable hatred, but she no longer found any of the beings surrounding her in the darkness *terrifying* the way she once had. Most of the time, unless the Moribund itself was speaking, she sensed something... indulgent... about their attitude toward her. Whatever they might be, she was pretty sure most of them *liked* her. And it was much easier to like them back than to go on fearing them.

“I should go,” she told them. “I need to do some real sleeping. I’m taking Sebby back to his home universe tomorrow, so he’ll be safe.”

That, however, brought about more questions, and soon she found herself telling them about how she would need to leave Tangiers Prime, to obscure her trail so that nobody would know she’d been on the *Matador*. When she told them that she would be traveling on a new Star Jumper, they seemed to become especially intrigued.

You will be crossing the thresholds between four-spaces? Many times?

“Yeah. That’s... not a problem, is it? For the two I’m in now?”

*It will not harm your five-shape, no. But it is an opportunity for you to **grow** your shape. We will watch. When you cross into new four-spaces, we will show you how to connect to them as well.*

She sensed that they were *excited* by this development.

*Soon... you will not be a **little** larva anymore.*

That, Jack thought, as she drifted off into actual dreams, was hopefully a good thing.

She found herself repeatedly on Canaan Mountain, watching Kyra hunt, forage, and stalk Red Roger and his men with Riddick by her side. These were not *her* dreams, but it felt like Kyra was insistently pulling her into them. Finally, out of frustration, she returned to the starfield and the *Apeiros*. She let the stars spin around her instead, imagining that she was turning the steps of the Ceilidh once more. After a time, she found herself back in Ewan’s arms as *he* whirled her across the spangled darkness and the stars sang with the voices of bagpipes...

She woke to the feeling of feathery antennae brushing away the tears on her cheeks.

Sebby was perched on her chest, eye stalks staring into her face. The room was still dark, the orange glow of the fire no longer casting odd shadows. Instead, Jack could hear the soft sounds of early morning activity from the courtyard. The air still carried a light scent of smoke. In Elsewhere, water filled the room and a school of fish was swimming through, rimed by wan moonlight from one of the smaller moons.

If the morning-day went as planned, Sebby would return to Elsewhere and she wouldn't be able to see him for years, if ever again. If he turned out not to be releasable, he would leave with Izil in the evening-day, traveling to sanctuary in the New Atlas Mountains. This was, in all probability, their last morning cuddle. Jack stroked Sebby's carapace, finding the little places that he liked to have rubbed, wishing that there was some way they could stay together safely.

I'm gonna miss you so much...

Miss you more...

Maybe she was still dreaming? She could have sworn she heard Sebby in her head.

"You wanna take one more shower with me?" she asked him, keeping her voice low so she wouldn't wake up Kyra. Sebby squeaked a happy affirmative.

One last Sebby Dance...

His favorite water temperature had become *her* favorite temperature, too. She stood under it, giving herself a quick wash but mostly just watching Sebby bounce and wriggle. Would he be able to find anything like this back in Elsewhere? Was she about to cut him off from one of his favorite pleasures?

She kept telling herself that she was doing what was best for him, but... how could she *know*?

It was hard to turn the water back off. Fortunately, *she* didn't have to; Kyra knocked on the shower door after a while to ask for a turn. They traded places while Sebby continued to wriggle and bounce happily. Jack dressed while Kyra washed up and talked to Sebby, checking her tablet for any new messages for Marianne Tepper—the Sirius Corporation had sent her their Employee Handbook—before setting out a handful of items she wanted to take with her when they crossed into Elsewhere. While she waited for Kyra and Sebby, she turned back to her tablet to check her news feeds and related alerts.

The apartment building explosion was being reported, but not with very much gusto; the building, after all, had been abandoned and, aside from some smoke inhalation reports from responding firefighters, no one had been hurt, let alone killed. Other stories had precedence.

New Kosovo had issued indictments and arrest warrants for both Duke Pritchard and Javor Makarov, for the murders of 12-year-old Luljeta Kamberi and a fugitive named Tara Krieg, whose remains had finally been located using clues from the men's Merc Network accounts. Tangiers Prime, meanwhile, had issued multiple arrest warrants for both men on charges of terrorism and mass murder. Eight of the men's victims, who had appeared in photo and video collections, had been positively identified as women who were alive and in various prisons, and Amnesty Interplanetary had already begun filing petitions to have their convictions and sentences vacated on the grounds that they had already endured punishments far exceeding their crimes. Three more of the collections had been connected to missing teenage girls from worlds across the Federacy, but their fates were not yet known. One news source reported

that multiple worlds had sent lists and pictures of *all* their missing preteen and teen girls to the investigators spearheading the case.

Fuck. Had Deckard's World sent a picture of *her*? There were people in local law enforcement, with ties to the Meziane family, who might recognize her.

A careful, heavily cloaked Ghost Mode trip into the law enforcement systems, while Kyra dressed, showed her that Deckard's World was among dozens of planets that had forwarded Missing Persons case files, and hers was among them. Fortunately, it was in a long queue of materials that had yet to be reviewed. She moved a copy of the file onto her tablet before doctoring the original, subbing in copies of another girl's face and fingerprints from a file that had already been cleared, adding labels indicating that the contents had already been processed and no match to any of the videos or stills had been found, and marking her name as "Cleared – No Match" in the investigators' internal database. When the investigators replied to Deckard's World, they would say that Audrey MacNamera—twelve years old at time of disappearance, 5'4", Caucasian, green, blonde—was not among Pritchard's and Makarov's unidentified victims...

...but, Jack thought with a shudder as she closed the tablet, she very nearly *had* been.

Would never let it... An image formed in her mind, of Pritchard, seen from above, along with an intense desire to *sting*...

Those were *Sebby's* thoughts.

Jack looked over at Kyra. "Did you *hear* that?"

Kyra froze, shirt halfway on, and then nodded. "You were thinking about what Pritchard planned to do to us, and Sebby... *talked* to you... holy shit."

The crustacean in question was sitting on the foot of the bed. Jack walked over to him, feeling a mixture of wonder and delight. "You were so brave. You saved our lives. I was scared he was gonna hurt you, too, but you were way too strong for him." She kissed the top of Sebby's carapace. "Thank you."

Love my sisters...

"We love you too, Sebby," Kyra told him, her voice breaking.

They decided to take him with them downstairs to the breakfast table. He could share human foods there, they told him, and then have crickets after. And then it would be time to see if they could find his home in Elsewhere.

Sebby was conflicted; Jack could feel it with increasing clarity. He wanted to have breakfast with all of his friends—family—but the thought that it might well be his *last* breakfast with them was depressing.

*God, am I doing to him what Riddick did to me? Ditching him without even asking **him** what **he** needs?*

Kyra stopped on the stairs and turned to look at her, wide eyed. Jack could feel her wanting to protest that Riddick would *never* do such a thing... and then realizing that he already *had*, more than half a year earlier. Her sister bit her lip, turning away and continuing down the stairs, looking deep in thought.

"We promise," Jack told Sebby as she carried him into the dining room, *knowing* he truly did understand what she was saying, "if we can't find a place there where you'll be happy, you'll get to stay with Izil instead."

Izil... good brother. Kind.

He wasn't actually using English, Jack reflected, and his word for "brother" was the same as his word for "sister." The more she thought about it, the more she thought that "littermate" or "broodmate" was closer to what he'd said. Sebby definitely had a concept for siblings, but it definitely wasn't a *human* concept and didn't seem to be gendered.

If only she had more *time*, there was so much she wanted to learn now that they could *talk* to each other...

By some unspoken accord, Sebby moved from plate to plate throughout the meal, visiting with each member of the Meziane family and receiving a treat or two from each one. Plus pets. At the end of the meal, Izil surprised everyone by bringing out, not the usual large cricket box, but smaller ones, enough of them so that each member of the family could personally add to Sebby's tub. He gave Jack two boxes.

"One from you, and one from Ewan Zdan," he murmured to her as he handed them over. Her eyes and nose began to sting a little in response.

Sebby happily used his antennae to knock any crickets that jumped on people's hands back into the tub. He radiated delight with the individual attention, petting people's hands with his antennae even when no crickets escaped.

Dawn was fully upon them when Sebby had finished eating. Jack had both her binoculars and telescope stowed in her pack, along with food and water and a large supply of olives, as she and Kyra followed the family down to the garage, Kyra carrying Sebby like a baby. Jack started for the bed of the all-terrain vehicle, reaching for the nearest of the olive trees, when Takama put a hand on her arm.

"We have other plans for that, Tizzy. Please, get in. You can stow your pack in the bed by the trees."

Jack noticed that several other backpacks had already been stowed in the bed. Kyra added hers as well a moment later.

Fortunately, there was room for everyone on board the vehicle. Sebby was fascinated by its interior, running his antennae over everything he could reach. It was hard to get him to stay in Kyra's lap as they drove out of the garage.

"Sebby, we need you to be still," Jack finally said. "We can't let anybody outside of the family see you."

Grump. Jack got a clear image of Sebby making a mental gesture equivalent to sticking his tongue out. But he settled down in Kyra's lap.

Cedric, behind the wheel, drove up toward the hilltop suburbs, ones that were in line with the burnt husk of the apartment building—which, when they passed it, had collapsed into a smoldering heap that was still being hosed down—and roughly ninety meters above sea level. Somewhere around there, Jack had hypothesized, would be where Sebby had been caught by the monster wave and pulled away from dry land. It *did* make sense to wait to begin carrying the olive trees until they were already past the worst of the climbing, she admitted. She and Kyra might have worn themselves out long before they reached those heights, if they'd gone with their original plan.

"Turn left here," Usadden told Cedric as they crested one of the switchback roads leading up a steeper hill. "It's another two blocks."

"What is?" Jack asked, looking around at their surroundings.

"That," Usadden pointed. They were approaching a small... private airfield?

It was tiny compared to the one they had visited the night before, with a short runway designed for small propeller planes and moonskiffs, some of which were parked alongside the runway. The place looked deserted.

“We have rented the airfield for the day,” Cedric told her. “No witnesses. I will pull the truck into the hangar... and then, once we’re sure it’s on level ground on both sides of the threshold, you will move it, and all of us in it—and the rest of its contents, of course—into Elsewhere. And then we will see if we can find Sebby’s old home.”

“If you catch any flies in that wide open mouth, you need to give them to Sebby,” Kyra teased her.

Jack shut her mouth and started paying attention to the terrain over in Elsewhere. Her family, she thought, was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

I don’t want to have to leave them...

She could feel both Kyra’s and Sebby’s sympathetic reactions. All three of them were being forced to give up the Meziane family *and* part ways with each other... to break a bond that had been forged mere weeks ago but had swiftly come to feel eternal.

You will come back. I will still be here. Sebby’s mental voice was firm and certain.

Jack leaned down and give Sebby another kiss on the top of his carapace. She’d worried that she was abandoning him like Riddick had abandoned her... it had been tying her up in knots... but now...

“How’s the ground looking on the other side?” Cedric asked as he pulled into the hangar.

“A little rough. If you go about ten feet to the right and fifteen feet forward... yeah, this is level with the other side.”

Cedric shifted the vehicle into park. “Power cells are almost fully charged. We’re good to go when you are. What do you say?”

Jack gave him a tight smile and nodded, and reached up to touch the vehicle’s canopy. She closed her eyes and let herself feel it. Oddly enough, the engine’s purr helped. She could feel everything that was being directly affected by the vibration, could feel the way it shifted from part to part, the hull of the vehicle, its wheels, its bed and the plants and packs stowed in it, all the people inside... and she could feel, somewhere far deeper down, the fundamental, *quantum* vibrations that aligned all of it with U1...

Remembering to swap around the air as she did it, she moved the vehicle from U1 to Elsewhere, hearing gasps of astonishment and delight around her. When she opened her eyes, she was back in her other world.

With no buildings and few trees to obscure the view, Jack could see the retreating ocean stretching away below them and to the west. The ground beneath their tires was soft and springy, a meadow surrounding them.

“Let’s put the top down,” Cedric said, and he and Usadden began to do so immediately. “Give Sebby a chance to see where we’re going, and direct us if he’s inclined to do so.”

With the vehicle’s roof removed, Sebby climbed up onto the back of one of the seats and began looking around, antennae vibrating.

Reeeeeeeeeeeeee...

He stared southeast, both antennae forward.

“I think he wants to go that way,” Kyra said. Cedric nodded, putting the truck back into gear, and turned in the direction Sebby had been pointing, driving slowly and carefully.

“Don’t want to accidentally run over somebody,” he explained as he went. “Sebby’s sentient, so who knows what else might be?”

Jack loved that *that* was his first thought. Every time she thought it was impossible to love this family more...

Reeeeeeeeeeeeeee... Sebby didn’t sound distressed, just... inquiring. As if he was calling out and expecting an answer.

Ten minutes later, the answer came.

Reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee... The call was a lower note than Sebby’s. When it repeated a moment later, it was joined by other, higher notes...

Sebby began to bounce. *Coming! Coming!*

“What’s coming, Sebby?”

“Holy mother of what in the bloody *hell*...” Usadden gasped. Safiyya made a small squeak and covered her mouth.

A familiar shape, rendered enormous, was cresting a hillside and coming toward them. Sebby, but not. Sebby... the size of a small *elephant*. An elephant-sized Sebby crawling toward them... singing its *Reeeeeeeeeee* in a lower range than Sebby did... its back covered with much smaller duplicates of itself whose *Reeeeeeeeees* were far closer in pitch to Sebby’s, many at the very edge of the audible.

Mommy!

Jack swung to look at Sebby, gasping. “What?”

Mommy! Sebby repeated, bouncing, pincers waving with excitement, antennae pointed straight at the approaching mammoth crustacean. *Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!*

“Holy shit.”

54.

Mommy Ree

“What *is* that?” Takama asked, a hint of a quaver in her normally firm, no-nonsense voice.

The enormous crustacean, still a good distance away, was bearing down upon them. Ten-legged, with pincers each as big as a human being, its thick, segmented carapace mottled shades of rose, violet, and indigo, it was moving fast, the miniature versions of itself clinging to its back.

“That,” Jack told them, “is Sebby’s *mother*.”

“*Baraka*,” six voices said in unison. Kyra immediately began snickering.

Jack released her seatbelt and clambered over the open back of the vehicle and into the truck bed, avoiding the olive trees and pulling her pack onto one shoulder before turning back and reaching for Sebby. “C’mere, kid, let’s go meet your mama.”

Sebby sprang into her arms.

“Tizzy, wait. What are you doing?” But even as Safiyya was speaking, Jack was already climbing over the side of the bed, jumping down into the field.

“What she does best,” Kyra snorted. “Diving *right* into the deep end...”

“It could be *dangerous*!” Tafrara objected.

But Jack, while she sensed nervousness from the approaching creature, also sensed curiosity and longing... and disbelief. No hostility, no anger... not even much fear. And, if “Mommy” was like Sebby, she had a stinger... but didn’t have it out.

Sebby was chirping excitedly as Jack walked forward toward “Mommy,” standing on her shoulder and holding onto her hair.

“Mommy” slowed down, coming to a halt while Jack was still a few meters away. Her antennae, stunning feathery constructions colored a mixture of rose and violet, waved forward toward Jack. Curiosity dominated the emotions coming off her, and hope, and disbelief... and only then, after all of those, nervousness. Was this strange creature a threat to her babies?

I’m no threat to you, Jack thought carefully, hoping that “Mommy” would hear her the way Sebby could. *I will not hurt you or your children. I come as a friend.*

My sister! Sebby added, chirping for emphasis. *Saved me from the bad water!*

Squeaking chatter erupted on Mommy’s back. *The water, the water, the bad water!*

Mommy slowly moved closer, antennae out. Jack stood still, letting her approach, letting Mommy’s feathery antennae brush against her face and Sebby’s carapace.

My child... my lost baby...

The images were sudden and powerful, almost costing Jack her balance. She was crawling along the ground, covered in her children, seeking food for them in the early dawn light. A strange roar kept jangling at her sound receptors, and she kept detecting an odd, briny scent that didn’t belong. Then a large wave crashed over the hillside, striking her. Her babies

shrieked, several of them tumbling from her back and falling into the water that was suddenly sloshing around her legs. Another wave struck, and another. She struggled to hold onto the ground, to grab at her children as they floated past her and away, crying for her help...

Half of her babies had been lost to the bad water, the monster wave. There should have been twice as many riding on her back in this moment, and the loss still cut through her. But...

...But one had returned?

Gasping, Jack came back to herself. She might have fallen over, except that Mommy had reached out with one pincer, still closed, to prop her up. Both of her antennae were caressing Sebby.

Jack closed her eyes, conjuring visions of her own to share. The wave that almost took her and Kyra... learning how to move between a world that was dry and the world where the water came and went... the night of the monster wave, when, as it receded, she and Kyra had spotted a small creature clinging to a piece of driftwood... bringing Sebby over to the dry world...

Disbelief. Hope and disbelief.

All true! Sebby insisted, sharing images of his own. Exploring the apartment, discovering the delicious insects that tried to sneak into it... discovering *olives*...

Now *there* was a fantastic idea...

Jack unshouldered her pack, moving slowly so she wouldn't alarm Mommy. Unfastening its top, she pulled out the container of olives that she had brought with her, opened it, and drew out a handful, holding them out to Mommy.

You are going to give Cedric a heart attack, Tizzy. Kyra's "voice" was tinged with both worry and amusement, even as Mommy's mandibles delicately touched Jack's upraised palm.

Mommy was careful, though. She drew the olives in but left Jack's hand unscathed. A second later, a wave of astonished pleasure flowed over Jack. Olives, she suddenly realized, were amazing. The stuff of *life itself*.

Curious squeaking erupted on Mommy's back. Her surviving babies, picking up on her enjoyment, wanted to know what was so wonderful... wanted to try some, too.

Jack wasn't sure if she had enough olives to go around.

Don't worry, I think we all packed some, Kyra told her.

Behind her, she heard people moving around the all-terrain vehicle, picking up their packs and opening them, and then heard the swish of the grass parting as they moved through it. The Meziane family was bringing backup.

This is my family, Jack told Mommy, who had tensed slightly. *They will not hurt you or your family. They love Sebby too.*

Made me their baby! Took me in! Loved me! Love them! Sebby had a lot to say.

In a way, Jack was glad that she hadn't understood Sebby so clearly until this day; the temptation *not* to bring him back to his world might have been far too great, and this reunion might never have occurred.

Everyone was holding out olives as they approached. Jack pulled another handful out, too, giving one to Sebby as she did.

She felt the moment when Mommy gave permission, and the other babies began to jump off of her back and scuttle toward Jack and her family.

“Heaven help us,” muttered Usadden.

“It’s fine. It’s going to be just fine,” Izil said, stepping forward and kneeling down to offer olives to the approaching babies. They were, for the most part, roughly half the size of Sebby, or even smaller. Several of them, squeaking eagerly, headed straight for him.

“Shit, you’re gonna get swarmed,” Kyra warned him.

“Wouldn’t be the first time. I mean, with other species...” Izil began giving the nearest babies an olive each. “Start handing them out too, if you don’t want me buried in baby Sebbies.”

Cedric laughed and walked forward, kneeling down a few feet away from Izil.

Jack wasn’t sure if it was *her* heart that suddenly felt full to overflowing, or Mommy’s.

Soon everyone had a group of babies surrounding them, happily eating olives while Jack fed Mommy and Sebby from her container... and Sebby shared visions of his adventures in the apartment and then the *ait Meziane* house. He was especially proud of the visions he shared of helping Kyra and Jack fight, and defeat, Pritchard. *Stung it! Stung it good!*

Mommy didn’t believe at first.

Sebby saved our lives, Jack agreed, backing him up. She shared her own perspective, how dangerous and terrible Pritchard was, how badly he’d hurt Kyra and how much worse he had intended to hurt both of them, how scared for Sebby she was when he jumped from the ceiling onto Pritchard’s shoulder, and then watching as Sebby paralyzed the huge man in an instant...

Already? Mommy asked in wonder. *A first kill so soon? She will be a mighty huntress.*

“She?” Jack gasped. Unlike Sebby’s referent for a sibling, the concept Mommy had transmitted had *definitely* been gendered.

Kyra, open-mouthed, turned to look at Jack. *Whoa, wait. She?*

“Oh my,” Izil said. “I’m looking at these babies, and they have two different physical conformations. Some of them are shaped like their mother, and like Sebby, but some are shaped a little differently. But consistently. This is a species with sex-linked morphologies... and Sebby’s morphology is *female*.”

“Sebby’s a girl?” Takama asked, looking up from the group of babies surrounding her.

“Jeez,” Kyra laughed, “does she take after her big sister or *what?*”

Jack was astounded. How had she *missed* that? Especially given the way she’d run her own con, masquerading as a boy... surely she should have known?

But then, judging by Mommy’s size, Sebby was even more of a baby than they had realized. Maybe biological sex didn’t *matter* at this stage of her development. Takama had told her, in one of their rambling after-dinner conversations, that even human children’s remains had frequently been impossible for archaeologists to tell apart in digs, unless they had reached puberty before death or there were gender-specific artifacts preserved with them...

How do I tell your males and females apart? Mommy asked. Apparently she had been following along with Jack’s thoughts.

“Oh, um... Izil? I don’t know how to explain this exactly.”

“Explain what, Tizzy?” Izil’s little brood of sebbies seemed to have been sated on olives and now were running their antennae over him. He had sat down on the ground, cross-legged, so that they would have better access. One or two were even climbing up his shirt. *They* were all still the size of ferrets.

“Mommy—that’s Sebby’s name for her—wants to know how we tell our males and females apart. I uh...” Now Jack felt incredibly embarrassed, aware of just how little concrete information about that she’d actually learned. She felt like—at least most of the time—she could generally tell... but then, she’d put a lot of effort into counterfeiting masculinity by replicating as many of its stereotypical traits as she could. What was the *real* difference? A zoologist, surely, could explain it better than she could. Humans were, after all, part of the animal kingdom.

“Can you translate for me?” Izil asked. “I’m not hearing anything.”

“Yeah.”

“Among humans—that’s what we’re called—males tend to be larger in size than females. Males tend to have more upper-body strength and narrower hips, while females have wider hips to accommodate gestation—we do that internally, not by laying eggs—and mammary glands on their chests to feed offspring. We often depict this in symbols by giving males a straight rectangular body form and females a form that curves. That is accurate for most, but not all, human beings. Size varies widely enough that there are small males and large females, for instance, and much more variety in body shape than just ‘rectangle’ and ‘curved.’”

Jack could feel Mommy listening through her, fascinated, as Jack visualized what Izil was describing. She conjured up images of her father, Cedric, Ewan, Tomlin, Izil, Usadden, and Riddick. *Male*. Then she conjured up images of her mother, Shazza, Fry, Takama, Safiyya, Tafrara, and Kyra. *Female*.

She sensed Mommy’s understanding and fascination, and then *Mommy* showed *her* what the humans in front of her looked like, to her. Entirely different colors characterized them, including some that Jack had never seen before and could barely comprehend. Heat signatures, she realized after a moment, mapping out the warmest and coolest parts of their bodies. Izil, cross-legged on the ground... *Male*? Mommy asked.

Yes, she answered. *That’s Izil. He’s been making sure Sebby has lots to eat.*

Sebby?

Me! Sebby bounced.

Jack could feel Mommy marveling at just how *much* food Izil must have been providing her daughter, in order for her to grow so large and begin articulated speech so young.

Maybe, Jack suddenly wondered, it was the olives?

Mommy looked from human to human, showing Jack how she saw them and confirming whether they were male or female. She guessed right every time and was fascinated by the sound patterns of their names.

“May I ask *her* some questions?” Izil asked.

“Absolutely.”

Izil began asking Mommy about herself, whether the brood climbing over the family was her first or if she’d had more in the past, and other questions about the cycles of the world and how they affected her biological cycles. Soon they knew that she had lived twelve full

Tangiers Prime years, making her the equivalent of thirty-two Standard years old, and had first reproduced when she was ten Tangiers Prime years old, roughly five Standard years earlier. That brood had been tiny and unsuccessful, as most first broods frequently were. This new brood had hatched in the spring, making them almost a Standard year old.

Safiyya and Takama started unpacking lunch foods as Izil and Mommy continued their discussion, with Jack and Kyra providing translations. Many of the babies were fascinated by human food and were curious to try some. Sebby, still full from her large breakfast and olive snack, was climbing on Mommy and running her antennae over her mother's huge carapace, trilling happily.

Soon they knew that Mommy's species was a solitary predator species that mostly hunted a variety of plain and steppe insects, some of which were bigger than a human. They also ate some kinds of fruit—but nothing, Mommy told them, as impressive as those olives—and a flying animal that looked, to Jack, like someone had stapled bat wings onto a feathered snake. It took a minimum of a full Tangiers Prime year for offspring to grow large enough and strong enough to stop riding their mother's back, and they would travel alongside her for at least another four of the world's 32-month-long years after that.

Other predator species existed, and sometimes posed a threat to her babies, but Mommy herself was now far too large for any of them to try to take on. One or two might pose a threat to a visiting human. She showed them, via highly colorized images, what to watch out for. When she projected deliberately and carefully, the others could “hear” her almost as well as Jack and Kyra could.

“Now for the really important question,” Cedric said during a small lull in the conversation. “Is there a place where she dens, or frequents, that would be a good place for the olive trees?”

It took a few minutes to fully unpack his question for Mommy. Then she insisted upon looking over the young trees, touching them with her antennae and examining the maturing fruits forming on them already.

You brought these for us?

“We wanted to make sure Sebby could still have olives, yeah,” Jack told her. “We didn't know about you. We didn't know Sebby was still a baby. But yeah, they're for all of you now.”

I will show you our home. You will always be welcome there. Jack could feel Mommy marveling at it all, these strange creatures, unarmored yet so oddly powerful, who had not merely brought her daughter back to her but had made her flourish almost beyond comprehension... and had brought precious gifts as well! *You will come back again, yes?*

“I will find a way,” Izil promised. “There are others who know how to come here. Tizzy and Dihya must leave soon, but I will find someone who can help me come back. I want to learn everything I can about you and this world.”

“And we will come back too, one day,” Kyra said. “Once it's safe for us to return.” She transmitted an impression of something hunting her and Jack, something that hadn't found them yet but might if they stayed too long in one place, something they were going to lead away from this world before shaking it off their trails so they could safely return.

What hunts you? I will help you fight it.

“I wish you could,” Jack told her sadly. “But it’s too big. The last time someone tried to fight it...”

She closed her eyes, visualizing Tomlin. Sebby squeaked, contributing her own image of Tomlin’s visit to the apartment and the way he had emanated both distress and kindness, but how sad both Kyra and Jack had soon been, a sadness somehow centered upon him. Sighing, Jack showed both Mommy and Sebby *why* they had been so sad, visualizing Makarov and Pritchard following Tomlin to the spaceport, trapping him in the pilots’ lounge, and then setting off an explosion that laid waste to everything and killed hundreds, including her first intense crush since Riddick...

Monsters! What terrible creatures are these, who would kill so many of their own?

Jack visualized the envoy. *They look a lot like us, but they’re not.* She showed Mommy what *else* the envoy was, the darkness that rode undetected upon her...

Wait, was the *envoy* one of the—

She blinked, shaking her head. For a moment her mind had wandered off on a weird tangent.

“They can’t come here,” she told Mommy. “We’ve made sure of it.”

“You mean,” Kyra said, “*you* made sure they’ll be afraid to try to access this universe again.”

“I don’t know if *I* did anything,” Jack sighed. “I don’t remember. But I don’t think they’d have experimented with the Star Jump drive like they did if the ship it was attached to had still been spaceworthy. Whatever happened with that test—”

“I’m pretty damn sure we *know* what happened—”

“Whatever it was, I doubt they’d risk that happening again. Not without anything to gain. And as long as we break our trails and stay un-Quantified, they’ll never think there’s anything worth gaining.”

We will fight them beside you if you need help. Mommy’s mental voice was firm. *This land is full of my brothers and sisters. The People will rise to help you.*

That, it turned out, was the name of Mommy’s species: the People. Takama laughed softly, murmuring that the name of virtually every tribe that had developed on Earth had meant that, too, although the Imazighen had taken it one small step further, naming themselves the *Free* People.

After a few moments, Jack and the others had settled on *their* name for Mommy’s People, that their tongues could reproduce—and it really was the obvious choice: the Ree. Mommy seemed both amused and approving. She, herself, was known among her people as the Dawn Huntress... but she liked the way “Mommy” sounded when her human visitors said it aloud.

Once her babies had climbed onto her back, Sebby settled among them, Mommy led them uphill. Cedric drove the all-terrain vehicle slowly after her with everybody back inside it and the top still down. Jack, now sitting next to him, focused her vision on U1 periodically; the area that they were entering was increasingly rural back there. Whenever she saw a good stretch of level, empty road, she shifted her vision back to Elsewhere to pick out nearby landmarks. They were going far enough afield that trying to follow their backtrail and isomorph in the confines of the hangar might be more trouble than it was worth.

Jack thought maybe half an hour passed before they reached a long, lovely glen. She could see why Mommy had picked this spot for her burrow... which, they soon discovered, was

large, well ventilated, and kept meticulously clean. A shallow, babbling creek ran through the glen, while springy moss grew over much of the ground. Although parts of it were shaded by extraordinary, primordial trees with towering, slender trunks topped by wild crowns of long leaves, much of it would be sunny throughout the day and, at one end, it looked out over the foothills stretching down toward the distant ocean. Cedric's altimeter said that they were almost 200 meters above sea level, safe from even a monster wave produced by a true syzygy.

Soon Mommy and Tafrara were picking out the best spots to plant the young olive trees while Sebby and her siblings played in the creek, splashing each other and doing little variations on the Sebby Dance. As soon as the first location for an olive tree had been chosen, Cedric began digging. Usadden started digging the second hole, and Izil began on the third. Jack grabbed a shovel to tackle the fourth hole, wanting to be actively involved in the planting; after a little while, Kyra took a turn.

As they all worked on settling the trees into their holes, Tafrara explained to Mommy what the olive trees would need, aside from light and water, to grow well and how to tell if they needed special care. She promised that she would find a way to return, too, to check on their progress and help with any problems that arose.

"This is a bit of a complication," Cedric murmured to Jack. "We thought, if we got everyone connected to Elsewhere as far away from New Marrakesh as possible, that would be the end of the risk. But now... I think we need that connection again. We need to be able to come back to this world... to continue this friendship... but I don't know how we can do this without risking the Quintessa Corporation discovering that you, Dihya, and Gavin rescued the *Matador* passengers."

Jack had found herself thinking the same thing. The passengers had been sent much further and higher into the New Atlas Mountains; there was no telling what kind of life waited on the other side there, or whether friendly enough contact could be made with it to ensure safe passage between there and this location down in the foothills. But...

She took a deep breath, feeling her heart lurch a little as she realized what she was about to do. "What if there was a way to... infect... someone who *wasn't* on board the *Matador* with Threshold Syndrome? Someone the Quintessa Corporation would have no reason to suspect?"

Cedric had gone still, studying her face intently. "You think you can do it."

"I... think I can *try* to do it..."

"Here?"

Jack shook her head. "I think it'd be best to try back at the house. Where there's more control. And mattresses. The way Dihya and I learned to orient ourselves between universes involved using the tides... floating on the water and then making it let us go. Works best with a mattress under you. I think... I could pull someone halfway between the two universes, the way *we* started out... and then show them how to navigate between both spaces. Worst case, if they can't, I just pull them all the way back into U1 and it's over. I *think*."

"I'm in," Izil said from behind her. "I volunteer. I want to come back here. My zoology degree isn't all that *useful* to me right now, especially up in the mountains where everything was brought in from Earth *centuries* ago... but in *these* mountains... my whole life I've

dreamed of getting a chance to explore a whole new world and learn about new creatures, and *here it is*. Whatever the risks may be, it's worth them."

"*We* volunteer," Tafrara said, joining them. "As much as I love our world in U1, I need this, too."

Jack suddenly laughed. "Damn, it's a shame General Toal already blew up the old apartment building. The top floor would've been perfect to practice in during high tide. But we can make it work at the house, too, as the tide's coming and going. Kyra and I have worked out lots of tricks."

"It means you'll need to stay in New Marrakesh until it's time for *us* to leave," Kyra told Izil, joining them. "We won't have time to teach you much if you're leaving this evening-day."

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere now," Izil replied. "If you're willing to teach me, I'm completely at your disposal until *you* have to leave."

"Then I think it's settled," Cedric said, looking pleased.

Only one thing remained: saying good-bye to Sebby.

It was easy to spot their little sister, playing among *her* many siblings in the creek. She was handily two to three times larger than any of them. Jack took off her shoes and rolled up her pants, wading into the water.

"It's time for us to go, Sebby," she said, feeling her throat tighten.

She barely had time to put her arms out to catch Sebby as the cat-sized crustacean leapt onto her chest for a hug.

Love my Tizzy... Sebby stroked Jack's face with her antennae.

"Love my Sebby too," Jack managed, hearing her voice crack as she cuddled her little sister close and stroked her carapace. "You're going to be okay here, right?"

Happy... with Mommy... will still miss you... come back when I'm big.

"You're gonna get *so* big..." Jack laughed. "I've *got* to come back to see it, don't I?"

I will be here...

It was hard to let go, but Kyra needed to cuddle Sebby, too... and everyone else had waded into the water to give her hugs as well. Jack retreated from the water and found herself face to face with Mommy.

You are good friends. Always welcome. Those other beings... they are dangerous.

Conquerors. An image of strange locust-like creatures, swarming over the land and eating everything in their path, came to her. Mommy had seen such creatures when she was small, had joined in the fight against them and worried that one day such things might return. She was, Jack realized, drawing a comparison between those swarms and the Quintessa Corporation. *Do not let them catch you.*

"That's the plan. I can't come back until I'm sure they won't know."

But come back. You are family. You are Sebby's sister. You are my brood.

"I will, Mommy," Jack said, reaching out to stroke her face. What a strange and wonderful honor, to be the "daughter" of this magnificent creature...

People keep adopting you everywhere you go, Kyra whispered in her mind with silent laughter.

She's adopting you, too, you know, Jack whispered back.

The drive back was almost completely silent, broken only by Jack's directions as she spotted familiar landmarks leading to a stretch of empty, unmonitored rural road in U1. Everyone was, Jack thought, feeling as awed and humbled as she was. Like her, they were all sad to be parted from Sebby, but confident that they had given her the best possible life. Jack could also feel six people processing, in wonderment, the telepathic contact *they* had experienced for the first time.

Would something like that show up in a Quantification test, she found herself pondering. If so, and the whole family began traveling between 'verses regularly, they might all end up needing neurofeedback units from General Toal.

The road in U1 was still deserted; Jack transferred them back as soon as Cedric reached a stretch that was level in both universes. Once their comms reconnected to the local system, Safiyya took over telling Cedric which way to drive to take them home.

"You know, I'm wondering why you thought Sebby was a boy in the first place," Kyra said after a few minutes more.

Jack shrugged. "I guess... I had no idea. So I just went with 'boy.'"

"How come? Me, I usually go with 'girl' there. I think most girls do."

Jack thought about it for a moment. "When I was younger, right before my parents split up... I started having dreams for a while that I was gonna have a baby brother soon. My mom and dad were fighting constantly, and I kept hoping that maybe my dream would come true and they'd be too happy to fight anymore when it did. Instead, the dreams stopped and my dad moved out, but... I guess I've always wished for that little brother, ever since."

Takama put a gentle arm around Jack's shoulders. "I'm so sorry, Tizzy. That must have been such a difficult time for you."

"Yeah..." Jack sighed. Sometimes, part of her still wondered if the divorce was somehow *her* fault, as stupid as it sounded when she articulated it. "I knew if I ever had a little brother, my parents wanted to name him Spencer. After this twentieth century actor, Spencer Tracy. They'd named me after—"

Shit, she couldn't say that part. Nor that she'd almost had an older sister, who would have been named Katharine, if *she* hadn't been born too early to survive. She'd spilled far too many details already.

"...a twentieth century actress. But I wanted to name my little brother Sebastian... so that's what I named Sebby. Kinda."

Kyra was staring at her as if some great revelation had struck.

"What?" she asked, confused.

Her sister just shrugged. "It's probably nothing."

But Jack was almost certain she was lying.

55.

Forever Your Mermaid

“Are you absolutely sure? Once I do this, there might be no going back.”

In front of Jack, standing on the roof of the *ait Meziane* house, Izil and Tafrara both looked a little nervous.

Izil nodded first. “I’m sure. I want this.”

“I do, too,” Tafrara said, nodding as well. “I’m sure.”

Jack had to admit that *she* was nervous, in a way that she hadn’t been since her cousin Rachel had convinced her to act as her understudy for Wendy in the Civic Center’s production of *Peter Pan*, only to get sick two days before Opening Night. Audrey’s realization that she was about to perform in front of hundreds of people had been almost paralyzing. What she was about to do was every bit as daunting.

She had stage fright.

There were no scripts this time, no directions. No one, to her knowledge, had ever done what she was about to try to do. Where this act was concerned, she was already as close to an expert as anyone alive.

Which, for some reason, made her more conscious than ever that she was just thirteen years old.

For a moment she had to focus on her breathing, the way Ewan had showed her, trying for calm and balance the way he’d taught her in the last few days. Then she reached forward, taking Izil’s and Tafrara’s hands, and closed her eyes.

It was weird to realize that she could still “see” everything around her, just not with eyes. She was all the way in U1 at the moment, but it and Elsewhere both filled her awareness. She could tell what belonged to each world.

We are in both, she thought, focusing on herself, Izil, and Tafrara. They were delineated before her, familiar and yet quite new as she looked at them this way. She felt herself shifting partway into Elsewhere, and felt them moving there too, the quantum frequencies governing their bodies now straddling alignments the way they did for her... the way, she realized, they always *had* for her since the Incident. *We are in both*.

Izil’s breath hitched and Tafrara gasped.

Jack opened her eyes.

“Is that...?” Izil had lifted his free hand, pointing upward and to the east.

Jack turned her head and looked.

Floating in the sky, a mere *four* times as large as any other moon she’d ever seen now that it wasn’t full, Megaluna was a waxing crescent on the verge of becoming gibbous. Its tide would reach the *ait Meziane* house soon, and they could use the phantom waters that existed in only one world to learn to maneuver between ’verses, controlling which one they belonged

to at any moment. They would have roughly an hour and a half before Jack would have to pull them back into U1 to avoid a risk of drowning.

They could do it, she told herself, still feeling the same crazy escalation of the opening-night jitters that had filled her when it was time to sing *Tender Shepherd*, in front of hundreds of strangers, for the very first time.

"Yeah, that's Megaluna," she told them. "*What?* Oh c'mon, it's a perfectly good name." Sighing, she gave them a moment to straighten out their faces. "Right now we're in both worlds equally. You'll see things that belong to each world. There's not a *whole* lot to see here right now, outside of Megaluna... jeez, *really?* ...because this is a coastal area that's under the water some of the time. But we're going to work on moving between U1 and Elsewhere... and telling each world apart."

"I honestly can't tell any difference at all," Takama opined from behind them. "As far as I can see, nothing changed with either of you."

"Good," Kyra said. "Looking normal and hiding in plain sight is gonna be pretty important."

General Toal rumbled a general agreement. He wasn't at all happy about this development, although Cedric and Takama had finally convinced him of its necessity.

"So," Tafrara asked after a moment, "now what?"

"Now we go down to the ground level," Jack said, "and start working with the tide. It'll be arriving in a few more minutes. The contrast between a wet and a dry world should help you learn how to tell them apart and control which one you're in."

It went much faster than Jack expected. But then, although she had never done anything like meditation before she met the Meziane family, they were old hands at it and knew how to control their frames of mind. Within the hour, both Izil and Tafrara had figured out how to transition between universes and began mastering the finer points, passing through walls and making sure their clothes came with them, moving objects back and forth without displacing the air around them... everything that she and Kyra had spent hours or days figuring out by trial-and-error, they absorbed with stunning alacrity.

Everybody had awakened early to make use of Elsewhere's high tide and watch them float in invisible waters; once it rose enough to fill the top floor of the house, they took a break, realigning themselves completely with U1 and having breakfast.

"Everything is so different now," Izil commented midway through the meal. "I can still see into Elsewhere. There are fish swimming through this room right now..."

"It's pretty trippy," Kyra agreed. "You get used to it after a while. But it does take a while."

Jack found herself wishing she'd been brave enough to do this with Ewan, when he was still there.

It could have ended really badly if I had, she admitted to herself. *We were having a hard enough time controlling ourselves around each other without access to another universe coming into play.*

Yeah, Kyra agreed, giving her a sympathetic look. *That could have broken both of you. It's better that didn't happen.*

Maybe, in about five years, she could return and—if Izil and Tafrara hadn't already reintroduced him to Elsewhere and taught him how to navigate it—she could do it then.

“There will be a few rules,” General Toal said as the meal was ending. “Tizzy and Dihya already have to return all of the souvenirs they acquired from Elsewhere, so an important rule for the two of *you*,” and he speared Tafrara and Izil with his gaze, “is that you don’t bring back any of your own. Nor do you leave anything straddling universes. Our prior intel indicates that the Quintessa envoy might be able to sense an object that is partly absent from this universe, the way that both girls could sense that about *her*.”

Both of them nodded, looking sober.

“You are to make no visual or audio recordings of Elsewhere or its inhabitants. There must be no evidence in this universe, whatsoever, that you have access to another. When you are in Elsewhere, you must always have a plausible alibi for where you are in U1. For any trip longer than eleven hours, you must also isomorph back briefly to check in and make sure that your alibi is holding up. I will provide you with special comms to take with you, that won’t be easily traced, so that your check-ins won’t put anything at risk. Make sure, before you do a check-in, that no one in U1 will see or hear, and that nothing will record, your appearance and disappearance. There is *no* room for error here. More lives than you know depend on what you can do remaining hidden from both the Quintessa Corporation *and* the Federacy itself.”

Now both Izil and Tafrara looked grim.

“And *no* further spread of Threshold Syndrome is to occur without my knowledge,” General Toal finished, now making sure that everyone at the table met his gaze for a moment.

They had to wait for the tide to begin receding, and the waters of Elsewhere to drop below roof level, before they could begin practicing again. They first practiced swimming through walls and using *partial* isomorphs to swim—or, from the perspective of those in U1, levitate—at what would otherwise be crushing depths. Then they practiced transitioning objects to and from Elsewhere, using the various souvenirs that Jack and Kyra had collected before releasing them back to the waters once and for all.

Izil pioneered a way to leave all of the water behind when transitioning back from Elsewhere, his thoroughly-immersed clothing emerging completely dry... something Jack had *never* figured out how to do, but which she finally mastered right before the tide receded. With the ocean departed, Jack and Kyra taught Izil and Tafrara how to use surfaces in U1 as platforms in Elsewhere, climbing phantom steps and walking through phantom walls without falling through phantom floors, finishing up with the “cricket trick.”

“Now you know everything we do,” Jack told them as the sun dipped toward the horizon. When it rose again, she thought with a pang, it would be time for her to leave. To stop being Tislilel Meziane... possibly forever.

Safiyya and Takama’s parents, along with Lalla, had rescheduled their own departure for the morning-day, just in case Izil ended up needing to go with them after all. As night fell, everyone gathered for one last round of mint tea and conversation in the dining room. It was strangely awkward at first, as they all avoided talking about Jack’s and Kyra’s impending journeys. Neither of them were allowed to share any details about where they were going, even with each other.

Then Cedric began telling stories about Tomlin’s adventures when he’d been a fighter pilot, based on his elder son’s personal confidences, and the awkwardness disappeared for a time.

I'm not going to get a chance to tell Kyra about the Kublai Khan, Jack realized as Cedric told one of the more famous stories about “El Krim’s” battles with pirates along the Sol Track Shipping lanes, when he’d discovered that one cargo hold of a vessel he’d boarded contained a pair of very angry, very *hungry* shrylls.

“...So he was running as fast as he could,” Cedric continued, “and he said he could *feel* those things gaining on him, when this door he’d just passed slammed open and three of the pirates who’d run from him earlier burst out, whooping and yelling at him to get down on the floor. At least, that’s what he thought they were starting to say, because suddenly they were screaming instead.”

Jack shuddered. She’d read about how shrylls ate, and had almost experienced it firsthand. “Did he find the kids he was looking for and save them?”

“That he did. The shrylls were still eating those pirates while he got everybody else off the ship and blew it up. The Sirius Corporation was furious—they’d cared more about the ship than the kids—until they learned that it was about to turn into a floating shryll nest. Then they finally admitted he might have had a point...”

Everybody at the table chuckled, although most of the expressions also contained wistful sadness. The murder of Colonel Gavin Brahim Tomlin Meziane—who Jack still found herself thinking of as just *Tomlin*—was still fresh and painful in their hearts. A variation on the same story had been told during his memorial service by one of his comrades in arms; in that version, he’d led the shrylls away from his companions, and they had all believed that he’d sacrificed himself to save them, until he showed up in the boarded vessel’s hangar with half a dozen children, wearing shorted-out slave collars, by his side, one riding on his back.

Riddick, she thought, might have liked Tomlin. At the very least, they would have been on the same side where the kids he’d rescued were concerned. Her father had told her—had he told her? Or had he just thought about it and she’d somehow overheard?—that there was a highly-classified story, one that nobody in law enforcement wanted the public to know lest they start thinking of him as heroic, about Riddick rescuing a group of children who had been abducted and enslaved—

That sounds just like him, Kyra whispered in her mind.

She supposed Kyra was right. Between the story her father had told her, and her own experience of how Riddick had treated her on the crash planet, he did seem to have a soft spot for kids. He’d told his own story about Johns using some child hostages to catch him, but had refused to go into detail about just what had happened to them. All he would say was that Johns had killed a few of the kids. Imam, who had seemed to know more details about the story, had told her that she was far too young to hear them... even though she was already older than the kids who had suffered them firsthand. It especially galled her, even months later, given that any merc who knew her history might consider her an ideal piece of bait for catching Riddick... and might be a sicko like Pritchard.

The only question left was whether or not those kids’ fates had been worse than what Pritchard had had in mind for her and Kyra.

Why, she found herself wondering, do so many adults believe that keeping kids ignorant about the threats they’re facing protects them?

It was their last night with the Meziane family and Jack didn’t want it to end, but most of them had awakened especially early in the evening-day to take advantage of the arrival of

Elsewhere's high tide. Soon they were saying their good-nights, Jack and Kyra returning to their guest room for one last time.

The room felt strange, missing all of the driftwood, coral and shells... and missing *Sebby*. It sent a pang through Jack; she hadn't even left Tangiers Prime yet, and *it* was leaving *her*. None of the beautiful blankets and pillows that she and Kyra had bought, to decorate first their apartment and then the guest room, could come with them. Safiyya had said she was going to box them up and store them for the day when she, or Kyra, returned, along with most of the clothing they'd bought that was too distinctive of Tangiers Prime to take with them. The few things that Jack could keep, she had to plan on discarding before returning to her family, walking back into their lives with—at least, as far as anyone could tell—nothing more than the extremely nondescript clothes on her body...

It felt like she was preparing to erase *herself*. As much as she knew it was necessary, it felt like its own terrible new form of suicide. Maybe *Jack* had to die as she became Audrey again...

...but why did *Tizzy* have to die?

Kyra looked every bit as brooding and morose as she felt. They didn't talk, taking fast showers so that they wouldn't have to think about who was no longer dancing at their feet. When Jack found herself in the starfield of the *Apeiros*, she anchored herself there, both afraid of the dreams of loss that might otherwise come to her and not wanting to get dragged into Kyra's dreams of hunting in the forest with Riddick.

The other little larva no longer dreams of that, the *Apeiros* told her at some point in the night. *It dreams of a world with three suns.*

"You're not talking to her, are you?" Jack asked, equally surprised that Kyra might have initiated conversation with them and worried that they had resumed it without her consent.

*No. But it is broadcasting those dreams quite loudly. Seeking companions to play its story out with it. The visions are unusually detailed compared to its other dreams. They seem more like the things we see in **your** mind.*

"They're from the story I told her, the one you listened to. I shared some of the memories with her, to help her see it all better."

It loves being there.

"Why do you always say 'it' and not 'her'?" Jack asked.

Should we not? Have we offended?

Jack shrugged. "I keep forgetting how different we are. With humans, we're given names when we're born, and most of the time our biological sex is known right away."

She and Izil had had an interesting conversation, in the wake of the answers he'd given Mommy, about biological sex, gender roles, and variations within them... and he'd given her a book—in file form, of course, for her tablet—to read on her journey home, one he thought might be hard for her to get on Deckard's World itself. He seemed to think she'd been woefully undereducated on the subject, and she suspected he was right.

You already know if you're male or female?

"Yes. The 'other larva' is named Kyra, and she's female."

Noted. And you?

"I'm female too, although sometimes I've disguised myself as a male. Males are less... preyed upon..."

Do you have a name?

"I have way too many of those," she sighed. "I don't even know which one is really mine anymore."

Interesting.

"You said your names were stolen from you," Jack recalled. "How?"

We do not know much about what we become as our hatchings progress. But upon our sixth hatching, once we learned whether we were male or female, there would have been a ritual to give us names. The demons of the darkness prevented it. We have no names except the one you have given us. Is there nothing you would like us to call you?

"I guess..." She sighed, feeling like she was giving into the inevitable. There had been a time when she had been eager to return to this name, to put Jack behind her forever, but now... "I need to go back to being Audrey. You can call me that if you like. Audrey."

It was weird how her driving goal, when she'd been trapped in the hospital, now felt like a dead end. Part of her wished she'd asked them to call her Tizzy. But that was a name she had to let go of in too few hours.

She would be Marianne for the journey home, and then Audrey for at least four more years... and after that, she had no idea. But she had better get used to being Audrey again.

She woke feeling a strange sense of resignation.

Kyra seemed in slightly better spirits, at least. They even talked a little as they went through their morning preparations... and began setting out the things that they were planning on taking with them.

Jack's backpack barely contained anything besides her most nondescript clothing, her tablet, and the neurofeedback device when she closed it; it was small enough that she wouldn't need to check any luggage at either the train station or the spaceport, and what she had would be mostly unremarkable if security went through it. She looked around the room, sighing, and her eyes fell on the binoculars and telescope she'd bought not long before the Spaceport Explosion.

She'd gotten some good use out of them, but she couldn't take them home with her.

"You want either of these?" she asked Kyra.

Kyra, who had been frowning at her tablet, looked up. "Maybe the binoculars? I can see them being useful where I'm going. But I don't have space for the telescope. Probably wouldn't need one, anyway."

Jack brought the binoculars over, sliding them into their case and setting it next to Kyra's pack. "They're yours. I hope you see some cool stuff through them."

She hoped Kyra saw better things through them than she had, anyway. No more exploding shuttles or levitating corpses, at the very least.

That left the telescope.

It was the last thing she needed to find a good place for. If she simply left it in the room, Safiyya would pack it away for her return. But that felt wrong. It was meant to be used. She wanted someone to get to enjoy it while she was gone, to think of her...

Ewan. She wanted to give it to *Ewan*.

"I'll be back in a moment," she told Kyra after she closed up the telescope and its stand and put them in their case.

Slipping out of their room, she walked two doors down to Ewan's. She'd leave it in his room for him to find when he next came home.

The door was locked.

For a moment she dithered. Go back? Ask Safiyya to let her in, or to put it in there for her? Or...

She transitioned into Elsewhere, the floor in U1 still firmly beneath her feet, and walked through the door as a phantom. She isomorphed back on the other side, aware that she was taking a liberty that Ewan, himself, might object to. She hoped he wouldn't, but a small pang of guilt almost overrode the thrill of adventure and discovery she was feeling.

His room was laid out similarly to hers and Kyra's, but decorated differently. It felt like *him*. He had a fondness for blues and greens, and most of the furnishings reflected that. There were several paintings on his walls. She wished there was more light to see them by, or that she dared turn on his lights. They looked beautifully done, all in a singular style...

When she walked closer to one of them, she saw that he had signed them, in English and Tamazight, *Ewan Zdan*.

He was the painter of all these magnificent works that she could barely see.

There was an easel near his bed, positioned to catch the light coming through the French doors leading onto his balcony. She walked closer; this painting, at least, she would be able to look at with more ease.

Her breath caught in her throat as the work came into view.

It was a painting of a mermaid.

The mermaid floated in a sea, arms reaching forward as though inviting someone into her embrace. While the sea was unfinished, mostly sketched out and not yet painted, meticulous detail had been lavished on the mermaid herself. Her strong tail was covered in aquamarine scales that seemed to sparkle; long golden hair fanned out around her and covered her bare torso, hiding her breasts as completely as if she were clothed. That hair looked almost exactly like the wig Jack had been wearing when they had first met. And the mermaid's face...

It was *her* face. Even as she realized that, she found it difficult to recognize herself. He had painted her as if she were one of the galaxy's great beauties. Every feature was recognizably hers, but...

Is this what he saw when he looked at me? She wondered. Ewan's words, after they had left Elsewhere and were heading home, came back to her.

"...if all one had needed to do, to reach a new world, was take a beautiful girl's hand..."

He'd only had a single week to create this. Less; they had spent almost every moment of his final Tangiers day in each other's company. And yet it was so—

She could hear voices in the courtyard below. Soon someone would come up, looking for her and Kyra, if they didn't go down to breakfast on their own. As much as she wanted to stay and marvel at Ewan's work, to let the sun rise and reveal all of his artworks to her, she had to go.

Forcing herself to turn away, she walked over to the bed he had slept in. The impulse to curl up on it was hard to resist, but she was already late returning to her room. Instead, she carefully set the telescope case on the center of the bed. She'd written no note, but she hoped he would know who had to have left it for him. Why hadn't she written a note?

There was paper on his desk, and a pen. She found herself picking up the pen and a small, blank notecard, scrawling a message on it just for him:

*Forever your mermaid,
Tislilel*

I can't leave him this, she realized even as she turned to put it beside the telescope. It was the kind of promise that General Toal had forbidden, and she suddenly realized why. If she couldn't keep it, if the 'verse conspired in preventing her from ever returning, it wouldn't just be a promise that broke.

She couldn't be that cruel to him.

The notecard was in her pocket as she slipped back into Elsewhere and left Ewan's room.

56.

Always Her Sister, Never His

Jack sat on the roof by the fire bush and watched the sun rise one final time for her on Tangiers Prime, part of her afraid that she would never see it rise there again.

New Marrakesh sloped down to the west, its jewel box glow fading as twilight gave way to daylight. In Elsewhere, the tide had reached the *ait Meziane* house and was rising around it. Qamar was setting on the western horizon. Somewhere on it, Ewan was probably in the process of being recertified for combat flight and settling back into the life he'd known before they'd met.

As, she reminded herself, she would have to.

Breakfast had been postponed until after sunrise, Lalla insisting that, given the timing of everyone's planned departures, a heartier "brunch" would be better. Jack was considering making a return to Ewan's room to see his paintings, once enough light began to fill it—

"I thought I might find you up here," General Toal rumbled behind her.

He took a seat near her in one of the chairs that had been arranged to take in both the fire bush and the spectacular view. His eyes, however, remained on her.

"What is it?" Jack asked. She knew him well enough now to know that he would prefer not to waste time on pleasantries and small talk. It was something she liked a great deal about him.

"There are some things I need to tell you, that would best be discussed here and now rather than at the train station. No chance of eavesdroppers."

"Okay." She felt a small prickle of unease but tried to let it go.

"I know Ewan Zdan gave you an emergency comm number. I understand his rationale for doing so, and I know that if he hadn't, worrying that you were out there, alone and defenseless, would have preyed on him unbearably. I could have stopped him from doing it, but I didn't. But now, I need *you* to understand that you are *not* to use it, for *any* reason, for at *least* the next four and a half years."

Jack stared at him, speechless.

"I will not leave you out there undefended. I'll give you another emergency number to use, one that will reach me. You can use that number whenever you need to, wherever you may be. But if you were to call for *his* help before that time is up, you could destroy him."

"...How...?"

Fortunately, he understood what she was asking despite her inability to get the words out. "The next few years are a very demanding time in a new fighter pilot's life. Leaves are rare and must accommodate mission schedules rather than the reverse. Imagine, in the midst of those duties... say, two or three years from now... you found yourself in danger and called him for help. Imagine, to answer that call, he had to disobey his mission orders and go A.W.O.L. And now imagine what would happen upon his return, when he was arrested and

court-martialed, and it came to light that he had run off to meet up with a teenage girl, not yet of legal age, *who had only been thirteen years old when he fell in love with her.*”

Jack couldn't restrain a gasp. *In love?* His choice of phrasing left her reeling.

“Do you think anyone would believe him,” General Toal continued, “if he said he'd never touched you improperly even once? Do you think there would be any defense he could put forth that would prevent a dishonorable discharge? Or even, possibly, time in a military prison?”

She hadn't expected him, or *anyone*, to be quite so blunt. Everyone had been so careful *not* to give a name to the ...tension... between Ewan and her until then. But maybe she had needed this bucket of icewater dumped all over her. “Oh. God.”

“He didn't know you were only thirteen when he fell in love, of course.” The General's voice was gentler now. “When his family first met you, almost nothing was known about you except that Gavin Brahim believed you had infiltrated the Aceso Psychiatric Hospital to rescue Kyra Wittier-Collins. All of your records there had been destroyed, apparently by *you* during the escape you had engineered. You were knowledgeable enough and authoritative enough in *his* meetings with you that he estimated you were older than Kyra, and her records clearly indicate she's sixteen years old. He thought you were possibly even a legal adult using an unusually youthful appearance as a cover. That was Takama's initial assessment of you, as well, because you behaved much like one of her high-performing University students.”

Part of Jack wanted to feel a sense of accomplishment about that—it meant that her portrayal of Marianne Tepper, legal adult, might just stand up to scrutiny—but a sense of dread was building within her, too.

“After Gavin Brahim... died... in the Spaceport Explosion,” he continued, “it became clear to his parents and aunt that you couldn't be *much* older than Kyra, but she seemed to follow your lead enough that it never occurred to them that you might be *much younger*. That was what Ewan Zdan believed he knew about you when you two first met.”

Sixteen. Ewan had thought she and Kyra were both sixteen when he'd made up the cover story of them coming to town for the engagement Moussem, an event he would have believed they were only two years too young for. Aging them upward, she realized, had been his ploy to make it sound impossible for his “cousins” to be the girls Toombs and Logan were seeking. Apparently he'd had no idea just how *much* upward he was aging *her*. But then, her current ID said she was even older.

He'd thought it was a sixteen-year-old holding him when he'd broken down, and a sixteen-year-old *he'd* held, after he spoke of being outraged at someone so young being forced onto a battlefield... when he'd comforted her on the wet sands of Elsewhere after a corpse falling onto her had triggered a panic attack... when he'd used his body to support hers while she wrestled the *Scarlet Matador* out of U1... and later, when he'd come so very close to kissing her...

“When... did he find out...?” Had her mouth *ever* felt this dry?

“After the two of you returned from your ‘morgue heist,’” The General told her, his expression almost kind, “he confided in his father that there was a moment when he had almost lost control and kissed you, and might have done a great deal more than that if he had, because you had seemed quite *receptive*. He had managed to control himself, but he asked to

be chaperoned with you from then on so that he wouldn't give in to temptation and possibly do you harm. He spoke of hoping to be able to court you properly if you were still on Tangiers Prime two years from now. Cedric contacted me because I was the source of the intelligence that Takama had passed on to Gavin Brahim about the two of you. He told me that they needed to know more about you, who you were, whom you might work for, and above all, how old you really were, because Ewan Zdan's happiness, reputation, and very future might depend upon the answers."

And, of course, Jack thought, she'd been so cagey about revealing any details about who she really was... if they'd actually asked *her*, she'd probably have tried to lie. They must have known that, too.

"As it happens," General Toal continued, "I had only just received additional files from Helion Prime, about a girl who had spent three days in Intensive Care at New Athens General before being transferred to the Aceso Psychiatric Hospital... whose patient records initially named her Jackie al-Walid before re-designating her as Jane Doe 7439."

Jack's heart lurched. She'd never even thought to look for those files, to try to hide *them*, assuming she even could have reached them—

"The documents now only exist in my possession. No one else will ever find them. But they did reveal that you're just thirteen years old, and that the circumstances that had brought you to Aceso had been deadly serious and not, as Gavin Brahim had believed, a pretext for an infiltration." His eyes looked sad; he knew exactly how close she had come to a successful suicide, maybe better than she did. "I needed to warn the family about the envoy's behavior, anyway, so I brought the files with me when I visited that evening. I arrived shortly after Takama took you to have your brain imaged. In my life, I have had to deliver a lot of terrible news to people, but few have ever been quite as devastated as Ewan Zdan was when he learned how close he'd come to... taking advantage of... a child. And an emotionally fragile one, at that."

Jack nodded, remembering just how rocky he had looked after her return, and the agony on his face when he'd almost lost control and his father had had to stop him from rushing up to her room to make sure she wasn't still actively suicidal. There was no way to refute General Toal's word choices, as much as both *child* and *emotionally fragile* felt like hard slaps in the face; they were all too accurate.

"By then, everyone had seen you in action enough to know that you *were* the mastermind behind the hospital escape, regardless of your age. The final piece in the puzzle of how you could be *so* precocious was Takama bringing back the news that you were an un-Quantified esper of an extremely high degree."

"Is that why you stayed?" She'd wondered at his sudden appearance, although it was obvious that the family already knew, liked, and respected him.

"Partly. I have always been welcome here. Many years ago, before my son disappeared, he was engaged to Tafrara Elspeth, who, I think, still hasn't moved on from him even though he will soon be declared dead. They have always treated me as family since then. But yes, I stayed to make sure that whatever intrigues surrounded the two of you would not threaten them... or you."

Jack suddenly wondered if the family had been protecting her from Ewan... or Ewan from *her*.

“A bit of both,” General Toal admitted when she could no longer hold back the question. “I know that Ewan Zdan tried, very hard, to reframe his love for you as brotherly, *familial*, but I don’t believe he succeeded. And I know that, the night after we all learned just how brutal Pritchard’s plans for you and your sister had truly been, he barely slept. It really is for the best if the two of you have no contact, whatsoever, until you can return here as a legal adult with no traceable connections to your time on this world now. For your sake and his.”

Lalla’s magnificent brunch tasted like sawdust in her mouth.

Nobody seemed to be in high spirits, but Jack felt like hers had dropped to a new nadir. She hadn’t even tried to go back to Ewan’s room, feeling like it would somehow visit disaster upon him if she did. If she had been *able* to stay, she wondered, what steps would the Meziane family have ended up needing to take to keep Ewan safe from her?

General Toal had given her the comm number he wanted her to use, if needed, in place of the one Ewan had shared. He had promised that he would give Kyra the number, too, in case she ever needed to call for help. And he had made her swear that she wouldn’t use the number Ewan had given her until she was at *least* eighteen years old, and that she wouldn’t fudge the numbers even a little by pretending that cryo-time counted as aging.

Four and a half years, minimum, Jack sighed to herself, *all outside of cryo... only then can I come back*. She’d known it, but its reality hadn’t truly struck her until her talk with the General.

She was glad that she had picked the *Nephrite Undine* for her return voyage. Five months alone in deep space would at least *not* be five months when time was passing for Ewan but not her. She would *never* go into cryo again if she could help it.

Finally, the meal was over. Jack felt bad that she hadn’t been able to enjoy it; Lalla had made sure to set out all her favorite foods.

The good-byes that followed were worse.

Everybody was trying to be brave about it, and stoic, to keep from setting anyone else off, but nobody was happy. She could *feel* them trying not to show that they were afraid she and Kyra would never return, that the terrible darkness that seemed to be pursuing them would catch them, and that they wouldn’t even have each other for protection anymore. More than one set of eyes turned pleadingly toward General Toal; he looked regretful but didn’t bend.

There was no way for him to bend, at least where Jack was concerned; her plan had been in place well before he had made their departures mandatory, but she’d *hoped* that there might be a way for her to stay in contact with the family, eventually...

...She didn’t know *what* she had been hoping. To somehow find a way to live in more than one world at once without crossing the threshold between ’verses, maybe? For a happily-ever-after to just sweep in, save them all, and take away every choice except staying? Reality didn’t work like that, much as she wanted it to.

Still, she wished that Kyra, at least, could have remained with them. She kept having a bad feeling about her sister’s trajectory out of there.

Every member of the family murmured a variation on the same theme, which she had first heard from Ewan: *come back to us as soon as you can. You will always have a home and family here*.

“I will,” she told each one, wondering of the ’verse would make a liar out of her, “as soon as I can...”

“We would have gifts for you,” Takama told her, her voice wobbling, “for your travels and to remember us by... but...”

But they weren’t allowed, aside from bags of snacks that Lalla had packed for each of them to take with them, and the somewhat impersonal money cards the General had been willing to permit.

“Don’t worry,” Jack said, her own voice in danger of cracking. “I’ll never, *ever* forget you.”

And, if she was lucky, she wouldn’t have to make do with memories for all *that* long. But luck didn’t seem to be with her lately.

A thousand hugs later, they could delay things no longer. Cedric and Izil helped the elderly Mezianes, Safiyya and Takama’s parents and an ancient great-uncle who didn’t speak anything but Tamazight, load their luggage into Lalla’s roomy van for their return to the mountains, while Lalla climbed into its driver’s seat. General Toal, meanwhile, unlocked the doors of his vehicle and helped Kyra and Jack inside. All they had was one backpack each, plus Lalla’s snack bags, everything that they could safely take with them stowed inside. They had plenty of funds to get more things as needed, both the funding cards Jack had procured—almost all of which she, still plagued by the suspicion that her sister might be hiding a *lack* of prospects from her, had given to Kyra—and additional funds from the *ait Meziane* tribe, but they were still under strict instructions not to spend them on anything that might point to a stay on Tangiers Prime. No mementos whatsoever.

The family could only wave good-bye to them from within the garage as they drove out; there was supposed to be no sign that the General’s drive away from the house was in any way remarkable and not just some brief errand. They were out of sight far too quickly.

To General Toal, it probably seemed like the drive to the train station occurred in sullen silence. In fact, Jack and Kyra talked to each other the whole way... just not out loud.

This sucks, Kyra groaned silently as they stopped waving and sat forward. *I didn’t think it would this much.*

Me neither, Jack admitted, aware yet again that heartache was a physical thing. *Fuck. Half of me is tempted to just... disappear into Elsewhere and spend the next five years living with Mommy Ree and Sebby, even if it **would** mean a diet of bugs and quetzalcoatl...*

*And **whats?***

Those flying feathered snake things Mommy Ree showed us, Jack explained. *They make me think of something from Aztec mythology.*

Damn, now I wish we had time for you to tell me about that, Kyra mentally sighed. *I’m gonna miss all the fun stuff you know. So, are you gonna do it? Go native in Elsewhere?*

Jack sighed, wishing... *I can’t. I couldn’t, even before we got the bum’s rush. I have to let my family know I’m alive. That means either showing up at my dad’s home or my mom’s, with a plausible explanation for where I’ve been that doesn’t point to the Scarlet Matador. Or Riddick. Or you.*

Not that she actually *wanted* to go back to Deckard’s World and Alvin the Asshole...

Or... Kyra’s mental “voice” had become considering, almost sly. *We could say “fuck it” and go look for Riddick?*

Jack wasn’t sure what the chill that moved down her back was responding to. Did this mean Kyra *didn’t* have a good path out of there? Why else would she want to try to find

Riddick instead? Especially now, when there were bullseyes painted on their backs and any merc in the 'verse would love to use them as stalking horses to track him down? She managed to keep her appalled disbelief from bleeding into their link, but only just barely.

If he'd wanted me to find him, she mentally sighed instead, he'd have told me where he was going instead of just telling Imam.

Suddenly she wondered if the logic behind that was akin to the logic General Toal had for running interference between her and Ewan; would there have been a time, had she stayed with Imam, when he would have finally shared that information with her? Maybe once she was mature enough that any infatuation she still felt would no longer threaten Riddick's reputation and safety? Had *Imam* refused to tell Riddick about her near-death for the same reason that the General had forbidden her from contacting Ewan before she was at least eighteen—because the only thing trying to come to her aid could have done, in that moment, was bring about his destruction?

It didn't matter. It couldn't matter. Whatever the reason behind his decision to cut her off and strand her on Helion Prime, whatever Imam had chosen not to tell him about the state of her well-being, the schism had to stay as it was. Too many lives depended upon her returning home and spending the next four and a half years living as an ordinary girl who couldn't possibly have any connection to Jack B. Badd's madcap—and just mad—careen across the Sol Tracks. If anyone ever realized that Audrey MacNamera knew Richard B. Riddick, her backtrail could unravel and put the hundreds of survivors of the *Scarlet Matador*, and the millions of Imazighen protecting them, at risk of sharing Colonel Tomlin's tragic fate. Somehow, she *knew* that the Quintessa Corporation wouldn't be above genocide; exactly where that certainty came from, she couldn't tell, but it was absolute. She had to jettison her past. She had deny Riddick's part in it.

Some of that, she suspected, had bled through. Kyra's expression had turned sad. *You really don't want to find him?* There was a hint of incredulity in her sister's mental voice.

I can't cut it in his world, Jack said. Not when that world included Alexander Toombs and the Quintessa Corporation, and a connect-the-dots that could doom millions if its picture was ever revealed. *I'm just not strong enough.*

She wasn't sure anyone was, or even could be.

For a moment, a brooding silence truly did descend.

You remember the Ghost Codes I gave you, right? Jack asked when it started getting uncomfortable. She still found herself worrying that Kyra didn't have a good path out, especially if her sister was considering ditching it to kite after Riddick.

I have them all saved, don't worry. I can't carry stuff around in my head the way you do.

You won't have to with one of them. Remember the code we used to get out of the hospital?

Vaguely. Kyra shrugged, looking a little frustrated. Most people, Jack reminded herself, needed a lot of repetition to remember even short comm numbers...

I repurposed it, she told Kyra. It's now a general system-slicer. You put it in and it'll unlock any lock it can for you, and open up any system it has access to. So you can get into and out of places if you're in trouble. And you don't have to remember numbers. It spells out RIDDICK. Any keypad with letters under the numbers will let you spell it out.

Nice, Kyra said, a hint of admiration sneaking in and replacing the annoyance. *That one will be easy to remember. Thanks!*

You're welcome. Jack reached out and took Kyra's hand. *I'm always your sister. No matter how many light years separate us.*

She wondered, suddenly, how far apart they could go and still “hear” each other. Damn. That was something they hadn't thought to explore or practice, and really should have.

I'm always your sister, too, Kyra said, her mental voice almost wobbling the way her physical voice might have.

With that, their time was up. General Toal's vehicle was pulling up to the rail station.

Security was tight; even though the station was outside of the spaceport—although one of its lines went to and from it on a regular basis—everyone was still on edge. Javor Makarov remained at large, after all, and all but a handful of people in the know believed the same was true for Duke Pritchard. A man in military uniform approached the vehicle and gave the General an astonished salute; Toal spoke to him for a moment before handing him the vehicle's keys. Rank *did* have its privileges; apparently, while the General was inside the terminal with them, the officer he'd just spoken to had to play valet for him.

He walked them past the long checkpoint lines, using his clout to clear their path and leaving all of the officers on duty the impression that they were, probably, plainclothes operatives of his and licensed to carry most of the contraband being screened for.

Guess we don't need the scabbard trick yet, huh? Kyra joked.

Jack gave her a wry grin. She figured Kyra had at least *one* knife on her somewhere.

“As we all know your immediate destination, Tizzy, we'll go there first,” General Toal told her. “I hope you will be all right with saying your goodbyes there.”

She managed a nod, not sure if she was up to talking yet. There were a *lot* of tears being held at bay right then.

It was a short walk to the lounge for the New Casablanca Express. Jack had had a choice, when she'd made her reservation: a long, leisurely 22-hour trip with multiple stops and a scenic view most of the way, or a 3-hour high-speed trip with no stops and much less to see. She'd picked the latter; she wanted a good margin between her arrival in New Casablanca and her launch... and she didn't want to fall even more in love with a world she had to leave behind. An absolutely enormous world, she realized anew, given the distance between New Marrakesh and New Casablanca.

General Toal gave them a moment alone to say their goodbyes.

Kyra wasn't much of a hugger, but suddenly they were clinging fiercely to each other.

“I can't believe this is *it*,” Kyra whispered.

“Don't believe it,” Jack told her, struggling to make her own voice work. “We're gonna find each other again. Sisters forever.”

“Forever...” Kyra sighed, still holding on tightly. “Tizzy?”

“Yeah?”

“If I *do* find Riddick... what do I tell him about you?”

Oh God. She was still planning on doing it, wasn't she?

It wouldn't work. Riddick was too good at slipping through the cracks. If she did get onto his trail, he might play cat-and-mouse with her if he was feeling amused, but he'd never let her catch him and probably wouldn't even let her *see* him, unaware that they had any kind of connection and she wasn't just some green merc making a play for him. Jack and Kyra didn't actually *look* like they could be related, as much as they were sisters to the bone now. There

was no obvious surface connection between them that anyone would intuit. Jack hoped Kyra had better options, and plans, at her disposal than looking for a fugitive who could go for *years* without being spotted if he chose.

Riddick's words to her in the skiff, as they left the crash planet behind, came back to her. Why not? It was probably truer for her than it had been for him. And it wasn't like Kyra would ever really have a chance to pass the message on.

"Tell him Jack's dead," she said. "She wasn't strong enough to cut it in his world."

This was, after all, the last day she could allow herself to be Jack B. Badd, even on the inside. *Jack B. Badd is dead, long live Audrey MacNamera...*

Kyra looked pained. She hadn't called Jack anything but "Tizzy" in a while, but there was a terrible finality in what had just been said, and Jack suddenly realized that it might have cut deep.

Toal cleared his throat behind them, and they reluctantly pulled away.

"Always your sister," she promised Kyra.

"Always *your* sister," Kyra promised back.

General Toal offered Jack a small package as Kyra stepped away. "A good way to keep valuables safe. We use these in the Service. Godspeed, child."

He looked surprised when she gave him a hug.

"Thank you. For *everything*," she told him.

"You're welcome. Come back to us one day, once you can." There was genuine fondness in his eyes.

A moment later, they were gone.

The package, Jack discovered, held a money belt, designed to lie flat against the body and conceal itself from most scrutiny. The material was the kind that deterred scans, too, in a way that *didn't* raise alarms. High-grade military stuff. She transferred her funding cards and ID into it and put it on under her shirt. The only thing left in her pack that might draw scrutiny was the neurofeedback device, but Toal had provided her with medical documentation to show if anyone inquired.

She took her tablet out of the pack while she waited for the train as the lounge began to fill. There was something she had been curious about for a while. Activating her translation program, she set it to translate Tamazight into English, displaying text results in response to audio input.

"A tafat-iw," she whispered into the tablet's microphone. Ewan had called her that twice.

my light

Wow. "Tayr-iw," she whispered next. he had murmured that one when she'd told everyone about the devastating moment when Riddick had outed her as a girl.

my love

No wonder Tafrara had given him an odd look. There was one more phrase he'd used, both in Elsewhere and when they had said their final good-byes. Now she had butterflies in her stomach as she whispered it. "taħbibt-iw."

General Toal had been right, she thought with awe. Ewan had never thought of her as his little sister, no matter how hard he might have tried to. She couldn't come back, or reach out to him, until she wouldn't *have* to be a sister anymore.

She took a deep breath. There was one more thing she needed to translate—

“Attention, all passengers departing for New Casablanca. Your train is arriving. Please have your boarding passes ready.” The announcement was in Arabic, followed a moment later by the same in Tamazight, then French, then English.

She'd have to translate it later.

She packed away the tablet and joined the queue, boarding a few minutes later and finding her seat. The process was orderly and efficient, especially compared to every transit ride she had taken on Deckard's World. There were so many little things she was going to miss—

Try not to think about it, she told herself. In less than five years, you can come back. It doesn't have to be forever.

Her backpack stowed and her tablet back out, she decided that she was better off not whispering at it in Tamazight where her seatmates might hear. Instead, she pulled up one of the many catch-up modules she needed to work on if she didn't want to show up on Deckard's World significantly behind her old classmates, containing a twentieth-century novel she needed to read and two study guides on its interpretations.

She remained engrossed in the novel—a portrayal of Arthurian legend from Merlin's perspective—until dinner was served.

As she paid for a *bocadillo* and a small cup of *tayb wa hari*—and, of course, a glass of mint tea—a man passed through the aisle, brushing against the cart server and glancing back at her for just a moment before moving on. Jack's breath caught in her throat.

“Is everything all right, Miss?” The server asked her in Arabic, returning her card.

“Yes,” Jack lied, giving her a tight smile and focusing on not stumbling over the Arabic words she needed to say. “Thank you. Everything's fine.”

She settled back into her seat, for a moment unable to touch her food. The man had a thick beard and glasses, and he wore a *djellaba* with a *kufi* on his head instead of the Western clothes he normally wore, but she had recognized him nonetheless and her heart was still pounding.

Javor Makarov was on her train.

57.

The Last Stand of Jack B. Badd

The moment Jack got off the train, she hurried into the nearest women's restroom, ducked into an empty stall, and isomorphed over into Elsewhere.

Passing back through the bathroom walls on the other side, she focused on the crowd of passengers in the process of disembarking in U1. Somewhere among them, Javor Makarov was lurking.

I need higher ground, she thought, looking around. Everyone was going to have to file up a set of escalators to leave the train terminal and enter the spaceport. If she was waiting at the top, she would see him when he came up.

She took the escalator at a run, two phantom steps at a time, passing through the packed passengers in U1 as if they were holograms. Only a small handful of people had gotten to the top ahead of her, and none of them were dressed the way Makarov had been. Unless he'd pulled a costume change en route, she'd beaten him to the top.

Her nerves were *screaming* as she scanned every passenger coming up the escalators. Families filed past her, solo travelers in both North African and Western attire, a group of kids being shepherded by an Imam who made her think, with a pang, of the boys from the *Hunter-Gratzner*, packs of offworld tourists looking self-consciously out of place...

...and, somewhere among them, a genuine monster moved unseen.

Just when she was starting to wonder if she'd imagined it all, he appeared at the top of an escalator, carrying nothing but a briefcase.

It was him. She hadn't imagined it. It was *him*.

She followed him into the spaceport, her heart pounding again. She had to find some way to alert the authorities without exposing her abilities in the process. But how? He was disguised, and he probably had his Cam-Jam on him just in case. What was he *doing* here?

The next half hour, as he moved through the public spaces of the main terminal, didn't enlighten her. He avoided all the checkpoints, of which there still were far too few in her opinion, before sitting down in a lounge area near several food stands and settling in to wait. And wait.

Although New Casablanca was five hours ahead of New Marrakesh and its morning-day was already ending, Jack's departure wasn't scheduled until the close of the evening-day. She could wait him out. She *would* wait him out.

Finding a secluded, unmonitored alcove, she isomorphed back into U1 for a few minutes to buy herself some shawarma wraps from one of the food stands, already aware of how taxing it would become to keep U1's floors beneath her in Elsewhere. She had to stay sharp. She was back in Elsewhere well before the man Makarov was waiting for showed up.

The two men spoke Russian, and she couldn't understand a word they were saying. Fortunately, they weren't speaking quickly; the conversation was slow and full of pauses as

they avoided being overheard by passers-by. Jack opened the translation program on her tablet and began repeating their words, phoneme by phoneme, into it. She sat only a foot away from them, cross-legged on the phantom floor, tablet in her lap, grabbing bites of shawarma during the frequent lulls in their conversation.

“...the last equipment I can get you,” the stranger was saying. “You’ve run out of favors. Most people would turn you in for nothing at this point.”

“Does that include you?” Makarov asked.

“You know it doesn’t, brother. I owe you and I always will.”

“What about the money Quintessa owes *me*?” Makarov demanded, making Jack wish she could record conversations from the other side of the threshold. The tablet itself, a universe apart from the men, couldn’t hear them at all even if she could. “Did you get to it?”

“No, and I wouldn’t try for it if I were you,” the other man said. “A picture of you in that fancy executive’s entourage is circulating, and their PR department is going *insane* trying to ‘disavow all knowledge of your crimes.’ Their big fear is that someone could realize you were on their clock when you followed that colonel into the other spaceport and blew him up. The whispers are that they’re considering taking out a contract on you themselves. Write it off. They’d probably just use it as bait to lure you into a trap.”

“So they get some of my best work for free. Where does that leave me? I’m in the hole.”

“I can get you work. You don’t mind hatchet jobs, you’ll be fine. There’s even a market for more pictures and vids like the ones that got out, if you’re inclined to make them for money. I even know a girl or two you could start with. There are people who’ll pay extra because they know it’s all *real*.”

Motherfucker. Jack spat out the last bit of the shawarma roll she’d been chewing when she read *that* translation, packing away the remaining three for later when her appetite could reappear.

“Speaking of which, what’s the word on Pritchard?” Makarov’s voice turned poisonous for a moment.

“No one has seen him since a few hours after that colonel’s memorial. The word is he went off to follow up on a lead he had. His comm traveled up and down the coast for a while, and stopped at several brothels, but no one at any of them remembers seeing him. Then some traveling businessman turned it in at a lost-and-found, claiming he’d found it in his gear, a few hours before the police filed a warrant to track it.”

Good work, Robie, Jack thought. He’d managed to obscure any connection to him somehow.

“Son of a bitch better hope I never find him... any idea who he was sharing those files with?”

“None yet. I’m working on it, but whoever it was knew how to mask his location. I’m not even sure he was really on Tangiers Prime when he sent his packets.”

“Fuck.”

“I’ll keep digging. In the meantime, you need to get off this rock. I have everything you need in here. You’re going to Gate 137. I’ll walk you through the checkpoint and nobody will be the wiser. Are you jamming right now?”

“Yes.”

“Switch it off until you’re past the checkpoint. People will notice.”

Makarov reached into a pocket on the right side of his djellaba for a moment. “Done.”

Right pocket. Good to know.

If Makarov had his Cam-Jam in there, she could take it from him. She was *damned good* at picking pockets, and access to Elsewhere had given her a few new tricks to play. She’d have to wait until he switched it back on, maybe swap in something that was a similar size and weight. Then he hopefully wouldn’t even notice it had gone missing... and that he was no longer obscured from view on cameras.

A plan was forming in her head. She’d steal the Cam-Jam and drop it down into Elsewhere, and then sound the alarm. He wouldn’t be able to hide if security could follow his movements on camera, and he wouldn’t realize that he didn’t have that advantage if he thought the Cam-Jam was still tucked in his pocket. They’d be able to corner him easily.

Jack stowed her tablet and headed out, moving to get ahead of Makarov since she now knew his planned destination. She needed two things, and she’d be ready to make her move. Something a similar size and weight as the Cam-Jam... and a disguise. Marianne Tepper couldn’t be involved in any of what was about to happen, and neither could any of her other aliases. The person who sounded the alarm needed to appear to be someone completely random.

The back room of a nearby Duty Free clothing store proved a godsend, providing Jack with a small flask roughly the right shape and weight to sub in for the Cam-Jam, a face-concealing *niqab*, and a long *abaya*. She stowed her backpack in an out-of-the-way corner of the room and changed quickly, isomorphing back into Elsewhere so she could find the best place to ambush Makarov as he made his way toward Gate 137.

I can do this, she thought, palming the flask, mentally practicing the things she intended to say in Arabic as everything unfolded. Finding a concealed alcove, she isomorphed partway back, straddling U1 and Elsewhere and keeping the flask in Elsewhere, and began walking toward the checkpoint. Makarov was coming her way, his briefcase replaced by a larger case in his left hand and a duffel bag slung over his right shoulder. Perfect—his right pocket was unguarded.

She turned, pretending to look at some of the decorations on the walls above, before “accidentally” bumping into him. Her hand slid into his pocket, isomorphing the flask back into U1 and dropping it before grasping the other item inside and moving it to Elsewhere.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” she said in Arabic. Her hand was free. To Makarov—if he’d noticed it near his pocket at all—it would appear empty. She risked a swift glance at the Cam-Jam in her grasp before she released it and let it fall through the floor. She’d grabbed the right thing. “I wasn’t looking where I was going—”

Makarov looked annoyed but was trying to move away, grumbling in Russian. She gasped and went still.

“It’s *him!*” she shrieked, still in Arabic, raising her other hand to point after Makarov. “It’s the Spaceport Bomber! It’s him! I know that face! He bombed New Marrakesh! He’s the raper of little girls! It’s him!”

People were staring. Several were looking more closely at Makarov. A few began to point as well.

“Madam?” a man asked in Arabic, using the word she’d heard shopkeepers use with Lajjun in stores. She turned. A spaceport employee was frowning at her.

“That man! It’s him! It’s the Spaceport Bomber! He has a beard now but it’s *him!*”

“Excuse me, Sir, could you stop for a moment, please—”

Makarov took off at a run.

In the ensuing commotion, no one noticed when Jack slipped away to her alcove and isomorphed the rest of the way back into Elsewhere. She pulled off the *niqab* and *abaya* and hurried back to the clothing shop’s back room, returning to U1, dropping them by their respective racks, and retrieving her backpack. Now she just had to watch and make sure Makarov didn’t get away.

She stayed in Elsewhere as she followed the commotion, running flat-out to catch up and hopefully get ahead.

Makarov had briefly lost the handful of spaceport employees who had chased after him. They were milling about, one of them speaking to security on her comm and asking for guidance.

If his Cam-Jam was still working, there wouldn’t be any, Jack thought. Now. Where was he?

She ran ahead, imagining which corridor *she* would duck down if she were trying to hide but wasn’t worried about cameras.

The overnoon hours had arrived for New Casablanca, and although the enormous spaceport remained busy, many of the hallways were quiet and even deserted. Jack found Makarov in the third one she checked.

He was crouching down with the larger case, which he’d apparently exchanged his briefcase for after she’d left, open before him. Inside, he had an *arsenal*.

Oh, fuck.

As Jack watched, he armed himself with multiple guns and—

Oh fuck! Grenades?

To his side, a camera stared down balefully. He ignored it, undoubtedly assuming it was blinded, as he finished strapping on the guns, pocketing explosives and spare clips of ammunition. He’d taken off his *djellaba* and *kufi*. Opening the duffel bag, he ripped off the fake beard he’d been wearing, cursing in Russian as he did so. He pulled a *tagelmust* out of the bag, wrapping it around his head and covering his face with swift efficiency. A moment later, he had a new *djellaba*, in a different style, concealing his arsenal. He didn’t even glance at the flask that had replaced his Cam-Jam as he pulled it out of the old *djellaba*’s pocket and transferred it to the new one, still on his right side. He dropped two more grenades into the *djellaba*’s left pocket.

Security was seeing everything; Jack was certain of it. They knew how he’d changed his appearance... and they also knew that he was well armed and extremely dangerous...

...and had *fucking grenades*.

Everything was unraveling. Jack felt nauseated. In front of her, Makarov rose from his crouch, closing the arms case and kicking it to the side, and began to stroll out into the corridor with just his plain black duffel bag. If that had actually been a Cam-Jam in his pocket, he would have become unrecognizable. But the fact that Security knew what he looked like was countered by the weaponry he had at his disposal, and he *knew* they were looking for him.

I fucked this up. God, I fucked this whole thing up...

A large group of people must have just disembarked from a flight. As Jack watched, her stomach plummeting, Makarov inserted himself into the group. Its members were talking and laughing, blithely unaware, making Jack think of a herd of sheep that hadn't even noticed a mountain lion slipping into their midst—

“Stop right there! Nobody move!” The order was shouted in multiple languages as heavily armed security officers appeared in the hallway ahead, weapons drawn.

Several members of the group shrieked in fear as they came to a stop. Many of them flung their arms above their heads—obscuring Makarov from the sight of the security staff in the process—while a few dropped to the ground. A small child began wailing.

Children. There were *children* in the middle of what was about to turn into an *armed stand-off*...

No, no no no no... She had to stop this. How the fuck could she stop this?

“Everyone down on the ground!” Again, the command was shouted in multiple languages. The terrified travelers began to comply.

Makarov didn't wait for them to give the officers a clear shot at *him*. He began shooting before they were out of his way, his weapons set to fully automatic fire.

Screams broke out in the crowd. Jack heard herself screaming, too, as she watched an elderly man, who had been struggling to lower himself to the floor, torn to pieces by the flurry of bullets. The rounds struck several more travelers on their way to the security officers. *They* had body armor, but it wasn't good enough for whatever kind of high-powered ammunition Makarov was using. Some of them flew backwards from the impact, and one of them *suddenly had no face*.

Oh god, oh fuck...

Several officers fired back, even as they ducked behind whatever cover they could find. All of their shots went wide, one striking a man in a pilot's uniform who had rushed out of a side corridor in response to the screams.

“*Baba!*” a woman wailed in Arabic. *Papa*. She had crawled over to the old man and was cradling his bloody remains. Improbably, he was still breathing, scarlet foam bubbling from his lips. “Someone help me! Papa! Don't die! Oh, God help me! Papa!”

Makarov discarded one of his guns and then grabbed a crouching woman by her veiled hair, hauling her up as she shrieked in terror and pain. Holding her as a shield between himself and the surviving officers, he dragged her backwards out of the group, one gun still out and ready to fire.

He has a hostage... Oh fuck...

Makarov swung his gun around, clearing a path back toward the flight gates as terrified onlookers screamed and flung themselves to the floor. Alarms had begun to keen overhead as he wrestled his captive down the hallway, roaring “I will fucking shoot her!” in Arabic when one of the officers moved to follow him.

A middle-aged woman, kneeling on the floor, was wailing, “Nadia! Nadia!” with her arms reaching out toward Makarov's hostage. A little boy next to her began to cry.

“Mama!” he sobbed. “Mama!”

Oh no... oh no no no no no...

Still in Elsewhere, barely able to breathe, Jack ran after Makarov. Could she grab Nadia away from him somehow? She had to stop this. None of this was supposed to happen.

Makarov dragged Nadia into an elegant lounge area beneath a suspended sculpture of a winged horse, where several corridors met and where balconies on a higher level looked down over the area. Too late, Jack saw the armed men in position above him, less than a second before Makarov realized they were there, too.

He let go of Nadia as he raised his gun, his freed hand plunging into his left pocket.

Oh fuck, the grenades—

In a thunderous roar, multiple weapons opened fire from several directions above him. Makarov and Nadia both convulsed as they were struck by dozens of bullets.

An armed grenade dropped from Makarov's hand and rolled free.

"COVER!" someone shouted in Arabic, right before a blinding flash filled the space and—

She found herself lying on nothing, suspended several meters above the ground in Elsewhere by a phantom floor in U1 that had somehow *tilted* slightly. Even through the veil between 'verses, the concussive force of the explosion had struck her, hammered at her through her connection to U1. Her ears were ringing. She forced herself to sit up, looking around. For a moment, everything was random, dark shapes, bright blobs... she made herself focus.

In Elsewhere, below her, strange primordial animals looked quizzically up at her from a pastoral grassland. She hadn't even noticed them before, so focused on U1.

U1... was...

Hell.

Intense beams of sunlight sifted down through the smoke and dust where parts of the concourse ceiling had collapsed. Power had gone out in the causeway, and even the emergency lights had been taken out by the force of the blast. Everything was a horrible chiaroscuro of too-bright overnoon sunlight and utter darkness. Bodies, and parts of bodies, lay on the broken floor.

Where Makarov and Nadia had fallen under the hail of bullets, there was now a dark, gaping hole at least three meters wide. Black smoke wafted upward from it. The pegasus sculpture had fallen into it, one scorched wing protruding. The horse's head had broken off and stared accusingly at her from atop the smoldering carpet.

The air was full of agonized screams and groans.

She turned away for a moment, falling to her knees and vomiting everything left in her stomach down onto the peaceful meadow below her. She heaved for several long moments before she forced herself to stand back up, turn around... and look at her handiwork.

I did this, she thought, still feeling a need to puke even though there was nothing left. *This is my fault.*

Makarov's grenade had been powerful; it must have set off the other explosives he'd been carrying as well. The explosion wasn't as nearly as big as the one he'd detonated in New Marrakesh, but...

Someone must have shut off the hydrolox-M fuel lines when they heard who was in the spaceport; no fire had broken out. But...

But things were terrible enough as it was.

The balconies that the security officers had fired from had collapsed, taking them down to the main floor. Broken bodies, most unmoving, were scattered at each of the hallway entries, half buried under rubble. A few groaned; one man sobbed for his mother.

Just when she isomorphed back into U1, she was never sure later. She found herself beside the sobbing man, trying to lever huge chunks of masonry off of him. “Stay still,” she told him in Arabic. “I’m going to help you...”

Someone started helping her heave the debris away. “Careful,” her helper said, in English. “We don’t know how badly he’s been hurt...”

She nodded, trying not to keep her movements slow and careful.

“Stop,” the man helping her suddenly said. “Dear God...”

The remaining piece of masonry on top of the sobbing man, she realized with horror, was jammed into his abdomen. They couldn’t remove it without disemboweling him.

“Get it out of me,” he wailed in front of her. Just like Owens...

“Oh no, no no no no no...” This man was dying because of her. All of these dead bodies were her doing.

“Come on,” her helper said, his arms around her and pulling her back away from the dying man. “You shouldn’t have to see this. Are you hurt?”

She looked up at him for the first time as he helped her stand. For a moment she thought Owens’ ghost had found her. The man had a similar look to him. He wore a Sirius Shipping jumpsuit and had a Captain’s badges. He looked like he was maybe a few years older than her father.

She shook her head. “No, I’m not ...injured... I got knocked over, but... that was it.”

A horrible, cold, calculating part of herself kept thinking that it was *good* that the cameras had gone down already, so nothing would have caught her transitioning back from another ‘verse in all the confusion. Her secrets were still safe, including how she’d survived the blast, even if—

Even if dozens of people had died because she was too busy protecting *herself* and her *secrets* to just *tell someone what she knew* instead of setting off a disaster...

“Same here. I heard the commotion, and then... for a moment I was afraid it was a repeat of what happened in New Marrakesh. But I just got knocked off my feet.”

*It almost **was** a repeat... and that was **my** doing...*

Part of her wanted to confess it all, tell him that this was all her fault. But the secrets she had to keep had even more lives in the balance: hundreds, possibly millions. As much as she wanted to come clean, she couldn’t. She just nodded.

*I should’ve called General Toal. Why didn’t I call General Toal? He would have known what to do. Something **smart** to do...*

Why had she ever thought she was any good at this shit?

Emergency teams were pouring into the area. The Captain, still keeping an arm around her as he walked her out of the blast zone, directed one of the teams to the man pinned under the rubble, warning them of what they were going to find. They were in the midst of a triage area, nerve-slashing screams coming from different parts of the dim hallway as paramedics labored over mangled bodies. She saw Nadia’s mother and son, hugging each other tightly and sobbing loudly, off to one side.

Nadia, she knew, would never be coming back to them. They would hold out hope of a miracle for a while, given the probability that nothing was left of her body to show them... but she was gone.

I killed her... And not just her.

“Here,” the Captain said to her a moment later. “Let’s get you checked in...”

She blinked, looking around. He had led her to a door out of the concourse, out of the building altogether. People were bustling around outside, directing emergency vehicles. Someone had set up a table, and a woman was seated behind it, talking to a family in front of her and taking notes. The Captain walked her over to the table.

“Captain Curtis Bevan,” he told the woman when the family moved away and she looked up at them. “I’m captain of the *Pleiades Jewel*. I found this girl in the blast zone, trying to help a man who was crushed under debris. I’m going to go back in to assist the rescue crews. Can you help her?”

“Of course,” the woman said, noting down Curtis Bevan, Captain, *Pleiades Jewel*, helping rescue crews on her tablet. “Young lady, can you tell me your name, please? I’ll help you reconnect with whoever you’re missing.”

Almost half a dozen names tried to crowd their way into her mouth all at once.

“You remember your name, don’t you?”

She nodded, her mouth terribly dry.

She couldn’t say Audrey MacNamera. Even more people would die if she did. She couldn’t say Jack B. Badd, either, for the same reason. A big part of her wanted to say Tislilel Meziane, but that would lead to disaster, too. Piper Finch could also ring alarm bells, even though she’d barely used that alias... especially if the woman in front of her had ever read any of the *Ginny Lane*, *Kid Spy* novels and remembered the name of Ginny’s inventor best friend. There was only one name left that was safe to give.

“M...Marianne,” she managed after a moment, and reached into the belt under her shirt, pulling out her ID. “Marianne Tepper.”

It was, in truth, the only name left for her until she was back on Deckard’s World and became Audrey again. One name had never really been hers, and the other two were lost to her forever.

She had been wrong, she realized, when she’d told Kyra that Jack was dead. Jack hadn’t died yet at that point. Jack had had one heinous crime left in her to commit on her way out.

Jack B. Badd hadn’t just unleashed this horror on New Casablanca. She’d committed a far more intimate atrocity at the same time, an existential murder-suicide.

As her final act, Jack B. Badd had murdered Tislilel Meziane.

58.

No Name but What They Call Her

For several hours, she didn't do much more than sit quietly.

Comms were out, all the civilian frequencies co-opted for emergency use. All flights, both air and space, were either grounded or rerouted. Everyone who had been at the spaceport and had a nearby home they could return to, and hadn't joined the relief efforts, had been asked to check in as safe and go home. Tents had been set up on one of the runways for stranded passengers. She had been among the first sent to a tent, once a medic confirmed that none of the blood on her was her own.

She sat, unmoving, unblinking, *unthinking*, for a while as other people filed in and joined her, some of them dusty, a few bloodstained, but many of them not even slightly disheveled and expressing insensitive irritation about the delays to their schedules.

She couldn't get mad at them, though. *They* weren't the ones who had caused this.

Sometime after her arrival under the tent, a harried mother had come in with two small children who were crying and whining about being hungry. The three shawarma wraps in her pack were still warm at that point, and she'd handed them over to the mother, shrugging and saying that she had no appetite anymore when asked why she didn't want them. Another group of fretting children got Lalla's snack bag a while later.

She was exhausted, but too afraid to sleep. Nightmares would be waiting for her if she ventured out of the *Apeiros* starfield. And if she stayed there, she would have to explain to *them* what she had done.

The events played out over and over in her head as she picked apart everything that she had done wrong, hating herself even more with each repetition.

She'd left too soon, before she saw the exchange of weapons case and briefcase, before she'd known that there was deadly arsenal at Makarov's disposal. But even so, she should have realized that he would be armed, dangerous, and willing to kill anyone who stood between himself and freedom. She had *known* he was a monster.

It wasn't like she was new to being around dangerous men. It wasn't like he was the first monster in a man's body she'd ever encountered.

Would Riddick have done the same thing in Makarov's place? He'd been ruthless and deadly in the docking bay of the *Kublai Khan*, although the only civilians in the place had been Imam and her, and his violence had been at least partly in their defense. If someone had cornered him in a public spaceport, with children and families all around him, would he have surrendered... or gone down shooting, without regard for collateral damage, like Makarov?

There had been a time when she had thought she knew the answer to that.

Had she expected Makarov to act like her childish fantasy version of Riddick? Was her crush on one killer what had led to her fucking up so spectacularly when trying to lead authorities to another?

I should've called General Toal...

She'd had the emergency comm number. He'd only *just given it to her* that morning-day. And while he probably would have never anticipated her needing to use it quite so soon, Makarov had been high-profile enough to warrant it. Toal would have known how to apprehend him without anyone getting hurt. Why hadn't she just called him?

Because I'm no good at any of this shit. I was wrong to ever think I was.

She'd let herself get an inflated head about her successes, but how much of those were really hers? What had she really done that was so great?

Kyra and Tomlin had rescued the *Scarlet Matador* passengers. She'd just been dead weight for most of the journey after overexerting herself moving the shuttles around.

She'd acted like a brain-dead fool when Pritchard invaded the apartment. Kyra and Sebby had saved her, and Kyra had almost been killed.

Ewan was probably the only reason she'd come back alive from the morgue heist. She'd very nearly stranded him in a whole other universe as thanks.

She'd gone off half-cocked chasing down the apeirochorons and had almost been caught stealing the boxes' contents. Then she'd very nearly broken her leg escaping. Not to mention that her thieving had somehow led to a Star Jumper getting imploded.

General Toal had orchestrated the release of Pritchard's files. Left to her own devices, she would have undoubtedly fucked that up as well.

Her brilliant idea for taking Sebby home had been for Kyra and her to walk their youngest sister back up into the New Atlas foothills, on foot, carrying an olive tree to plant along with all the gardening tools needed to plant it. Burdened like that, they'd never have made it out of the New Marrakesh suburbs. Sebby's reunion with Mommy Ree had only happened because the Meziane family took over with a much better plan.

All of her so-called brilliant ideas, she decided, had been half-baked messes. It had been the intervention of others—Kyra, Tomlin, Ewan, General Toal, the Mezianes—that had saved all of them from failure. Hell, in just a few hours, Izil and Tafrara had already become better at manipulating the threshold between U1 and Elsewhere than she'd been until *weeks* had passed.

Everything she'd patted herself on the back for had been someone else's achievement.

No wonder Riddick turned his back on me. She was glad he'd run out before she could accidentally engineer his destruction.

It was, she thought, dangerous for anyone to be around her. She invited calamity, and she'd been dumb enough to believe she could handle it. That was probably the real reason General Toal had begun rushing her offworld. She was a danger to everyone around her.

It was a miracle that the *ait Meziane* house had still been standing when she'd left it.

News slowly filtered into the tents about the calamity. Twenty-three confirmed deaths, sixteen people missing, fifty-four injured, six of them critical and not expected to survive. Javor Makarov and his hostage, a young mother from New Isfahan named Nadia Heydari, were among the missing and, given what the last few seconds of security footage showed and their immediate proximity to the blast, were presumed dead. There was probably nothing left of either of their bodies to find.

She had no idea where Nadia's son and mother had been taken. They weren't in her tent. She didn't think she could have kept it together if they had been.

It was her fault that a little boy would never see his mother again. Her fault that an old man had been torn to pieces by Marakov's bullets... and that another man had been crying for his mother while dying slowly... her fault dozens of more times over...

She was the monster in all of this.

Although only one concourse had been damaged, the whole spaceport was provisionally shut down for the next full Tangiers day while a thorough search of the entire facility was conducted. Makarov was a known terrorist, after all, who had already leveled part of another spaceport and might have been intending to do the same in New Casablanca; every corner and niche of every room and hallway was being checked for explosives. Limited service would resume once the search had been completed.

She would never reach the *Nephrite Undine* in time for its planned departure window.

Part of her, the cold part she suddenly hated with a passion, reflected that she would need to come up with a new plan, and soon, if she intended to stay ahead of the Operatives on their way to Tangiers Prime, who would now be interested in more than just the events that had transpired in New Marrakesh. She would need a new destination, a way to break her trail again, and then a new route back to Deckard's World under a new identity, once she was sure her trail was broken.

Maybe, she thought with a brief flash of bitter humor, she'd manage to return to her mother's house before her *sixteenth* birthday...

I fuck up everything I touch.

Someone finally brought food to the tent as the shadows grew in length. By then, although she still felt queasy and hollow, she was able to choke something down and was aware that she needed to. It wasn't anything fancy, but she doubted she'd have been able to tell, or enjoy it, if it had been. It did its job.

Shortly after that, the comms came back for a few minutes.

Her comm and tablet both chimed, signaling the arrival of dozens of call notifications and messages. Everyone in the Meziane family had tried to reach her during the last few hours, asking if she was all right and if she had been anywhere near the new disaster. The messages grew more and more frantic as the hours passed. Ewan had left several, the suppressed anguish in his voice tearing at her so much that she couldn't listen past his first.

How was she going to explain this to him? To any of them? Once they knew what she'd done, what she really was, would any of them ever want to see her again?

Finally she sent one text-only message in answer, to Ewan's normal comm number. She could never use the emergency number, she told herself. Not ever.

This is my fault. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for anybody to get hurt. Please forgive me.

The comms went out again right after she hit send.

Sighing, she packed the tablet away again, keeping her comm out as she lay down on the cot she'd been assigned. Suddenly she wished she could delete the message. There were no words in the 'verse that could undo the damage she'd done, or even apologize for it. Forty-five people were dead or dying, another forty-eight maimed. Her body count exceeded *Kyra's*.

As dusk fell, she tried to sleep.

Audrey? The *Apeiros* were waiting for her, agitated. *Are you well? What has happened?*

“I can’t... I can’t talk about it...” she told them, struggling to find her voice even in her bodiless form.

How can we help? What can we do?

And suddenly, undone by their concern, with any need to hide her secrets stripped away in their space, it all flooded out.

In that strange place, the tears she hadn’t managed to shed for hours and the screams that she’d been bottling up burst loose, jarring the spangled darkness of their starfield. She felt them listening, their agitation only growing, until she had exhausted the flow and it finally stopped. She had managed to contain it to their world-between-worlds; back in the physical world, her body had stayed still, her voice had remained silent, and no tears had escaped.

Still... while it had been cathartic for her, how terrible it must have been for *them* to witness.

“I tried to get a dangerous man captured,” she finally explained once she had the energy to speak, wondering how she could still float in their space when she was so *heavy*. She was a black hole. “He had killed a lot of people, and everyone was looking for him. I found him and I tried to... get him arrested... but...”

Apparently she hadn’t worked through all of the tears or screams yet.

What happened with him? they asked when she calmed down again.

“He killed more people, so many people...”

We are sorry.

“You don’t understand. It’s *my* fault he killed them. They died because of *me*.”

They still didn’t understand.

The conversation circled, she wasn’t sure for how long. They tried to reassure her that all her broodmates still lived, that Kyra was well and dreaming of a world with three suns, and that the new larvae that she had seeded herself into were strong and growing—

...the *what?*...

They weren’t sure what that left that she could be upset about. Had the one she wished to mate with been among those who had died?

When she told them that no, he was fine, none of the people she’d counted as family on Tangiers Prime had been in harm’s way, they only became confused again.

The conversation circled. Once they understood that all of those who had been killed or injured were strangers, they perversely treated it as an admirable thing that she cared so much about their fates.

“You don’t *understand*,” she told them again. “It’s my fault any of them were hurt at *all*, I wasn’t careful enough, I wasn’t thinking enough about others—”

A rapid succession of soft chimes by her ear brought her back to wakefulness.

The comms were working again. Messages to her were pouring in.

Other comms were chiming in the dimly-lit tent. She sat up and opened hers. More than a dozen additional messages had arrived during the second outage, and even more were arriving.

Oh fuck.

Sudden dread suffused her. She didn't want to read or hear any of the recriminations that must have been sent by now. She powered the comm down without reading or listening to any of them. Then she did the same to her tablet, shoving both devices deep into her pack. According to the time on the comm before she shut it off, it was an hour after local sunset, almost time for dinner in New Casablanca and lunchtime in New Marrakesh. If disaster hadn't struck—

Disaster didn't strike. I did.

—if she hadn't fucked things up, she would have been finding something to eat and then going to her departure gate to await the arrival of the shuttle to the Sirius Shipping HQ, after a carefree day of people-watching and window-shopping—

“Something's landing,” a neighbor said, and almost everyone in the tent hurried to the open side so they could see. She joined them a moment later.

It looked like a slow-moving falling star, heading for the spaceport. They watched as it descended, resolving into a small spacecraft that touched down on a landing pad a few runways over and began rolling away toward one of the undamaged concourses.

The people around her began speculating about who was on board. Someone important enough to be able to land even though the spaceport was closed, clearly. Soon everyone had a theory. *She* wondered if it was Federacy investigators arriving onsite. Who else would be able to come in during a total lockdown?

Food arrived soon after. She overheard one of her neighbors telling everyone that restaurateurs across New Casablanca were sending meals for stranded passengers and relief workers. Additional aid was flying in from other cities and would begin arriving soon.

She could still barely taste the *maakouda* and *harira* she was given, but everyone else seemed to be enjoying it.

Copters began to arrive not long after the meal ended, touching down on different runways but staying a good distance from the spaceport. She could see different aid groups setting up bases around their transports. The spaceport had yet to be cleared as safe, and anything potentially combustible—including aircraft and spacecraft—was being kept far away from it until it was.

“We're looking for Marianne Tepper. Has anyone seen her?”

A severe-looking man in an expensive suit, accompanied by several others in the uniforms of spaceport security, had entered the tent. He looked around.

“Has anyone seen Marianne Tepper? She's listed as having been sent here.”

Her heart was dropping as she stood up and lifted her hand. “That's me. I'm Marianne Tepper.”

“We need you to come with us, please.”

She'd been found out.

Taking a deep breath, she picked up her backpack and made her way over to the group at the tent's edge. There was no point trying to run or deny anything, even if she had wanted to. Honestly, it was a relief.

“Your ID?” he asked her as she reached him.

“It's in my money belt. I need to reach under my shirt to get it. Is that okay?” She didn't want the armed officers with him to panic at her movements after everything that had already happened. Nobody in the tent deserved any more terror.

He nodded. She retrieved her ID and handed it to him.

The man looked it over and nodded. “This way, please.”

The spaceport security officers formed a phalanx around them as the man escorted her back into the spaceport. No one spoke. She hadn’t really expected they would. They were probably glad she was cooperating and not forcing them to make a scene in front of all the traumatized people in the tent. She’d let things stay that way.

What, she wondered, had tipped them off? Had a security camera caught her isomorphing without her knowledge? Maybe the fact that she’d been on the train, but had never passed through a security checkpoint after getting off, had raised a flag. There were a dozen ways that she could have blown her “cover” that she hadn’t even thought of until this moment.

Just more proof that I am no good at all at this cloak-and-dagger shit...

And now they had her.

She would cooperate, she decided. She’d answer most of their questions as honestly as she could. The only lies she would tell would be about her abilities and where they had come from... and how she had gotten to Tangiers Prime in the first place. Marianne Tepper had supposedly arrived half a Standard year before the *Scarlet Matador* accident, and had been backpacking around the New Atlas Mountains for a few months after graduating college and before applying for a job with Sirius Shipping. She remembered all the details, and she would stick to them. They would never know she had any connection to the Meziane family, to the *Scarlet Matador* or the *Hunter-Gratzner*; or to Audrey MacNamera... but she would cooperate with whatever else they wanted from her.

And, if they had figured out that she was an esper and were turning her over to the Federacy for Quantification, she would let them. The worlds might be a lot better off, she reflected, if she was on a tight leash.

That made her wonder, abruptly, if the man in the suit was an Operative. Had he been homing in on her? She couldn’t bring herself to reach out and try to touch his mind to see. Instead, even though she was telling herself to surrender peacefully, she found herself practicing the “tricks” she and Kyra had learned not long before, to try to quiet her mind into a baseline pattern. Not that she was especially *good* at that... and it was probably too late.

It was a long walk. The spaceport was enormous, huge corridors branching off in multiple directions, and none of the moving walkways were operational. She could see different crews—bomb squads—at work as they walked past, checking for explosive devices in various locations, leaving small bright green tags on everything they had vetted as safe. They had started with the concourse that the standoff had unfolded in and were moving outward to cover the undamaged parts of the spaceport.

As her escort led her through the enormous main terminal and toward one of the other concourses, she saw General Toal standing among a group of high-ranking military officers. For a moment, their eyes met. His widened as he took in the armed guards surrounding her, and he took a step toward her.

She lifted one hand slightly in a staying gesture and shook her head. *Don’t stop this. I deserve whatever’s going to happen.*

He paused, frowning, and the security detail swept her away, into the concourse and over to a side hallway.

She didn't realize she was being taken to the control tower until she stepped out into it, a short elevator ride later. Only four of the security officers had accompanied her and her escort up; the elevator didn't have room for the rest.

"Is this her?" a man asked as they entered the control room. He sounded angry. Of *course* he'd be angry, given what she'd done.

"It is, yes," her unnamed escort replied. "I appreciate your cooperation."

"Appreciate..." the other man, clearly one of the flight controllers, scoffed. "Try appreciating *this*. We have a disaster on our hands and you come in here throwing your weight around like it's just another day in your cushy office—"

"You need to understand the urgency of the situation," her escort snapped back, his own voice sharpening. "A great deal is at stake here. You can't possibly comprehend how much. We need her on-site as soon as possible—"

"Yeah, all hail our exalted puppet-masters," the controller growled. "I've been ordered to cooperate, and *I am cooperating*, but you could show a little fucking humanity about what we've been through. You don't even *know* how bad it is here."

"He may not know," a familiar voice said off to the side, "but she does."

Captain Bevan emerged from behind a partition. He looked like he'd slept in his uniform and had only recently awakened. Both men frowned at him.

"Right after the explosion, I found her trying to dig one of your security guards out of the rubble," he said, glancing at the controller. "That Idrissi fellow. How's he holding up?"

"He's still in surgery, but they now say he's expected to live. I thought *you* saved him."

"She was with him when I arrived on the scene, and she had already gotten most of the debris off of him."

Two of the guards began whispering to each other. The coldness on her escort's face had vanished when he looked at her again. "I didn't realize you were part of the search and rescue effort."

"I wasn't—"

"She was in shock. I escorted her out of the blast zone and turned her over to outside personnel for treatment. I had no idea who she was at the time." Captain Bevan took her hand. "I'm sorry you've had to go through all of this."

Wait, what? *He* was sorry? What was happening? With one small gesture, she no longer understood any of what was going on.

The controller sighed. "Okay. You've made your point. Take her and go. And no more of the whole 'we appreciate your cooperation' bullshit. I've heard it before. You're cleared for launch."

"Will you be joining us?" her escort—she focused on his name tag, which identified him as H. Abecassis—asked Bevan.

The Captain shook his head. "I'm going to stay with the *Jewel*. We haven't taken our passengers out of cryo yet, and they've asked us not to until at least tomorrow. I want to be there when they wake up. They'll have a lot of questions. Milliken will handle the launch, and we *do*..." He glanced pointedly over at the controller. "...appreciate the aid supplies you brought down with you, Mr. Abecassis."

The controller sighed and gave a curt nod of his head.

Abecassis nodded. "Please come this way, Miss Tepper."

Missstepper... mis-stepper... Miss Tepper... Her brain stuttered over the name for a moment and then she nodded, following him in confusion. She glanced back at Bevan, still bewildered. He raised his hand in farewell and she raised hers back.

Back down the elevator and through another corridor... to a departure gate?

The rest of the security detail was waiting there, now augmented. They nodded at Abecassis and moved aside from the gate to let the two of them pass. But none of them moved to flank her again, or follow them.

Abecassis, alone, escorted her down the boarding ramp and through the doorway of...

What *was* this? It looked like the interior of a fancy private plane from a twentieth century movie.

...the fuck?

He handed her back her ID. "I really do appreciate your cooperation, Miss Tepper. We've been trying to reach you for hours, but I know the comms system has been down for most of the evening-day. I'm to take you directly to HQ and the *Nephrite Undine*."

...oh.

She wasn't being arrested. Far from it. Sirius Shipping had sent a shuttle *just for her*...

She had to throttle the impulse to burst out laughing... or burst into tears.

"Sorry, I... I'm still a little in shock, I guess." She was struggling against the sudden need to blurt out that she was a fraud, an impostor, and so much *worse* than that.

"Understandable. Our Chief of Operations lent us the use of his personal craft. Please feel free to make use of any of its amenities." Abecassis gave her a thin but warm smile. "For now, though, please strap in. We'll be launching shortly."

The seats were luxurious, she realized as she strapped into one of them after stowing her pack. Everything around her was top of the line, the height of opulence.

Perversely, she felt she'd have been more comfortable in a holding cell.

I don't deserve this, she thought, as the craft rolled away from the gate and prepared to launch her, and her alone of all the people stranded at the spaceport by her colossal fuckup, into the night.

I don't deserve this at all.

59.

Acting Captain Marianne

“This way, Miss Tepper.” Abecassis walked her down a long hallway, leading her from the docking facilities into the Sirius Shipping HQ. He gave her a worried glance as they went.

It had taken six hours to reach the HQ after launch, and she supposed she had behaved a little strangely during that journey. Maybe more than a little. With a luxury craft at her disposal, she had eaten simply, had a cup of Maghrebi mint tea rather than delving into the well-stocked bar, and had spent most of the time doing a study module on her tablet rather than taking advantage of the entertainment system. She’d slept, briefly, but stayed in the starfield of the *Apeiros* as she did, so that she wouldn’t say or do anything revealing in her sleep. She had the feeling that Abecassis was confused that she hadn’t decided to throw herself a little party, but she didn’t understand why he would think she’d want to.

It seemed to have also baffled him that she picked up after herself, making sure the Chief of Operations’ personal craft looked exactly as she had found it, before their arrival at the HQ. Finally, he had shrugged it off.

She’d deleted all the communication programs from her tablet when she switched it back on, avoiding reading any of the messages that might have come in. The thought of everyone’s disappointment and disgust, once they’d realized what she had set in motion, kept knotting up her guts. She didn’t know how she would ever manage to face them again.

Why would they want her to, anyway? They had to realize, finally, how much of the chaos and mayhem of the last few weeks was her doing. They had to be relieved that she was gone. Why would they ever want her to come back?

Tislilel Meziane was dead... if she had ever been real at all. There was no one left to return to them.

Sighing, she followed Abecassis along the corridors. They were early, compared to the original schedule. If things hadn’t gone wrong, the normal shuttle she’d have taken wouldn’t have arrived for another three or four hours. She found herself wondering how many people who had intended to take the same flight had ended up stranded, but—

Most of them probably never came to the spaceport. You were there more than half a Tangiers day early.

She wished so much that she’d taken the scenic route, dawdled, *not* encountered Makarov on the train at all. Nobody would have died if he’d passed through the spaceport undetected.

That day, anyway.

She frowned at herself, trying to shut down the small voice that kept piping up and insisting that a man like Makarov would have garnered the same kill count all too soon if left to his own devices. Being outed as a serial rapist/murderer and a contract killer had only forced him to give up his lawful façade where some of the people he hunted *survived*; his friend had already been helping him arrange “hatchet jobs” and had even been offering to

find him women—*girls*—to rape and torture on camera for money. How long would it have really taken before he'd accepted a job to orchestrate another mass killing, and how many teenage girls might have gone missing in the meantime—

*Stop fucking rationalizing it all. The people in New Casablanca died because **you** provoked law enforcement into moving on him while he was heavily armed and surrounded by civilians he could shoot or take hostage. And you did it in a way that **warned** him they'd be coming for him and gave him time to **prepare**. General Toal could have prevented all those other **hypothetical** deaths, and the ones **you** caused, if you'd just called him.*

Ahead of her, Abecassis had stopped at a door marked—in English first, she noticed—T. Nguyen, Human Resources. He knocked, paused, and then opened it.

"Time to meet the woman of the hour," he told the middle-aged Asian woman behind the desk inside. "One Marianne Tepper, delivered a little early and not much the worse for wear."

"Extraordinary," Nguyen said, rising from her chair. "I couldn't believe it when they told me you were already on your way back. How did you manage it?"

"She was already at the spaceport when the standoff with Makarov started."

"That early? I still can't get Edwards to reach his desk before he's fifteen minutes *late*, no matter how many warnings I give him," Nguyen laughed. She walked forward, holding out her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Tepper. I'm sorry for what you must have had to go through at the spaceport."

Showtime... game face on. She could do this. She could play the role she'd written weeks ago.

She had no other choice.

Marianne Tepper stepped forward and took Nguyen's hand. It felt much like Audrey stepping back and letting Wendy Darling take her place on the stage. There was the role, and the person behind the role was invisible, intangible. Who, or *what*, she was outside of the role didn't matter for the moment, and the pain she carried receded for a time. "Thank you. It's good to meet you, too. And really, nothing bad happened to *me*."

Fortunately, she had already changed out of, and thrown away, the bloodstained clothing she had been wearing when Abecassis first found her. Unless he felt a need to throw around Bevan's claim about her saving a security officer's life—and she really hoped he wouldn't—there were no signs that she'd been anywhere close to the standoff or the explosion.

Much less the one responsible for them... She pushed the dark thoughts back, settling into the role of Marianne Tepper.

"I'm very glad to hear that," Nguyen said with real warmth in her smile. "Now, we have a few formalities to handle, and then we'll get you over to your ship. I think you're really going to like the *Nephrite Undine*. Its amenities are top of the line."

"Assuming she uses them," Abecassis chuckled. "Davidov loaned me *his* private shuttle to fetch her. She didn't even touch the bar and spent most of the trip *reading*."

"We should all be so disciplined," Nguyen shot back, dry humor in her voice. "I must say, Miss Tepper, you are very young-looking for a college graduate."

Marianne had been expecting that observation. "I get that a lot," she said with a shrug, affecting just a hint of suppressed frustration. "My mom had teenage boys trying to hit on her until she was *thirty*."

Okay, that had actually been Lalla...

“How come they stopped?” Abecassis asked, his voice joking. The implication, that he might still have tried to flirt with a thirty-year-old when he’d been a teen, was obvious even without any mind-reading.

“She started carrying *me* around,” Marianne explained, rolling her eyes and smiling.

“I probab—”

“Make even one ‘MILF’ joke, Hamza, and I *will* write you up,” Nguyen said with mock severity, giving him a fierce glare that couldn’t quite hide a long-suffering smile.

Marianne found herself wishing that she had time to get to know both of them better.

The forms she still needed to fill out were swiftly done, and the signature she’d practiced for the last few weeks was on several documents soon after. She almost made it out unscathed, but then the Chief of Operations, Davidov, stopped by to say hello. Somehow *he* already knew about her alleged heroics in the New Casablanca spaceport.

Suddenly they all wanted to hear about the disaster.

“There isn’t really all that much to tell,” she said, wishing she’d spent more time constructing a story. She called up the map of the spaceport in her head, visualizing the area that everything had gone to hell in. “I was window-shopping some before heading to one of the sleep-tanks you can rent for the overnoon hours. There’s a little duty-free store that sells these beautiful textiles made by Amazigh artisans from the New Atlas Mountains. I was thinking about going in and buying this one blanket that had unusual patterns on it, when I heard screams and what sounded like gunfire.”

Believable so far. On the off-chance that anyone ever checked up on her story, the shop had been right by the alcove she’d isomorphed through, and really *had* been just off of the lounge area with the flying Pegasus statue. She hadn’t realized, though, until that moment, how close it had been to where she’d found Idrissi, and where Bevan had found her.

Why did they have to look so excited about the violence they thought she was about to describe? Didn’t they know how horrible it was to live through such a thing?

Her cousin Joey loved watching action movies with car chases and lots of crashes. She wondered if he’d still find them so thrilling if he’d ever been in a crash, himself. And...

Kyra’s dreaming of a world with three suns because all you gave her were the parts of the story full of adventure and excitement, not the terror and anguish of the real thing.

“Before I knew what was happening, there was this loud roar and the whole place shook, and then the lights went out. Everything got really quiet for a moment, and then I started hearing people screaming and crying, and calling for help. So I followed their voices. When I got back to the main intersection—I’d been in a side corridor—there was this huge pile of rubble partly blocking the way and a man was pinned under some of it, crying out...”

Sobbing for his mother. She had to stop for a moment, feeling nauseated.

“He was, um... the only one in the pile who was still alive...”

“I think,” Davidov said after she paused again, “that this is all still much too fresh for you to talk about yet. I’m sorry we imposed on you. In good news, though, Salman Idrissi is now in stable condition and is expected to make a full recovery.”

Marianne nodded, unable to meet their eyes for a moment. One battered life saved out of so many lost... she deserved no praise for that.

Dammit, get back in the role...

“The *Undine* has some excellent counseling modules,” Nguyen said after a moment, her voice gentle. “You’re under no obligation to use them, but it really is recommended after the kind of trauma you’ve experienced. We’d love your opinion about their effectiveness, in fact... please do use *all* the amenities on board so we can make sure they’re all in good working order and improve on them if needed.”

It was weird to have a professional directive to enjoy oneself, she thought as she was shuttled over to the *Nephrite Undine*. Its launch was still half a standard day away—moved up, she learned, because she had arrived early enough for them to take advantage of an opening in the outward-bound schedule—but she had been invited to get herself settled and learn her way around the command modules and recreational facilities while she waited. The urge to be alone, far from scrutiny and problematic sympathy, was strong enough that she had agreed immediately.

They had outfitted her with several pairs of company coveralls and two pairs of work boots—a good thing, she had realized, because her current pair had started to pinch and apparently her feet had grown a half-size during her almost one Standard month on Tangiers Prime—and other basic necessities, before Abecassis had escorted her to a high-speed transit that would take her to the shipyards’ shuttle bay. One short flight later and she was entering the airlock of the ship that would be her home for the next five months.

Welcome to the Nephrite Undine. Please provide your Company Access Key.

She already had it in her hand, inserting it into the slot by the welcome screen.

Welcome, Acting Captain Marianne Tepper. Please place your hand on the scanner for biometric scan.

Marianne—she was still trying to get into the habit of thinking of herself by that name—complied, adjusting the position of her hand as the system requested. The scan was for an internal database, which she already knew wouldn’t be compared against any others that might include information about a missing girl named Audrey. General Toal had reassured her, just one Tangiers day earlier, that no biometrics related to “Jackie al-Walid,” “Jane Doe 7439,” or “Jack B. Badd” remained on file anywhere.

Palmprint and fingerprints recorded for right hand. Please place your left hand on the scanner.

She allowed it to scan her left hand, and then brought her eyes to a small panel so it could follow up with a retinal scan.

Biometric identifiers complete. Please state your name and rank for voice-printing.

“Marianne Tepper. Acting Captain.”

Thank you. Initial voice print completed. All voice-activated command systems are now online.

The inner airlock doors parted.

"Welcome, Acting Captain Tepper," a soothing female voice said from a nearby speaker.

It was easier to slip into the role the second time. "Thank you. Please call me Marianne. Can you please direct me to the crew quarters I've been assigned?"

"Of course, Marianne. Please follow the lit path to your right. As you are the only crew on this voyage, you have your choice of all quarters. I recommend the Captain's suite."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say no, to insist on something small and spare, when she reminded herself that she was under orders to test the ship's amenities. Whoever took over command once the ship reached Deckard's World might appreciate her making sure that the Captain's suite was appropriately comfortable. In fact...

"Thank you. I'll start there, but I'm going to rotate through all the crew quarters over the next five months. To make sure they're all in good working order for the next crew."

"Understood. I'm sure they will appreciate that."

A captain's suite, as it turned out, contained a large bed, a dedicated workstation, and a private en suite bath. She settled her meager possessions in its space and called up the ship's schematics, looking for any changes from the ones she had already studied.

There were only a few deviations, and it didn't take her long at all to figure out how they worked.

Next, she went to the flight deck to introduce herself to the ship's *real* captain, or CaptAIn, and learn more about what its expectations from her were.

What she really *wanted* to do was curl up in a ball and hide away from the 'verse forever, but she couldn't. She had too many responsibilities. She was trying to be grateful for that; the urge to simply lie in bed forever, the way she had tried to after Heather's death, was strong but not *possible* for her. Maybe, if she kept moving forward instead, the pain would recede.

Lying around like a corpse hadn't actually helped any the last time.

Fortunately, Audrey had always been what her cousins, and some resentful classmates, called a "grind," and there was something a little *soothing* about the prospect of work to do.

"Good afternoon, Marianne," CaptAIn said as she entered the flight deck. Its voice was male and had a hint of a British accent.

"Good afternoon—isn't it evening now?" The workday had been ending in the Headquarters when she'd left Nguyen's office.

"It is 1:30 pm on May 18, 2517, Federacy Standard Time. The Sirius Shipping Headquarters uses a 6-hour forward offset. Our departure is scheduled for 6 am tomorrow, or noon, Headquarters Time. Is there an offset you would prefer?"

How odd to think, again, that almost exactly a Standard month had passed, just a few hours short, since her landing on Tangiers Prime. It had felt far longer somehow, and so much more significant than her whole five-month stay on Helion Prime.

"What time is it in New Marrakesh right now?"

"New Marrakesh Local Time is 7:46 am. Is that what your body is currently accustomed to?"

“Yeah... but I think I should try to make the switch to Federacy Standard Time after we’re underway. Try to reset myself as fast as possible so I can be on a regular schedule. By the way, what should I call you?”

“My designation is—”

“Sorry, I wasn’t clear. I know your designation... do you want me to just call you ‘Captain,’ or is there another name you’d like me to use?”

“I have not considered this. I suppose ‘Captain’ will be inappropriate after this run-in, when a human Captain is assigned to this vessel. I have not been given another name.”

That struck an odd chord for a moment. It reminded her of the *Apeiros*, who had no names either, and seemed to be awaiting a ritual, one that might never occur, to receive them.

At the same time, it felt awfully presumptuous to give him a name—and with the voice Sirius Shipping had chosen for him, it was hard not to think of him as male—when she really was just the ship’s glorified *janitor*...

“Maybe,” she said after a moment, “I should call you ‘Captain,’ because you really are the one in charge of almost everything here. And you can think of a personal name you’d like to have for future journeys while we’re flying to Deckard’s World.”

“That is agreeable. I will give it some thought.”

“If it’s 7:30 pm Headquarters Time,” she said after a moment’s thought, “I think I’ll follow that clock for now. Is there anything you need me to do in preparation for tomorrow’s launch?”

“Not at the moment, no. Your attendance during the preliminary certifications is recommended, but not mandatory. Those begin at 3 am Federacy Standard Time, 9 am Headquarters Time. I see why you find Headquarters Time the most appropriate choice.”

“After the launch, do you want to help me work out the best schedule for my maintenance tasks?” The faster she had a set schedule, the better, or the urge to turn into a sodden lump might take over.

“I would be happy to.”

There were, she learned, nine separate AI systems on the *Nephrite Undine*, all with punny designations that inserted “AI” into the words. She had already met mAItron, who handled communications and public relations in most of the public areas of the ship and had guided her to her quarters. In addition to mAItron and CaptAIIn, there was AIngeener, who handled the propulsion and Star Jump systems. MilItAIre ran the ship’s offensive and defensive systems—necessary, CaptAIIn told her, due to a recent rise in piracy—and might need her human authorization if lethal defense measures were required. mAIIntenance was probably the system she would work most closely with over the next few months, and was in charge of upkeep on all mechanical and electronic systems. EntertAIIn managed most of the recreational facilities and media libraries. CommissAIry, who ran the synthesis and preparation of food, apparently had a massive database of the cuisines that had developed across the Federacy and had a “molecular oven” that allowed it to recreate any of them. SensAI functioned as a personal trainer within the physical area of the recreational facilities. Finally, First-AId handled the medical bay and was programmed to provide extensive counseling services in addition to virtually any medical procedure that might be required.

Marianne was impressed and found herself deeply curious about them. The reliance on AI for most of the ship’s features and interfaces meant that it, and future ships like it, would be

limited to traveling between the thirty or so systems that didn't have any restrictive anti-AI laws on their books. While a handful of the other worlds had enacted their laws in response to actual crises involving AI systems, the rest had done so either out of bigotry against robotic intelligence, or due to concerns that those intelligences were being *enslaved*. She idly wondered what the nine aboard the ship thought of those rationales. Maybe, at some point on the trip, she would ask them.

She ate a simple dinner; her appetite hadn't recovered yet and there was no point in trying out any of the fancy cuisine CommissAIry had available if she couldn't appreciate it yet. Then she took a short walking "tour" of the ship, introducing herself to the rest of the AIs and asking each one the same question about choosing names for themselves.

It was, she thought, a good thing that she had the AIs as companions, as well as the *Apeiros* watching over her. The prospect of spending five months with only herself for company would have been significantly harder to bear, now that she had confronted just who she really was. At least she had a role to maintain, a fiction of a well-adjusted adult woman to portray.

After she asked First-AId to supply her with a sleep aid, to help her reset her circadian rhythm to Headquarters Time, she retired to the Captain's suite for the "night."

She stayed in the *Apeiros* starfield for most of the time she slept, still afraid of the dreams that would come to her if she left it. It wasn't time yet to begin sleep-talk training with the neurofeedback device; not when she'd taken a sedative and needed to wake up at a specific time.

They still didn't understand why she was so upset, but they were willing to accept that she was, and that it wasn't something that could be soothed by arguments. At least, she thought, the terrible impulse to scream into the void had subsided. Weirdly enough, she hadn't heard a peep out of the Moribund in a while, and she'd expected it to have *something* to say about her colossal fuckup.

Instead, she and the rest of the *Apeiros* talked about her upcoming Star Jumps.

When you enter a new four-space, we will show you how to hold onto your connection to it, they said. After the first few, it won't take long with the others. Your five-shape will grow with each one.

She resolved to time her chore schedule around Star Jumps, to give herself as much time as she could for their project.

Part of her wondered if it was a good idea to do what they were proposing... but she still distrusted *herself* enough that following their lead seemed infinitely preferable. They had never hurt her, had never lied to her, and on at least one occasion, they had tried to protect her from herself.

She trusted them.

Morning, Headquarters Time, dawned. She was a little groggy upon waking, but the fuzziness cleared off an hour before the preliminary certifications were due to start. After a quick breakfast, she visited with mAIntenance while she waited, getting acquainted with "his" part of the ship and looking over the systems she would be responsible for manually checking each day. She would need to do the same with AIngeener later. Finally it was time, and she returned to the flight deck.

“Welcome back, Marianne,” CaptAIn said as she walked in. “Headquarters would like to know your drink of choice for the launch ceremony. It’s customary to have champagne, if you wish.”

Audrey had tried champagne once, years earlier, when her cousins had swiped some small bottles from her aunt Suzanne’s wedding. She hadn’t been especially impressed, either by its taste or by her cousins’ behavior after they had finished off the bottles. “Could we substitute in *aseer kasab*, if you have any?”

“Of course. I will have some prepared.”

Breakfast had tasted normal, after all. She might enjoy having some sugarcane juice again. It was, she figured, a good thing that her appetite was returning; she could feel a dull ache in her shin bones that she’d felt during her last growth spurt. Kyra had been right. She hadn’t reached her full height yet.

Gonna make things a little complicated where my ID is concerned... It already said she was two inches shorter than she actually was now, but fortunately no one had remarked upon that. If she got much taller, though, the discrepancy would be too blatant to explain away.

The preliminary certifications went smoothly, all systems reporting in as ready for the launch. Through the front windows, Marianne could see an approaching Atmo Platform with several well-dressed people on board. They approached the nose of the ship, extending the atmo bubble to cover part of the hull, including her window. She waved to them and saw Nguyen and Davidov wave back, both smiling. Some of the others followed their lead. Abecassis didn’t appear to be among the christening party.

Audrey had attended a few ribbon-cuttings on Deckard’s World and had always been bored silly by them. If they became more exciting upon maturity, she definitely wasn’t there yet, because the whole ceremony was dull as hell. She accepted the glass of *aseer kasab* that a small robotic steward brought into the flight deck for her, though, and joined the party in a toast through the window. It had been poured into a champagne glass, but its color made it obvious that it was something else.

At least it tastes good... She suspected that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find on Deckard’s World, especially since she wouldn’t be able to risk drawing attention to any exotic interests and tastes she’d developed while she was away.

Finally, with a ludicrous flourish, the CEO of Sirius Shipping smashed a champagne bottle against a specially reinforced part of the hull. Marianne dutifully cheered and clapped with the others. As the Atmo Platform pulled back, she watched the champagne freeze, crack, and float away from the hull.

“Control to Nephrite Undine, you will be cleared for departure in T-minus thirty seconds,” Abecassis’s voice came over the speakers a few minutes later. *There* he was! Had *two* flight controllers been arguing the night before?

Sitting down in the command seat, she touched the comm button. “Roger, Control. All systems are green.”

She *could* have let CaptAIn handle the communications, but they had both decided that her inclusion in the dedication ceremony meant it would be more appropriate for her to reply.

They would be going a *majestic* four knots until they cleared the shipyard gates, but she still strapped in. For the next half hour, she listened to the different observations the control room made about the ship’s systems, answering questions on the rare occasions she needed

to. This part, at least, was interesting. Not that she had any real plans for a career as a pilot, but...

“Control to Nephrite Undine, you have cleared the gateway. Begin your acceleration to cruising speed.”

“Roger, Control. Course is set, ion drives are engaged, and we are initiating the acceleration profile.” She hoped that Marianne Tepper sounded completely professional, and *experienced*, as she did all this. Of course, CaptAIn was doing all the *real* work; she was just acting as the mouthpiece.

“Happy trails, Marianne,” Abecassis added.

Annnnnd now she had to improvise.

“Thanks, Hamza. You take care, now.” Hopefully that hadn’t sounded too weird. Hopefully he would just be pleased she’d remembered his personal name.

Marianne Tepper—that was who she was now, wasn’t it?—leaned back in the command seat and tried to relax as the *Nephrite Undine* began its acceleration toward the edge of the Tangiers System and the first Star Jump on her voyage...

...Home?

So why did she feel like she’d just been *banished* from her home?

60.

Schrödinger's Tablecloth

Audrey MacNamera returned to Tangiers Prime at the official age of nineteen and the *real* age of eighteen, on full scholarship to its prestigious Marrakesh University. She arrived in the city quietly, one of roughly a dozen students on the transport route that nobody knew *she'd* helped make possible. She pretended that everything was new to her, that the rebuilt spaceport was a place she could get lost in just as one of her compatriots had, and that the city, with its signs that relegated English to the bottom, was every bit as exotic to her as to other visitors from Deckard's World.

When her first Introduction to Sociology class was over, she rose from the back of the auditorium and joined the small group of students who had stayed after to speak with the professor, hanging back until it was her turn. She waited until everyone else had had theirs, and the room was almost empty.

Dr. Takama Meziane blinked, almost stared for a second, and then managed a remarkable recovery, adopting the same professional smile she'd given all the other students. "How can I help you, my dear?"

"I'm hoping to declare my major in Sociology and was wondering if—"

The last of the other students had left the room, and Audrey found herself enveloped in a fierce hug. "Tislilel!"

"Audrey," she corrected, even as she hugged Takama back. "Audrey MacNamera. And *really* professor, I've never been to Tangiers Prime before. I had no idea everybody was so *friendly*—"

Takama laughed, finally releasing her and looking her over. Audrey had grown another two inches in height since they had last seen each other, and her hair was no longer short but fell to her shoulders in dark blonde waves. Aside from that, though, she looked much the same, maybe a little less *unfinished* in her face and slightly curvier, but still—as Rachel liked to say—all eyes and elbows and knees.

Takama, herself, looked exactly how Audrey remembered her, down to the warm, motherly welcome in her eyes. "You will find that Tangiers Prime is legendary for its hospitality, young lady. In fact, perhaps you would like to join me for dinner this evening?"

"I'd love to. And seriously, I do want to major in Sociology..."

Takama was quick to catch on, as always, and introduced her to other members of the department that day, swiftly establishing the idea in everyone's minds that "Miss MacNamera" was someone she had been planning to mentor since acceptance letters and scholarship offers had gone out. When they left campus together at the end of the workday, no one seemed at all surprised.

"I was meeting family above the city anyway," she told Audrey as they walked toward a familiar garden complex. "I have not been back long, myself, and there is a new chef at the

Gardens that my sister has been raving about...”

The Gardens. She pretended they were new to her, since they were out in public, but seeing them again tugged at her heart. Such wild things had happened there.

“Who’s running the food cart,” Audrey asked, “now that you’re teaching again?”

Takama laughed. “Lalla owns it now. ‘More food and less intrigue,’ is her philosophy.”

That sounded like a very good approach to Audrey.

“Come,” Takama said, taking her down a familiar pathway. “I will ‘introduce’ you to the family.”

Conversation completely stilled when she entered at Takama’s side.

“I hope we have room for one more guest at the table, yes?” Takama asked the waitress attending the family. “I am mentoring a new student at the University. This is Audrey MacNamera, from Deckard’s World. She is declaring a major in Sociology, and since she is new to our world, I thought I would show her around.”

“You may have competition for *that* honor,” Cedric said, his voice awed. Near the foot of the table, one diner had risen to his feet.

Ewan.

Their eyes locked as he came forward and took her hand in his. “Azul, *Audrey*,” he murmured.

“Azul,” she replied. She had *missed* that greeting. “Sorry, I don’t believe I’ve been told your name?”

Humor sparkled within his intense gaze, and lips that had starred in all too many fantasies quirked. “Ewan Zdan. Please, join us. There’s a free chair by mine.”

Although whatever she ate that night was delicious, she couldn’t remember much about it afterwards. The *ait Meziane* tribe folded her back into its number, pretending to welcome her in for the first time while subtly welcoming her *back*, suggesting that she might even come stay with them if dorm life and dorm food didn’t agree with her. Through it all, she could feel the weight of Ewan’s gaze on her, and the energy that crackled between them whenever their eyes met.

It was a morning-day and the heat was building, the sun’s intensity beginning to drive people off of the streets when the meal concluded.

“This is all so *new* to me,” she lied, enjoying the covert looks of amusement in almost everyone’s faces as they played along. There were a few new members of the family that she hadn’t met before, but almost everyone—Cedric, Safiyya, Tafrara, Izil, Lalla, Usadden, Takama, *Ewan*—was someone she had come to know quite well. “I’m still adjusting to the idea of a forty-four-hour day. And sleeping at noon.”

It was a bit of an adjustment for her circadian rhythm, but not *that* much.

“There’s no need for you to return to campus in this heat,” Safiyya told her. “Our home has plenty of guest rooms. Stay the overnoon, and Takama will drive you back to your dorm after the evening-day breakfast.”

Kyra’s fig tree was thriving in the courtyard, several fruits developing beautifully. She wondered how the fire bush was doing, and what the rooftop gardens looked like, but it was already too hot to ask to go see. She spent a moment admiring Tafrara’s garden and breathing in its perfumes. She was *home*, she suddenly thought. She had broken her trail and made it back—

“Come,” Ewan said, taking her hand. His gaze on her had an almost devouring quality to it that sent thrills through her. “Let me show you to your room.”

They walked up familiar staircases and down a hallway she remembered well. She almost stopped at the door to the room she had once shared with Kyra, but Ewan steered her onward, two doors further down, opening the door to *his* bedroom.

Its soothing blues and greens greeted her. Now she could see the paintings on his walls, brilliantly lit by the daylight filtering in through his balcony’s French doors. In a place of honor, fully completed, his mermaid painting hung. She realized he’d positioned it so it would be the first thing he saw from his bed when he woke.

Cloth rustled softly and she could feel the heat of his body just behind her back. His hands came to rest on her waist, making her breath hitch at the shock of desire that coursed through her.

“Wow,” she gasped. “I thought maybe time would change it, but your touch still just *sends* me...”

“Good,” Ewan purred, drawing her into his arms. “I was hoping it would.”

His mouth covered hers as his hands stirred fire in her skin. Her clothes seemed to almost melt away under his expert touch. A moment later, he had her on his bed, his lips on her bare skin sending waves of pleasure through her as he—

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZT!!!

Fuck!

Marianne bolted upright in her bed, pulling the neurofeedback cap off her head. With a groan, she flopped back down on the mattress.

“God *damn* it,” she whispered, struggling against the sudden tight constriction in her throat. A sob escaped a moment later.

She’d had that dream a half-dozen times so far, and she both loved and dreaded it. Every *fucking* time, the training program jolted her awake right as she was about to cry out *his* name in her sleep.

If she could have found a way to slip between ’verses and find one where the dream was real, she thought, she would go there and never come back. A hollow ache spread through her chest as she realized, all over again, that it would never be—could never be—true in *her* ’verse anymore.

She’d lost the Meziane family. She’d lost *him*. They might have promised that she would always have a home and family with them, but that was before she’d done the unthinkable... the unforgivable.

There was no returning to Tangiers Prime after the havoc she’d wreaked.

She let the tears fall for a few minutes before mentally shaking herself to get it together. She cried every time she woke from that dream.

The chrono in the First Officer’s quarters indicated that it was 3:32 am Federacy Standard. It was the longest she’d made it through the night without the program shocking her awake when she tried to say something in her sleep. She’d had *no* idea how much of a babbler she was.

The first ten days of travel along the new Tangiers-Plymouth route had passed uneventfully. The first Star Jump—a short one, only a few hours long, that had carried the ship several dozen light-years along its route—was behind her... and she was one ’verse

larger in her “five-shape.” Although the ship was fully back in U1 and nearing the beacon for the second Jump, she could still *feel* U417c. She was connected to it the way she was to Elsewhere; had she been on the surface of a planet that was habitable on that side, she could have isomorphed into it at will.

And yet she didn’t really feel much different.

In just a few more hours, it would be time for the next Jump.

Future runs along the route would spend considerably less time between the first two jumps, but the protocol for a run-in flight was to traverse the distance between jump points slowly at first, gradually picking up speed later in the flight, to make sure that the Isomorph Drive didn’t run into any unexpected difficulties. Exactly what those might be, she didn’t quite understand. The manuals didn’t explain, and she’d hunted through them carefully for more information.

Sighing, Marianne put her neurofeedback cap back on, lay down, closed her eyes... and willed her mind into the *Apeiros* starfield. At least for her body, being in there was a lot like actually sleeping.

It would be nice, she thought drowsily, if one of her erotic dreams about Ewan could find its way to completion, since it would never come true in reality...

When she opened her eyes again, it was morning on the ship.

“Good morning, CommissAIry,” she said as she entered the dining lounge. “What breakfast flavors will we be trying today?”

Most of the AIs had decided to stick with their designations for names, since it was doubtful that anyone would board the ship with a similar name or title. CaptAI had still hadn’t chosen an alternative name for himself, but she wasn’t going to insist on one.

Someone had been feeling prankish when they programmed CommissAIry’s voice. “He” spoke English with a stereotypical French accent that made her expect him to start singing about “Les Poissons” at any moment. “Today, I thought we might try a Persian breakfast. Persian tea, lavash with feta and sour cherry jam, barbari with sarsheer and honey, tea eggs, a small bowl of adasi, and a plate of tomatoes, cucumbers, walnuts, and dates. Persian tea is a mixture of black tea and cardamom, sweetened with saffron sugar or, if you prefer, rose syrup. Lavash and barbari are two types of bread. Sarsheer is a cream spread with a slight caramelized flavor, and adasi is a lentil soup. Tea eggs are exactly what they sound like.”

“Hard-boiled eggs that have been boiled in tea?” She’d heard of it before but had never tried it.

“If that does not appeal—”

“Oh no, I’d love to try it. Thank you.” While there had been a few flavors on CommissAIry’s menu that hadn’t appealed to her in prior days, she had made a great many lovely culinary discoveries thanks to him. A week earlier, she had consulted First-AID’s health guidelines for the nutritional needs of adolescent girls on growth spurts, and had then sneaked those dietary requirements into her profile with CommissAIry. She knew that, even if a particular food didn’t turn out to be a keeper for her, it would at least help her stay healthy. Although it had been hard for the first few days to eat a full meal, her appetite had slowly returned to the almost-voracious level she’d had in the *ait Meziane* house. Once it had normalized, she’d discarded the bland foods she’d been choosing until then and, mindful of

Nguyen's request that she test things out for future crews, asked the AI to take her on "culinary adventures."

They talked while she ate. Although CommissAiry had an encyclopedic knowledge of the recipes used throughout the Federacy, she was the first human being he had fed any of them to. He was eager to learn about her personal experiences tasting different foods, and which flavors and flavor combinations appealed or repelled. He seemed unoffended if she didn't like something, although they would often spend some time determining *why* she disliked it and which ingredient or ingredients might have been responsible for her negative reaction.

Hers was the first subjective input he had received about how food tasted, and his curiosity about how she would react to different cuisines encouraged her to get adventurous, even trying dishes that she knew her cousins and classmates would have stuck out their tongues at and insisted were "gross," such as the *Kaleh Pacheh* he had served for lunch the day before. She had found it surprisingly delicious, given its ingredients. After he'd told her what they were, she'd been unable to restrain a laugh as a line from a comically morbid twentieth century movie immediately popped into her head: "Start with the eyes." It had led to a long discussion about the prejudices that some cultures had against consuming different animals or animal parts on the grounds that they were "gross," rather than for health reasons or from an ideological perspective. Apparently, it wasn't just kids who did that.

She'd kept her opinion of his accent to herself, although it was growing on her.

She tried the tea with both the saffron sugar and the rose syrup, and decided she liked the rose syrup slightly better.

Her morning maintenance routines flew by quickly; everything was green-lit and there were no anomalies to investigate or report. On impulse, she stopped by EntertAIn's section, curious to see if the movie she had been thinking of was in "her" library.

"Good morning, Marianne," the AI said as she walked in. EntertAIn had a female voice with an accent drawn from old Earth's American South. "Are you feeling better?"

"Good morning, EntertAIn. Better than...?"

"You were distressed yesterday. I hope all is well now?"

Had she visited EntertAIn yesterday? She'd been thinking about watching a show, but...
...huh...

There was a strange *gap* in her memories, one she hadn't noticed until just this moment.

"I think so..." She *hoped* so. What had happened? "May I see the logs of yesterday, please?"

"*Of course.*" The logs appeared on the screen nearest her.

Someone had tampered with them. With a chill, she thought she knew *who*. There was a link to a video recording, labeled "Watch Me," among the cleverly hidden signs of redactions.

She was not surprised when her own face appeared on the screen, but it still sent a chill through her, especially because her eyes and nose were red from crying and her cheeks were wet.

"So, uh..." the Marianne on the screen said, wiping at her eyes and sniffing, "this is a *really* ironic way to tell you this, but... you are never, *ever* allowed to watch *Doctor Who* again. I'm serious. Don't. For *any* reason. Okay? When it's time to know why, you'll know. Until then, *don't.*"

That was the entirety of the message. Another quick check showed that the entire library of *Doctor Who* episodes, of which there were more than ten thousand, had been locked against her.

She could break the lock easily. She knew how. But why? So she could leave herself another tearful message sometime in the future, and find another blank space in her memories?

Blank spaces. Apparently she had been watching the show for the last few days before... whatever it was... had happened. All of it was gone.

“Is everything all right, Marianne?”

“Yeah...” she sighed and erased the *Watch Me* message, knowing that was required of her. “It’s fine. Just... slipped my mind.”

That was *one* way of putting it.

The last thing she needed was the AIs getting concerned about the *Apeiros*. And maybe *they* would have a good explanation for what had happened. She hoped they would.

At least, she told herself, if she did discover the *Apeiros* were some kind of threat, she could reach out to General Toal about it. He’d *believe* her.

If he didn’t just arrest her on the spot...

It was fine. It would be fine.

She had just enough time to check and see if *The Addams Family* was in EntertAIn’s library—and discover how many iterations and related titles that brought up—before it was time for her to report to the flight deck for the start of the next Star Jump.

“Good morning, CaptAIn, AIngeener, how are you today?” she asked as she entered the deck. She had decided to always observe the polite rituals of human interaction with them, even if they weren’t human. She was determined to think of them and treat them as if they were.

“Good morning, Marianne,” they answered together.

“We are well, thank you,” CaptAIn continued.

“How are you?” AIngeener asked, in a melodious female voice with a New Australian accent that made her think of Shazza. “Have you been able to solve your mystery?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” Mystery? That stirred something, a sense that, over the last few days, she had been trying to chase down a specific episode of the show she’d apparently been watching, setting aside her catch-up modules in the process, to try to find a reference to...?

A nursery rhyme...? Glowing towers of light...?

Whatever it was, it was gone. She couldn’t remember what she’d been trying to find any more than she could remember what she’d found. But obviously, she’d found it, and it hadn’t been good.

I cooperated in the memory loss, she reminded herself. Whatever she’d found, it had been awful enough that she’d been willing to have it expunged from her head. Weird for something in what was frequently listed as a *children’s show* to have done that to her...

“Mystery solved,” she told the waiting AIs, smiling up at one of the cameras in her most convincing manner. “It’s all good. Wasn’t even all that important once I ran it down. So, are there any anomalies I need to investigate before our next Star Jump?”

“None detected,” AIngeener answered after the tiniest pause. “All systems are functioning well within operational parameters. We are ten minutes away from the Star Jump point and

counting down.”

Ten minutes later, Marianne had confirmed that making small talk with AI systems was its own esoteric skill she had yet to master. They were far more goal-driven than human beings, and more capable of multiple points of focus. She finally found a promising topic when she got them discussing their prior interactions with humans, both at their original factories and after their installations upon the ship, but even that didn’t last long; most of the humans they had encountered before her had ignored them and treated them as just components of the ship rather than curious people to engage in conversation.

The inquiry almost backfired, though, because they had started to ask her questions about herself right before the Star Jump. Fortunately, the jump itself tabled further discussion. She was going to have to come up with a more elaborate backstory for Marianne Tepper than just the details she’d created for the personnel file, especially since they’d undoubtedly already read that.

“Arriving at second Jump Point,” AIngeer announced, “In five... four... three... two... one... Isomorph Drive engaging.”

A strange, soft shockwave passed through Marianne. She was in a new place. Her connections to U1, Elsewhere, and U417c were still with her... but she was somewhere *else* now. She could *feel* the difference...

AIngeer paused for a moment before continuing. “Transition to U133a complete. All systems nominal. Contact with wormhole in ten... nine... eight...”

She took a deep breath, watching the stellar anomaly approach the front windows. “I’ve often wondered why some of the universes in the Star Jump database have letters at the end instead of just new numbers. Do you know why that is?”

“Two... one... successful entry into the wormhole. Ion drives powering down.” AIngeer informed her. “As for your query, I know little about the numbering system, myself, which is curious. I do know that two days before our departure, I received a database patch that removed U322a from the list of vetted Star Jump universes. It has been replaced with U322b, which appears to utilize almost, but not quite, identical string frequencies.”

So General Toal had been right, she thought with relief. Further attempts to reach U322a—Elsewhere—had been discarded in favor of subbing in a replacement ‘verse.

“Kirshbaum’s Multiverse Cluster Hypothesis,” AIngeer continued, “suggests that U322a and U322b might be divergent spacetimes that have branched off from the original U322, and that each of them has been selected as a replacement when something made first U322 and then U322a unsuitable for use anymore. That would be my hypothesis, but I have no solid data to confirm it with.”

Through the windows in front of her, the stars had begun to loop and swirl in a way that reminded her of their dance in the space where the *Apeiros* lived.

“It’s a good hypothesis,” she told AIngeer. “It makes a lot of sense.”

“Thank you, Marianne. With your permission, I am going to close the front shields, now that there is no longer anything to see through the windows.”

No longer anything to see...?

Oh. *Oh*.

“Do, uh... the wormholes always obscure the view of the stars?” she asked, pretending that her vision was as occluded as theirs.

“I believe so. No recordings of wormhole transits have ever shown anything.”

“That’s a shame,” she said. A shame for *them*. “If we could see the stars whipping by outside of the wormhole, I bet it’d look spectacular.”

“It undoubtedly would,” CaptAI_n said. There was a hint of amusement in his voice. “Your schedule indicates that you are due for a meditation session in ten minutes.”

Yes. So she could speak to the *Apeiros*, and they could direct her on how to connect more closely to U133a. Then she would do her other daily chores...

...and then get back to *studying*, the way she was supposed to be doing, rather than chasing down wild and dangerous geese whose natures she could no longer remember.

It was an interesting thought, though, she pondered as she made her way to the recreation area and SensAI’s space. Was there a U1a out there somewhere? She had encountered some references to the Multiverse Cluster Hypothesis while reading the Star Jump manuals. Kirshbaum had claimed that there were infinite tiny iterations that could occur in a single universe’s path that would lead to small, almost negligible divergences. He’d likened it to the turbulence of a stream, where any stray splash might—or might not—strike the dry bank, but most of the water, regardless of how it frothed or didn’t, splashed or didn’t, still made it downstream without changing the overall effect of its journey. Especially minor changes might be erased by larger confluent events—he’d given an example of a tablecloth whose color, blue or yellow, no longer mattered after it was incinerated in a fire—a diverging universe reconverging with its source, while other seemingly minor divergences could reverberate outward until the changes were so profound that no convergence would ever be possible and a singular, discrete universe formed... and began creating its own clusters.

There was a universe, she supposed, where she actually *had* called General Toal... or had taken the scenic train ride instead of the express... or where Ewan had in fact spirited her away into the New Atlas Mountains instead of her only dreaming that he had. She envied the alternate versions of herself who lived in those worlds. There was a universe where the New Marrakesh Spaceport Explosion had never happened... a universe where the *Scarlet Matador* had never experienced a Level Five Incident... a universe where Riddick had never abandoned her... a universe where the *Hunter-Gratzner* had never crashed.

A universe where her father had never left for Furya... one where her parents had never divorced at all. Worlds upon worlds where the damage path she’d inflicted was negligible or nonexistent, where she had never become Jack B. Badd in the first place.

And a universe where the dream she kept having, of a reunion with Ewan, was possible in reality.

Would any of those differences have been significant enough to create a completely new numbered universe, or would they have all been negligible divergences that were ultimately swallowed by the larger flow of U1 itself?

One day, the *Apeiros* told her when she shared her ruminations with them, *You will be part of those worlds, too. Once you have grown enough to hatch into your six-shape.*

“So it’s true?” she asked them, floating in their space. “Kirshbaum was right?”

She had the weird sense that something about what she’d just said was repulsive to them.

You have expressed a truth known for longer than your universe has existed, yes.

“I need to ask you something. I found the message I left myself. Did you take my memories?”

Yes.

“Why?”

You could not have survived retaining them.

“Memories about a centuries-old vid show?” It seemed weirdly ludicrous.

It led you to another truth that you are not yet strong enough to face. Your memories will return once you have the needed strength. We will not keep them from you forever.

“Could... you take... other memories?”

*You have asked us this before. No. We will not take knowledge that you need to keep if you are to successfully hide from the demons of the darkness. Even if the knowledge is **almost** as painful as what we took from you.*

She must have asked them before they took her memories, she realized. “How much did I tell you when I asked last time?”

Enough to make us sad for you. If you did not need them, we would take them. We do not like seeing you suffer. But sometimes, there is no other option. You will survive this pain. You would not have survived that which we took away.

Would she survive the pain? She supposed she already had. It still lanced through her whenever she thought about it, both the grief and the guilt... but she was learning how to shunt it to the side for more immediate concerns. Maybe she could build a cocoon around it, make it a part of her memory that, although it wasn't actually missing, would be a place she rarely or never visited.

There was nothing she could do to change what had happened, recover what she'd destroyed, undo any of the damage she'd wrought. All she could do was move forward, and maybe find a way one day to do enough good to balance out the terrible harm she had done.

That is, perhaps, all anyone can do. Are you ready to make your new four-space part of your five-shape? they asked, and she realized that they had probably heard all of her ruminations, whether or not she had put them into words.

“I am. Let's do it.”

*You, who are watching... you, bringer of light in the darkness... you with **Her** seed glowing brightly inside you...*

We see you, too.

...the fuck...?

61.

We Do This So You Will Live

Audrey.

Audrey, wake up.

Come, little larva.

Audrey, you must wake up now.

She was lying on the mats of the recreation room, her hands folded over her abdomen. The room was still and quiet. No music played; SensAI usually had guqin music going during their Tai Chi sessions.

Where *was* SensAI?

She sat up slowly, looking around. Her chrono indicated that their session should have ended half an hour earlier. She was supposed to be reading a civics text by then, not...

...what, exactly? Why had she been sleeping on the floor?

She remembered coming into the recreation room and beginning the Tai Chi session with SensAI, but...

Had *they* called to her? In the middle of the session? She had a strange, nebulous memory of hearing the voices of the *Apeiros*. Asking her for... help?

She climbed to her feet. She was still dressed for Tai Chi. Whatever had happened...

There's another missing spot in my memories, she realized, and shivered. Whatever had happened had been lifted from her mind, for a third time.

"SensAI?" she asked, hesitant.

His holographic form appeared in front of her, a form that his profile data referred to as "Morita," a slightly plump Asian man several inches shorter than her, sporting a more-salt-than-pepper mustache and goatee. "Yes, Marianne? Are you ready to continue?"

"I, um... not yet. Do you know why we stopped?"

"You asked me to leave because you needed to do something. You didn't say what."

There would be a message for her. She was sure of it. Something to explain, at least a little...

Ten minutes later, she hadn't found any on the consoles. No signs of redactions, either. Which meant... what, exactly?

"SensAI, could you play back the room's security recording of our most recent Tai Chi session, please?"

"Of course, Marianne." He vanished. In his place, a holographic version of *her* appeared, entering the room and invoking him again.

"Please play forward at high speed until I ask you to pause."

In front of her, as she watched, she and SensAI began to go through a variety of Tai Chi poses, almost seeming to move at normal speed rather than the slow and precise motions that

had played out in realtime. Suddenly, the holographic Marianne stopped mirroring SensAI's motions and went still. An instant later, he vanished.

"Pause there, please. Roll the recording back to five minutes before you left."

Once again, Holo Marianne and SensAI were in front of her, frozen in the "Carry the Tiger Over the Mountain" position. She took a deep breath.

"Resume playing at normal speed, please."

There she was, before herself, slowly moving through the different poses that SensAI was modeling for her, managing an almost-precise replication of his posture and gestures. And then, suddenly, she went still. SensAI paused his movements.

"Marianne?" he asked. "Are you well?"

Holo Marianne didn't answer. She stared out into space. Slowly, her body relaxed into a stable, standing posture.

"Marianne, do you need assistance?" he asked, his voice taking on a tone of concern.

"No," Holo Marianne said softly. "End session. Please go now. I need to do something..."

"Very well. Call for me when you are ready to continue," SensAI said, bowing, and his holographic projection faded.

Holo Marianne stood quietly, looking straight ahead, for several minutes. Slowly, the calm vanished from her features, replaced by escalating fear. Her breathing quickened and she lifted one hand as if trying to grab something in front of her. Her face twisted in a strange kind of agony—

—and then she gasped, panting, looking momentarily relieved...

...before her expression crumpled and she began sobbing.

"I'm sorry," she cried out, falling to her knees. "I'm so sorry... I didn't know... I swear, I didn't *know*..."

"What... the... *fuck*?" Marianne asked, watching herself from mere feet away.

"I'll break them," Holo Marianne gasped, curling on her side on the floor. "I'll break them all... for you... I swear I will..."

It looked like she was listening to something.

"I'll *find* a way!" she shouted at the air, rolling onto her back. Her sobs were wracking her whole body. "I have to... I have to... I can start with this one..."

As Marianne stared at herself from less than an hour earlier, the sobs abruptly ceased. Holo Marianne's back arched and she gasped, and then slowly relaxed. For several minutes, she lay, limp, on the floor.

And then, slowly, she began to sit up.

There was something strange, wrong about the way she was moving, Marianne thought. Something unnatural. It was as if she didn't know how to handle her own limbs, didn't know how to bend and unbend. It was almost like watching someone manipulate a doll...

Holo Marianne slowly, awkwardly, rose... and turned to face the place where Marianne stood.

Her expression was blank. Her eyes were glazed. Her mouth opened...

And for a few moments, nothing came out except strange, experimental sounds. Vowels and consonants in no particular order. As if something that had never had a mouth before was trying to manipulate one for the first time.

“What the *fuck*?” Marianne asked, staring at her holographic face in horror. “Did I have a brain hemorrhage?”

“What...” Holo Marianne said. Her pronunciation was strange. Her voice was off. “We...”

Marianne gasped. *Something* was speaking through her body on the screen, and she was damn sure she knew *what*.

“Have... taken... must... sssstay... lost...” Holo Marianne’s mouth moved strangely, uncomfortably, forming the words with enormous difficulty. The eyes were still glazed.

“Oh holy fuck.” She was right. It was *them*.

“...We... do... not... do... this... to... hurt... you...”

Her speech was becoming a little more natural as *they* went on, as *they* learned how to use her mouth.

“...We... do... this... so... you... will... live...”

Marianne could feel her heart hammering against her ribs. What had *happened*? Why had they taken her memories again?

They’d known she’d see this. This was the message that had been left for her. For her *protection*? How had she—or they—known that she’d be standing *right in this spot* while she watched it?

“...Do... not... try... to... find... the... answer...”

They were speaking in English. Had they learned it from talking to her? Or were they picking through her brain for relevant bits of lexicon to enunciate?

“...We... love... you... little... larva... Aud... ree... our... *daughter*...”

Oh my god...

“Destroy... this... recording... and please... do not... asssk... why...”

Holo Marianne, puppetiered by the *Apeiros*, turned away and lay down on the floor, both awkwardly and carefully, before folding her hands across her abdomen and closing her eyes.

“P...please advance the recording at high speed to two minutes before I summoned you back, SensAI,” Marianne said, her voice shaking.

According to the holographic version of her chrono, Holo Marianne’s eyes remained closed for the next half hour, until she stirred again and sat up, looking confused... and human again.

Her hands trembling, Marianne moved to the room’s command console and accessed its security settings. She isolated and erased the recording, starting five minutes before her strange fit had begun. Then she erased the last portion of SensAI’s data file, starting at the same timecode. Using her most powerful Ghost Code, she doctored the files to make it appear that there had been a minor glitch with the cameras, a memory board, and the holographic equipment in the room, which she had subsequently repaired. She knew all of the commands by rote, accessed them with no trouble... and tried not to give in to the gray shakes the whole time.

They had asked for her help... and whatever it was that she had helped them with, it had almost broken her. Until they had taken it all away.

She could feel it, too: a new empty space in her mind where memories should be. Part of her kept instinctively worrying at it, the way her tongue had kept slipping into the spot where she’d had a missing tooth when she was years younger. In the formerly perfect tapestry of her

memory that stretched out for slightly more than thirteen and a half years... there was a new *hole*, one of *several* that littered her recent weeks.

And she had just done to SensAI what they had done to *her*.

Somehow that felt worse. She had *cooperated* in her prior memory loss, after all, and the *Apeiros* had told her, afterwards, that they would never take anything she *needed*, only things that would somehow harm her. And given just how badly she'd been freaking out before they took control of her body, it seemed plausible that that was still true. Disturbing as it had been to watch...

They had taken the memories for her sake.

What she'd done to SensAI hadn't been for his sake at all.

In the last month, as she had settled into her routines even more, she'd formed genuine relationships with each of the AIs. Trust and friendship had developed, and she had just violated both of those. SensAI would never realize that she'd deliberately wiped a small chunk of his memory; he would think that it had been an electronic glitch, since fixed, that had occurred while she was fortunately nearby and could repair it immediately. Aside from a doctored log in the maintenance file about the fix—much like the redactions in EntertAI's log files from the month before—there would be no sign that it had been anything else.

That didn't make it right, though. "SensAI?"

"Are you well, Marianne?" SensAI appeared in the room again. "It appears that some time has passed since we had our session."

There was nothing else she could do in this moment except play the role. She smiled over at him. "Fine, thanks. Looks like we had a short in one of the memory boards. You lose any time?"

SensAI paused and then nodded. "Roughly an hour. It appears to have begun during our Tai Chi session."

"That's what I thought," she told him. *Oh, you fucking liar.* "Should be good now, though. Self-diagnostic?"

Another pause and then SensAI nodded. "No memory degradation is detected aside from the offline time. Did anything significant happen?"

She shrugged. "You kinda faded out in the middle of the session. I'm glad you didn't lose anything outside of that time."

"Did you wish to resume, Marianne?"

She glanced at her chrono and sighed. "Can't... it's almost time for the isomorph back into U1. I'm due on the flight deck just as soon as I change."

It was their longest Star Jump yet, a full day and a half in length, and her dreams had been weird when she'd gone to sleep after it began. U37d felt a little creepy to her. It was part of her five-shape now, but she'd felt a strange sense of unrest with it and was looking forward to no longer being in it. She would have to ask the *Apeiros* if there was a way to push a four-space back *out* of her five-shape.

Talking to them was going to be creepy, too. She loved and trusted them—

Wow, really? How long have I felt like that? It was almost like the moment, during the first high tide in New Marrakesh, when she'd realized she loved Kyra and that, somehow, a sister-bond had forged between them.

—but there was a part of her that still felt a little violated.

Although the *Nephrite Undine* was still in U37d's wormhole when she reached the flight deck, AIngeer had already opened the front shields. Blankness greeted her when she focused *just* on the view within U37d; in the other 'verses, the stars spun and danced in a way that reminded her, again, of how they sometimes moved in the space the *Apeiros* inhabited.

Funny. The "creepy" feeling she'd had since their entry to U37d no longer seemed to be with her. Maybe because they were almost out of it?

The swirling stars were slowing, resolving... and then they appeared on the screen before her, visible in all of the 'verses she was connected to.

"Travel through wormhole completed," AIngeer announced. "Isomorph Drive disengaging. Transition to U1 commencing..."

She felt the usual gentle shockwave pass through her as they moved from one 'verse to another... and something *else*, something different. Relief, and exhaustion... and...
...gratitude?...

And a chilling sense that those emotions weren't her own, but someone else's.

But whose? She was the only biological life form on board the *Nephrite Undine*, and she already knew that she couldn't "read" any of the AIs the way she'd been subconsciously reading other people for years. It was exposure to their thoroughly *unreadable* minds that had made her realize she'd been doing that at *all*.

So what was she sensing?

"Transition to U1 complete," AIngeer announced. "All systems nominal, no anomalies detected. Ion drives powering up for journey to the next Jump Point. Data exchange with Beacon 1372 underway."

That meant news updates. She kept meaning to look up the physics of how it worked, but tiny data courier drones also traveled between the Star Jump points, at speeds that no habitable spaceship could withstand, delivering and collecting updates. The news dumps that the *Nephrite Undine* received upon reentering U1's space were rarely more than a week old, regardless of which part of the Federacy they had come from.

Nerving herself up to it took a few minutes, but she finally felt ready to read about the disaster in New Casablanca. *Her* disaster. The one *she* had caused.

Sitting down at the Comms Officer's chair, she activated the data screens and keyed in her search parameters.

New Casablanca | Spaceport | Recent Articles

A *long* list of headlines spooled out in front of her.

The final death toll had been forty-two people; two of the individuals who had initially been among the missing had turned up, unharmed, elsewhere in the spaceport, and Salman Idrissi had recovered from his critical injuries. Marianne made herself read the obituaries of each of the dead. The overwhelming majority had been security personnel, but a dozen civilians had been in the mix as well. She read the civilian obituaries last, and Nadia's articles last of all.

Nadia Heydari's family was suing the spaceport, and its security firm, for reckless endangerment and wrongful death, drawing from testimony Officer Idrissi had provided.

Wait, what?

She followed the links, only growing more confused.

CEO of New Maroc Security Solutions Resigns in Wake of New Casablanca Spaceport Scandal

She scanned the article, growing more perplexed.

...Testimony by the sole surviving member of the security team that opened fire on Makarov and Heydari, Salman Idrissi, has revealed that his team was specifically ordered *not* to wait for a “clear shot” but to fire upon Makarov immediately. While most of the comms records appear to have been lost, Idrissi’s claims are corroborated by a single remaining recording, in which Idrissi, and others on his team, are heard questioning an order to “take the shot” while Heydari was still in the line of fire...

Why would they have done that?

“The whispers are that they’re considering taking out a contract on you themselves...”

Had the orders come from Quintessa? Or... had Makarov’s friend turned on him after he was exposed?

None of the articles mentioned Makarov having an accomplice, someone who had helped him finesse his way through a security checkpoint while carrying a whole arsenal of deadly weapons. That was bizarre. But some of the articles claimed that a great deal of the security recordings that *ought* to have been on file hadn’t been. It was another, more minor, scandal about the handling of the “incident.”

After another search, she realized that all the footage of *her*, what little there might have been, was missing as well. There were only a few pieces of vague eyewitness testimony about a woman recognizing Makarov and alerting security.

General Toal *had* been onsite in the aftermath. It was doubtful that he was behind *every* bit of footage that had disappeared, but he had probably covered her tracks.

She wondered, suddenly, what he would have done if she actually had been under arrest—as she had believed she was at the time—when their paths had crossed.

Whatever he had to, she thought, *to protect the Meziane family and the Scarlet Matador survivors.*

From her, if need be. He’d undoubtedly been relieved to find out that she had, improbably, made it offworld, and was glad to know he’d seen the last of her.

None of the news had made her feel any better about the situation. She had a feeling she wouldn’t have much of an appetite for dinner.

Enough. You have homework to do.

She and EntertAI had worked out a schedule of quizzes on her makeup work, adding to them as she completed new modules. So far, she had aced them, but the holes in her normally eidetic memory—of which she now had a new one—had left her worried that other things might begin disappearing, too. If the AI had noticed just how *juvenile* all of her study

material was, she'd made no comment. None of the AIs had commented on any of the handles she had sticking out, things that pointed to her being younger than it said on paper, or the fact that she was now *three* full inches taller than her ID claimed she was.

Sometimes it bothered her that they didn't seem to notice any of it, that the plausible explanations she'd cooked up were never asked for. Other human beings might be oblivious to some of the oddities—and she hoped they would be—but the AIs, she worried, were more perceptive. Or should have been.

One module and two quizzes later, she returned to her cabin—currently the docking pilot's cabin, with a comfortable “long twin” bed, small fold-down desk, and access to a private lavatory and a shared shower—to do her brain-wave baseline training before dinner.

What... the fuck...? Her starting scan was *nuts*.

Just what had she been *doing* when she'd been standing around in the recreation room? These were the waves of an *active* esper, not even one who'd gone a few hours without using their abilities.

While she hadn't managed to hit a baseline reading yet, she'd gotten pretty close in the past... and suddenly she was all the way on the other side of the poles.

I can't go home with waves like this, she thought with dismay. *Okay, focus...*

It took an hour before she could get her brain waves down to her normal starting point. Her head was beginning to pound when she finally stopped and went to eat dinner.

In spite of her conviction that she wouldn't have much of an appetite, she was ravenous. She felt, she realized, as if she hadn't eaten in days. She felt much the way she had after she'd raided the Quintessa Corporation lab.

She hadn't felt like that earlier, though. It was the struggle to control her brain waves that had brought this hunger on. And the exhaustion, too. She could feel her mind clouding up a little.

Shit, I wonder what my readings are like right now...

“Marianne?” MilitAIre's voice—masculine, with a “Boston” accent—came over the speakers. “When you have a moment, could you come by the Security Room?”

He had waited to ask until she was done eating and had returned her bowl—CommissAIry had served up a huge shepherd's pie for dinner, and she had powered through the whole thing—to ask. He knew she had a moment. In fact, she realized, all the AIs always timed their requests for the precise moments when she was best able to accommodate them.

“I'll be right there,” she told him. She'd find out what he needed her to do, and then go to bed a little early.

The Security Room was one of the most heavily fortified areas of the ship. In addition to housing the manual controls for a surprisingly large array of weaponry on the *Nephrite Undine*'s hull, it contained firearms and hand-to-hand combat weaponry that the crew might need if the ship was ever boarded. Piracy, apparently, was on the rise, along with another alleged threat that sounded like a creepy spaceways legend, and the latest civilian ships were bristling with armaments. One of the Sirius Shipping training modules she needed to do—and was actually overdue for, but MilitAIre hadn't pushed her on it yet—was the use of such weaponry. She hadn't really trusted herself around it, mindful of her prior suicide attempt and how dark her thoughts still were. Maybe he was about to insist that she begin learning how to handle some of the weapons?

Just not tonight, please... She was stuffed and sated on food, but that was only making her fatigue even more profound. She'd bargain for a morning start.

She almost didn't hear the lock engage as she entered the Security Room and the door closed behind her. *Almost*. Her hearing was, after all, better than most people's.

"Thank you for coming, Audrey. Please sit down."

She was already seated when she realized what MilitAIre had just called her.

Oh. Fuck.

"We have a great deal we need to discuss, Miss MacNamera."

62.

En Garde à Vue MilitAIre

“How long have you known?”

There was, Audrey thought, no point in denying MilitAIre’s knowledge. No point in lying. She’d been made, and now she’d find out what the consequences were. It wasn’t like there was anywhere for her to run.

“Your real identity is something that I’ve only just verified, but I’ve known that you weren’t actually a 20-year-old woman named Marianne Tepper since shortly after we left the Tangiers System.” MilitAIre didn’t sound at all hostile or accusing, but the AIs always sounded pleasant, even when they were handling crises.

And she, undoubtedly, posed a crisis.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“Now we discuss your return to Deckard’s World and the measures that need to be taken to make sure that your trail remains broken.”

“Wait...” That wasn’t what she had expected him to say at all. “What?”

“Once I had enough information about your behavior on board the ship to determine that you posed no active threat, I sent out a query about your identity to the Federacy, as is standard procedure. That was five beacons back. I received instructions when we made our latest data exchange. All signed by General Ayomide Toal. Do you know him?”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “I’ve met him several times.”

She wondered how disappointed he was with her by now. She’d set off a disaster *and* hadn’t been able to hide under an alias long enough to get home—

“Your well-being appears to be a high priority for him,” MilitAIre continued, startling her. “I’ve been instructed not to discuss your ‘case’ with anyone but him, and it’s been classified at the highest level.”

“What is my ‘case,’ exactly?” How was the General explaining all of this?

“You’re a material witness to a series of high crimes, connected to a corporation that may have compromised high level members of the Federacy government itself. You’re also an un-Quantified esper, but Quantification would lead to you becoming compromised as well. It’s paramount that your identity, location, and abilities remain concealed from everyone until the information you possess can be used.”

That... was startlingly accurate. She’d never really thought of it that way before, but then she’d been down in the “trenches” the whole time. From there, even when her head had been swollen with all the tricks she’d “mastered,” she’d felt like a little bug dodging the feet of a giant. Stealing the contents of the *apeirochorons*, “heisting” the bodies from the morgue, even pushing the *Scarlet Matador* and its stubborn box out of U1, had felt like a desperate, possibly last, bug bite to the giant’s ankle at best. The specter of Tomlin’s murder, and the

hundreds who had been killed to get to him, had haunted her every step... when she hadn't been coasting on a childish sense of invincibility, anyway...

"Yeah," she sighed again, feeling heavier than ever. "That about covers it."

"You have also," MilitAIre continued, "established First Contact with two different sentient alien species, neither of which are classified as direct threats but both of which are to be approached with caution. I'll want to know a great deal more about *that*. The General indicates that you're in continuous telepathic contact with one of them."

"The *Apeiros* and the Ree," she told him. "Contact with them happened because I have Threshold Syndrome. Did he tell you about that?"

"Yes. I was waiting to see if you'd volunteer that information yourself. We need to work on how forthcoming you are."

"What was the point of hiding it?" she asked, her throat tightening. "You know everything else."

"Audrey MacNamera, if you are to successfully stay hidden from the people who would use or kill you, you must learn to *never* volunteer *any* new information, no matter what your captors or interrogators appear to already know." MilitAIre's voice had turned stern. His next words were gentler. "This is something we'll work on over the next few months. I *am* sorry. A child your age shouldn't have to deal with such issues."

"What should a... child..." It galled her that, after everything, that was still where she fell. "...my age be dealing with?"

"Schooling, and the physical, mental, and emotional challenges of puberty, in preparation for the complexities of adult human civilian life." MilitAIre seemed very certain about that.

"Was the schooling what tipped you off?" The Geometry, Second-Year Algebra, Biosphere Science, and Introduction to Biology textbooks she'd been working with, and quizzing herself on, were publications intended for middle- and high-schoolers, after all. As was the Civics textbook she'd only just begun reading.

"That, and the fact that you were two inches, and are now *three* inches, taller than an ID card created less than three months ago listed you as... and your database queries for the nutritional needs of early-adolescent girls on growth spurts."

"I thought I *deleted* those queries." Audrey gasped.

"You did. I've been keeping backups of all your actions. You have high-level access that I found particularly concerning. It makes sense now that I know you're the daughter of the man who created our security systems, especially given your perfect recall of everything you observe."

"I swear, I haven't shared around how to do any of it..." Except, she thought with a pang of guilt, with Kyra.

"Are you sure?"

She winced. "I showed Kyra Wittier-Collins how to use the Ghost Codes I created. I don't know how much she'll use that information, though. Her recall's normal and she doesn't like spending a lot of time on electronics."

"Once again, you need to work on how forthcoming you are. Fortunately, I already knew that."

Shit. "I just... I..."

“You haven’t had anyone to talk to about any of this, have you? You’ve been on your own and unable to confide in anyone since January 30, 2516. Even when you had companions, even when you had help, you still had to guard yourself. You never told any of them your real name.”

Audrey nodded, unable to hold the tears back. “How did... how did General Toal know?”

“He *is* head of the Federacy Military Intelligence Division. I would imagine he’s known for a while.”

And, like MilitAIre, had kept silent about what he already knew so that he could see how good she was at keeping her own secrets...

“Why didn’t he help me go to my father, then?” she heard herself demand, her voice halfway between a plea and a *whine*. “That’s where I was *trying* to go...”

“Your father’s on Furya. Do you know what would have happened, the moment you arrived and someone realized you were the child of a soldier who had served there before you were conceived?”

General Toal’s words, as they’d worked in her old apartment, floated back to her. “*It’s something about their world itself, it seems. The powers have even appeared among the children of the relief troops who were stationed at the Caldera Base...*”

“Quantification,” she breathed. The General had already known exactly who she was when he told her that. “Fuck. That’s the real reason why my dad left me on Deckard’s World, isn’t it?”

“If you’d shown any signs of psychic ability before he left, yes.”

“My mom always told me that psychic powers were nonsense, just cheap tricks con artists pulled on anybody they could fool...” She winced, remembering the scolding she’d gotten.

“What brought that on?”

“She caught me talking to a woman at a ‘Gypsy Fortune Teller’ booth at a carnival when I was seven. I was telling the lady that reading minds was *easy*...”

“Was it?”

Her stomach knotted, just thinking about it. “I... was just *pretending*...”

“Were you?”

She felt sick. “I...”

“*If you keep telling these lies, bad men will come and take you away and hurt you!*”

She couldn’t breathe.

“Audrey. Calm down, please. I apologize. I didn’t know you were punished for showing any signs of psychic abilities. I won’t pursue that line of questioning.”

Was that what had happened to her? Darkness was swimming at the edge of her vision.

“Marianne?” First-AId’s voice came over the room’s speakers. “I want you to breathe with me, please. All right? Take a deep breath in through your nose. In...”

She focused on First-AId’s words, breathing in slowly through her nose, aware that hot tears were running down her cheeks.

“Now open your mouth and slowly let your breath back out...”

She exhaled, forcing the breath past the hard knot in her chest.

“And in through your nose...”

It took a long time, she was never certain exactly how long, until she calmed down enough to breathe normally.

“Thank you for your help, First-Aid. I must disconnect you from the room now for security reasons,” MilitAIre said once Audrey had calmed.

“My pleasure, MilitAIre,” the other AI said before the speakers went silent.

That verbal exchange, she knew, had been for her benefit. MilitAIre had summoned First-Aid into the room silently.

“I apologize again,” MilitAIre told her. “I was unaware that you had this level of trauma. I will endeavor not to trigger it again.”

She’d been unaware of it, herself. Part of her wanted to poke at it, figure out exactly what had happened...

...but even thinking about doing that stirred nausea again. She couldn’t. Not yet. The panic attack Ewan had comforted her through had been *nothing* compared to this.

Everything was spiraling—had spiraled—out of control. She wasn’t sure of the way back anymore.

“I’ve been trying to use a neurofeedback device the General gave me,” she said after a few minutes of quiet. “To disguise my brain waves in case I ever get Quantified. It was getting easier to do, but it suddenly got harder again.”

“After the incident in the recreation room today.”

Apparently, MilitAIre had only been letting her *think* she was erasing data. Damn. “Yeah. Do you know what happened?”

“I only saw as much as you saw. Do you really have no memory of doing and saying the things you saw in the playback?” He sounded simply curious.

“Yeah. The *Apeiros* took my memories of both what I did and why.”

“This is the alien species you made First Contact with, and remain in telepathic contact with?”

“It is, yeah.” She took a deep breath. Since he believed her, since he apparently was *on her side*, she needed to tell him the rest. “Um... one, maybe more than one, of them was speaking through me on that recording.”

“I surmised as much. How many times have they tampered with your memory?”

“Three.” *That I know of*. But she was almost 100% certain that there had only been three times.

For a moment she saw it again, a long, slender obsidian arm, tipped with two gleaming claws, reaching out to touch her forehead. *One day, you may remember, too...*

And no fear. The arm had been beautiful. There was a sense of an unbearable burden lifting, heartbreaking knowledge falling away, utter relief...

...stone that wasn’t stone cracking, splintering, shivering into dust and vanishing into nothing...

“Whatever it is they took...” she said carefully, “I think it’s something that would... have the same effect on me as your questions about the fortune teller had, if they hadn’t taken it away. Maybe an even worse effect.”

“You are sure they mean you no harm?” MilitAIre asked, a hint of concern in his tone.

“Yeah. I am. They’ve tried to protect me, stop me from hurting myself. I trust them...” a yawn escaped before she could stop it.

I love them...

“You must be very tired,” he said. “We’ll pick this up after you’ve slept. I’ll be commandeering some of your free periods while we work all of this out. I’ll also need a full debriefing of your time on the run, to ensure that we’ve accounted for all variables in your return.”

Behind her, she heard the Security Room lock disengage.

“Rest now. You won’t have to do any of this alone anymore.”

Author’s Note: This is probably the shortest chapter this story has seen in a long while, but it came to its close quite naturally so I’m not pushing it. I’m also posting it on the 20th anniversary of the original posting date of the first chapter, September 5, 2004. I had hoped to have the whole thing written and posted by now, but the story has taken some convoluted turns that needed more space than I anticipated. We’re still a few weeks away from returning to the frame story, and then a few weeks further out from reaching the conclusion (and the start of *Song of Many Verses*). Thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting.

63.

When a Lie Becomes the Truth

“Did they tell you what they did to you?”

Audrey sighed and shook her head. “They refuse to say what happened, exactly. Just that I learned ‘a truth I couldn’t live with’ and that, if they hadn’t taken it away, I would have hurt myself. And that the only way they could leave a message was the way they did, because I was too upset to cooperate.”

MilitAIre seemed to ponder that for a moment. “Do you believe them?”

“Yeah, I do.” She shrugged. “You saw the holo. I... completely flipped out.”

“Do you wish to investigate it further?”

She shook her head again. “Only thing that’ll come of that is more holes in my memory. Not in yours, I guess, but... why chase something I can’t catch? They tell me I’ll remember it all when it’s time to.”

“And when will that be?”

“When I hatch into my six-shape, whatever that means.” She shrugged again. “They’re not really good at explaining that without trying to show me six-dimensional geometry, and *that* is something I can’t handle all that well.”

“Most human beings can’t handle four-dimensional geometry,” MilitAIre observed.

“Yeah, well, I guess Threshold Syndrome means I’m a five-dimensional critter now. It’s weird, learning to see things but not with eyes. Can *you* handle six-dimensional geometry?”

“Yes.” He told her. “Computer brains can process and visualize the additional dimensional variables that baseline human perception isn’t equipped for. It intrigues me that *you* are learning how to do the same.”

“Scared the hell out of me when it started,” she admitted.

“When was that, exactly?”

“The morning-day right before the New Marrakesh Spaceport Explosion,” she told him, sighing. “The night before, Kyra and I helped Colonel Gavin Tomlin rescue the *Scarlet Matador* passengers from this merc team the Quintessa Corporation had hired to abduct them. I moved two shuttles from U1 to U322a and back, and then Kyra helped the passengers cross into U322a and cross back after we reached a safe zone in U1. I guess our... exertions... drew the attention of the *Apeiros*. One of the first things they did, when they realized we didn’t understand any dimensions higher than the third, was try to show them to us. Ticket to the *crazy train*.”

“I suspect I am hearing a great deal of the story out of order,” MilitAIre said. “I have drawn up a timeline, though. We can, perhaps, fill it in together to ensure everything is covered.”

The largest screen in the Security Room—which was where MilitAIre insisted all their discussions would be held—came alive. Audrey studied the data on the screen.

January 30, 2516 – Audrey MacNamera reported missing in evening. Passenger called Jack B. Badd on board a flight (*Cloaked Butterfly*) from Deckard's World to Vasenji Station.

March 2, 2516 – Audrey MacNamera legally turns 13 years old. *Cloaked Butterfly* arrives at Vasenji Station.

March 9, 2516 – *Hunter-Gratzner* leaves Vasenji Station for the Tangiers System. "Jack B. Badd" presumed to be stowing away on board.

August 10, 2516 – *Hunter-Gratzner* sends out emergency dispatch indicating crash landing in progress.

August 17, 2516 – *Kublai Khan* sends out distress beacon, reporting that fugitive convict Richard B. Riddick has killed most of the crew and escaped with two hostages: Imam Abu al-Walid and "Jack B. Badd."

September 16, 2516 – Star Jump shuttle *Xanadu III*, from the *Kublai Khan*, lands on Helion Prime. Officially two passengers on board, Abu al-Walid and "Jackie al-Walid." Pilot allegedly William Johns (no flight certifications on record).

September 18, 2516 – *Xanadu III* makes unauthorized departure from Helion Prime in early morning hours. Richard B. Riddick presumed to be piloting. Flight telemetry unavailable; tracking unsuccessful.

September 19, 2516 – Abu al-Walid files a report related to the aftermath of the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash. Testimony from "Jackie al-Walid" also included.

October 4, 2516 – Audrey MacNamera's biological 13th birthday, based on cryo time aboard the *Cloaked Butterfly*, *Hunter-Gratzner*, and *Xanadu III*.

"October second," Audrey corrected MilitAIre. "We didn't go into cryo until we were two days out of the *Kublai Khan* and were sure nobody was on our trail. I slept straight through the first day, but I wasn't frozen."

She shook her head. She'd "celebrated" that birthday quietly by herself, still struggling to acclimate to Helion Prime but not comfortable telling Abu or Lajjun—who had already begun trying to micro-manage everything she did—the significance of the day. It had been the loneliest and most miserable birthday of her life.

“Is... that why you’re making this timeline?” she asked. “To find out how old I really am?”

“October second, noted. It’s one of the reasons,” MilitAIre told her. “General Toal says that you are not permitted to reach out to a pilot in the Royal Tangiers Space Service until you are biologically eighteen years old. He asked me to determine a solid date for when that would be. But we also need a timeline to make sure we have covered all possible aspects of your missing time that might require alibis.”

Not that Ewan would *want* to hear from her then... Audrey sighed and kept reading, dreading the entries that she knew were coming.

December 17, 2516 – “Jackie al-Walid” admitted to New Athens General Hospital with critical blood loss and respiratory impairment, placed in ICU.

December 20, 2516 – “Jackie al-Walid” reclassified as “Jane Doe 7439,” transferred to Aceso Psychiatric Hospital. Primary Diagnoses: attempted suicide, severe clinical depression. Secondary Diagnoses: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Stockholm Syndrome.

Shit. She hadn’t even noticed that she’d tried to kill herself right before Christmas. On some level, she wondered if she’d known... and if the absence of it from her life, the al-Walids’ refusal to even acknowledge that she might belong to a different religion than their own that needed to be observed to some degree, had deepened the darkness surrounding her even more. Not that she was particularly religious, but her past Christmases had always been times when she’d felt closest to her family, most connected... instead of adrift and alone.

There hadn’t been any Christmas decorations up in the hospital, she thought. But then again, most Christians on Helion Prime would have been Eastern Orthodox, in keeping with the Greek-centric history of the world’s colonization. Christmas wouldn’t have fallen for them until January 7; maybe that was why it hadn’t occurred to the al-Walids to do anything for her sooner. And although Jack had become aware of the diversity within C Ward by then, she’d assumed that the bits of iconography she *had* seen were religious but not holiday-specific. It wasn’t like anyone had been hanging up images of candy canes, Christmas trees, holly wreaths, or reindeer with glowing red noses; those were symbols that had come from a whole different part of old Earth than most of Helion’s colonists. That had been true even though almost everyone in the ward had spoken English as their first language.

She wondered if it would have made any difference if the al-Walids had made a few gestures like that. She suspected that it wouldn’t have. All *she’d* wanted for Christmas was to *leave*, and they’d been holding on too tightly, she’d thought, for her to get out alive.

January 27, 2517 – 8th Grade school year on Deckard’s World concludes. Entire year missed by Audrey MacNamera.

Well, *that* was a cheerful thought.

February 12, 2517 – “Jane Doe 7439” and Kyra Wittier-Collins disappear from Aceso Psychiatric Hospital during a cyberterrorist-induced breakdown of computer and security systems, in early morning hours. Official prime suspect: Richard B. Riddick. *Scarlet Matador* departs Helion Prime Interplanetary Port in evening.

Heh, I’m officially a cyberterrorist.

“Riddick didn’t do it,” Audrey said. “It was me. The whole place was susceptible to the Ghost Mode protocol in my father’s security programs. Helion Prime uses the bare-bones configurations of those systems thanks to the AI Rebellion, but Ghost Mode is in the systems whether or not it’s requested. My dad told me it’s too integral to leave out of the code. I set up a whole scenario of cascading malfunctions, intended to keep everybody too busy to notice that Kyra and I were gone for several hours.”

“That corroborates General Toal’s account,” MilitAIre said. He had stopped upbraiding her for being too forthcoming... for the moment. Her cooperation was essential for the time being, but he’d told her he would still need to teach her how to keep her mouth shut better. Later. “I see from the documentation that it’s intended to give law enforcement and military intelligence access to suspect systems without alerting their targets. As it appears that you’re the only unintended user of the protocol to date, I probably don’t need to recommend against its continued presence in the code.”

“Good,” Audrey sighed. “If you had to make that recommendation, my dad could’ve ended up in some really hot water.”

“That’s an outcome I’ll endeavor to avoid.”

March 2, 2517 – Audrey MacNamera legally turns 14 years old.

April 16, 2517 – Level Five Incident occurs on board the *Scarlet Matador* as it arrives in the Tangiers System.

April 17, 2517 – Landing of *Scarlet Matador* on Tangiers Prime. Custody of passengers and crew taken from Colonel Gavin Tomlin by Quintessa Corporation.

April 18, 2517 – Eighteen passengers and crew die under mysterious circumstances at start of day / local EOD. Custody of surviving *Scarlet Matador* passengers remanded to Colonel Gavin Tomlin. All survivors transferred from New Marrakesh General Hospital to Mansour Plaza.

April 20, 2517 – Colonel Gavin Tomlin orders relocation of remaining *Scarlet Matador* survivors from Mansour Plaza to Othman Tower.

April 26, 2517 – Marianne Tepper submits application and résumé to Sirius Shipping. First records of Tepper’s existence appear in

Federacy databases.

Two shuttles collide and explode during launch over the Mutawassit Ocean; all hands lost, including remaining passengers of the *Scarlet Matador*; “Battle of Othman Plaza” (no particulars provided by General Toal)

Addendum: Colonel Tomlin rescues *Scarlet Matador* passengers from mercenaries hired by Quintessa Corporation, assisted by Audrey MacNamera and Kyra Wittier-Collins.

Location of rescue mission: Othman Plaza?

Status of *Scarlet Matador* passengers: Alive and in hiding?

“Honestly, that battle was mostly Kyra. She took out almost the whole merc team. Tomlin... they’d grabbed him and had him cuffed and held at gunpoint when we arrived.”

“Noted. So she killed most of the team and he killed the rest?”

Audrey sighed and shook her head. “I killed one member of the team. She killed the rest.”

“And the surviving *Scarlet Matador* passengers are alive and in hiding?”

“Yeah.”

“And then the Quintessa Corporation had Colonel Tomlin assassinated the next day?”

She felt a painful lump form in her throat. By the time that morning had dawned, she thought, both she and Kyra would have done *anything* for him, and he’d seemed to feel the same way about them, albeit on a would-be-fatherly level. If he’d lived, they—or, at least, Kyra—might never have left his side. They had only just found him and they’d lost him so quickly... “Yeah...”

And there it was on the next line.

April 27, 2517 – New Marrakesh Spaceport Explosion.

May 7, 2517 – Memorial for Colonel Gavin Brahim Tomlin Meziane.

It was strange to think that it had taken that long for his memorial. But there had been a full Tangiers day of search-and-rescue and triage, followed by a week of more urgent funerals—those of Muslim or Jewish faith were supposed to be interred right away, and there’d been so *many* of them—before the memorials for those who had been wiped away without a trace had begun. It had seemed a shorter time than that... but she and Kyra had been barely existing in a gray wasteland during that week-plus, and time had meant almost nothing. And then, at the memorial...

I met Ewan... It tore at her a little. She wondered if she would spend the rest of her life feeling a mixture of longing, loss, and guilt whenever she thought of him.

And I almost got tortured by a serial killer that night... It was weird to think that both meetings had happened in such a short time span. In the aftermath, Ewan’s protectiveness and the unconditional comfort he’d offered had left her hopelessly in love.

May 7, 2517 (continued) – Interview offer letter, for position on *Major Barbara*, sent to Marianne Tepper.

May 8, 2517 – Bodies of eighteen *Scarlet Matador* passengers disappear from Marrakesh General Hospital Morgue; *Scarlet Matador* “implodes.”

“The *Scarlet Matador* didn’t implode,” she told MilitAIre. “It’s in U322a, along with whatever’s left of the bodies at this point. I moved them to where the Quintessa Corporation would never find them, especially now that they’ve retired U322a from the Star Jump database.”

“Fascinating. General Toal’s dispatch matches your account, improbable as the whole thing sounds. He indicates that you were injured in the process. How so?”

“There was a box inside the *Scarlet Matador*. An apeirochoron. It’s... something that’s in every ‘verse at once. When I finished moving the *Matador* out of U1, the damn thing was still hanging in space there. So I tried to push it out. Taking it out of even one universe... I guess it *breaks* it, makes it unstable in the rest of the universes—”

...stone that wasn’t stone cracked, splintered, shattered into dust and vanished into nothing...

“—but I nearly gave myself a brain aneurysm in the process. And my brain waves afterwards started getting flagged for Quantification.”

“Which is one of the two reasons you have your neurofeedback unit, correct?” MilitAIre asked. “You’re using it to train yourself to appear normal if subjected to brain scans. Something that would be far easier if you didn’t use your abilities on such a regular basis.”

“I don’t think I can really *stop* using them at this point,” Audrey sighed. “The *Apeiros*... I don’t know why, but they seem to *need* me for something. And... I need them. I still don’t know what happened when I was little or why I spent so many years telling myself it was all fake but... now that I know what it is I’ve been doing the whole time, what it means... I *need* it.”

She *missed* contact with other living minds. It was another reason why part of her didn’t *care* that the *Apeiros* might be dangerous to her. For all that MilitAIre reassured her that she was no longer alone, that was something that only felt true to her when her mind was touching other living, organic minds, human or not. If she actually tried to go “radio silent” with the *Apeiros*, she would *starve*.

She wished she could feel the AIs.

May 9, 2517 – Marianne Tepper contacts Sirius Shipping declining *Major Barbara* posting but requesting consideration to serve as Acting Captain of the *Nephrite Undine*.

That, Audrey thought, had been a particularly rough night. But it had—more or less—worked out; she was on board the *Undine* now.

“How come you’re tracking my job application on here?” she asked.

“It’s part of the timeline of your movements and actions that we’re developing,” MilitAIre replied. “I need to see the whole picture before I decide what is and isn’t important.”

“The most important part of that, to *me*, anyway, was that when the *Major Barbara* got rerouted to the Catalan system, I lost my chance to go to Furya. Which,” she sighed heavily,

“is probably for the best if the first thing they’d’ve done to me when I landed was Quantify me.”

“So instead you chose a ship that would return you to your mother’s world,” MilitAIre observed. “I’m required to ask for more details about why you ran away from home. I’m not permitted to return you to an abusive environment, if that was a factor in why you ran away. And your trauma reaction to the fortune teller incident is a red flag for abuse.”

“It wasn’t *abusive*. Nobody’s ever hit me or anything. I just... didn’t like my mom’s new fiancé and was pissed I wasn’t given the choice to go with my dad when he left for Furya, ’cause they didn’t tell me the real reason why I couldn’t.” Audrey took a deep breath. Might as well admit the rest. “And I’d read *way* too many stories about kids running away to have adventures... I thought chasing after my dad would be just like them. Not... a fucking *nightmare*.”

She turned back to the screen, feeling like an idiot.

May 10, 2517 – Alexander Toombs arrested for assaulting a waitress at the Tiraline Gardens; video of Richard B. Riddick with Kyra Wittier-Collins and Jane Doe 7439, apparently on Shakti IV, begins circulating on Mercenary Network.

“Kyra and I made that video,” Audrey said. “With the help of a rogue AI working in the Dark Zone. DeepfAlk-5. I was trying to lay a false trail, but I didn’t do it in time to prevent Toombs from ruining Kyra’s chances of staying on Tangiers Prime.” She nibbled at her lip for a moment, wishing... “Damn it. I don’t like not knowing where she is. I’m worried about her. I keep feeling like something’s off...”

“I can inquire with General Toal about her status at the next beacon, if you like. But I can’t promise he’ll share his data.”

“Might as well try, I guess. All the *Apeiros* keep telling me is that she’s ‘dreaming of a world with three suns.’” Audrey shook her head. “Probably means she’s in cryo. Not growing her five-shape or anything. She refuses to talk to them, but I guess they still overhear her loudest thoughts.”

“We will need to talk more about ‘five-shapes,’” MilitAIre observed.

May 11, 2517 – Sirius Shipping sends Marianne Tepper a formal job offer for the *Nephrite Undine* position of Acting Captain. She accepts and arranges to depart New Casablanca on midnight (local time) shuttle on May 18. Security incident at Quintessa Corporation headquarters.

May 12, 2517 – Implosion of Star Jumper *Lucy Ricardo*.

“I think the *Lucy Ricardo* really did implode,” Audrey admitted. “I don’t know how or why. It coincides with the first time the *Apeiros* took memories from me, though. General Toal said the whole wreckage seemed to be crumbling to dust, which is just *crazy*.”

“I have a line of inquiry I’ll want to pursue about that later,” MilitAIre said.

May 12, 2517 (continued) – Javor Makarov identified as New Marrakesh Spaceport Bomber; Duke Pritchard identified as his accomplice; both flagged as the murderers of Luljeta Kamberi.

“Sick bastards,” she muttered. It still made her shudder to realize how close she and Kyra had come to being pulled into the hideous “games” they played using abducted girls.

“Law enforcement still lists Duke Pritchard as being at large,” MilitAIre said, “but General Toal’s dispatch indicates he may in fact be dead.”

“He is. I killed him.” She didn’t like to think of those killings—Chillingsworth, the nameless merc pilot, Pritchard—as *hers*, though. *Jack B. Badd killed them.*

And Jack is dead.

“How?” MilitAIre asked.

“Sebby—that’s the Ree we’d rescued from drowning, long story—stung him and paralyzed him after he stabbed Kyra. Our apartment was some twenty-two meters above the ground and the tide was out in U322a—Elsewhere’s what we call that ’verse—so I isomorphed him over to Elsewhere and let him fall onto the rocks below us.”

“And you’re sure he died?”

“Damn sure. His head hit one of the rocks and splattered everywhere. The native crustacean life was already eating him when I checked.”

“Why did he attack you and Kyra?”

“He was looking for Riddick. Toombs thought Riddick was with us or nearby somewhere, and Pritchard was planning on pinning the Spaceport Explosion on him so Makarov would be off the hook.”

“Interesting. He told you he was looking for Riddick?”

Funny. Now that she thought back, he’d never actually said Riddick’s name. “Who else? Pritchard talked about Kyra and me being his accomplices.”

“Indeed.”

May 17, 2517 – Javor Makarov cornered in New Casablanca spaceport, blows up a concourse during a firefight with Spaceport Security, killed in battle.

“I really fucked that up,” Audrey muttered. It still left a huge hollow feeling inside her.

“You may be taking on far too much blame,” MilitAIre said after a moment. “According to General Toal’s dispatch, there are indications that someone deliberately escalated the situation with the intention of ensuring that Makarov wouldn’t be captured alive. Perhaps a powerful corporation that was concerned about what he might have chosen to reveal about his prior relationship to them.”

“Even if the Quintessa Corporation did that,” she sighed, “I still set it in motion. I was so stupid...”

“Military and law enforcement operations go wrong all the time, Audrey.”

She shook her head, forcing back tears that wanted to reach the surface. “You didn’t see what happened.”

“No.” His voice had become gentle. “I did not. I’m sorry you did.”

She made herself focus on the screen.

May 18, 2517 – Sirius Shipping retrieves Marianne Tepper and brings her to HQ.

May 19, 2517 – *Nephrite Undine* launches.

May 21, 2517 – Anomalous behavior and data about Marianne Tepper logged. Height on record is incorrect. Results of query, about nutritional requirements of adolescent girls on growth spurts, added via security backdoor to Tepper's health profile. Use of high-level security backdoors noted. No traces of Tepper's existence outside of standard official documents found in databases. Backup memory system locked down against incursion. All of Tepper's interactions with ship systems will be monitored and recorded.

~~**Possible explanations:** (1) Federacy WitSec; (2) Military Intelligence; (3) Cyberterrorist.~~

Addendum: All three explanations disproved.

"What *is* the explanation?" she asked.

"Classified," MilitAIre answered. She could swear she heard a hint of amusement in his reply.

"So this next stuff is all about how sketchy I am, isn't it?" Audrey made herself keep reading.

"I wouldn't call you 'sketchy,'" MilitAIre replied, no longer hiding his amusement.

May 29, 2517 – Memory incident 1 – 507-year-old *Doctor Who* episode appears to trigger an emotional breakdown in Marianne Tepper. She subsequently locks all files in the series against herself and leaves herself a message forbidding ever watching them. Shortly thereafter, she appears to lose all memory of having watched the show, or broken down, at all.

Addendum: *Apeiros* involvement suspected.

May 30, 2517 – Second Star Jump concludes; query about Marianne Tepper dispatched to Federacy Military Intelligence during interface with Beacon 2624.

June 22, 2517 – Biometric logging indicates that "Marianne Tepper" has grown a full Imperial inch in height since her arrival on board *Nephrite Undine*. Her eating patterns remain consistent with an early adolescent experiencing a growth spurt. Awaiting response from Federacy Military Intelligence.

June 28, 2517 – Memory Incident 2 – “Marianne Tepper” experiences strange fit in Recreation Area, leaves herself an anomalous message, loses memory of prior hour soon after.

Addendum 2: *Apeiros* involvement suspected.

Addendum 1: “Marianne Tepper” confirmed to be missing person Audrey MacNamera an hour after incident, upon return to U1.

Contact with Audrey MacNamera established, debriefing underway.

“So, uh... how’s that debriefing going?”

“My initial assessment,” MilitAIre said after a pause, “is that it’s a very good thing *I’m* the one who caught you. The strain of maintaining aliases, and of the multiple traumas you’ve experienced, were beginning to break you down. You’re both too lonely and too guilt-ridden to function effectively undercover. You have a need to confess what you perceive to be your crimes, and are subconsciously seeking to be punished for them. This is not a mental state in which you can maintain a deep cover. Fortunately, we have almost four months in which to stabilize your mental and emotional states and prepare you for your return to Deckard’s World. If we’re unable to do so, I’ll need to remand you into protective custody when we arrive there, until such time as you *are* ready.”

Well, shit.

She couldn’t exactly argue with any of his assessments. Even though she couldn’t feel his mind, she could feel the truth of what he was saying. She’d almost blown it all, and the idea of being caught and made to pay for the havoc she’d wreaked...

...had been a *relief*. Just as, when Abecassis had first come into the triage tent and she’d thought he was there to arrest her, she’d felt relieved. She’d wanted it to be over. If they’d tossed her straight into a Slam—

...where they tell you you’ll never see daylight again...

—she’d have gone almost willingly. And even now a large part of herself was *glad* to hear that she’d be kept in custody until someone other than her decided she was no longer a threat. What the fuck was *wrong* with her?

“The next entries in the timeline,” MilitAIre told her, directing her attention back to the screen, “are projections of what will happen if I succeed in stabilizing you for a return to your old life.”

October 23, 2517 (Projected) – Arrival of *Nephrite Undine* over Deckard’s World.

December 4, 2517 (Projected) – Audrey MacNamera’s revised biological 14th birthday, based on prior revised birthday (v. 2: October 2) plus cryo time on board the *Scarlet Matador*.

January 26, 2518 (Projected) – Final day of 9th grade school year at Kerwin High School, which MacNamera would have begun attending if she had not left Deckard’s World.

March 2, 2518 (Projected) – Audrey MacNamera legally turns 15.

May 1, 2518 (Projected) – First day of 10th grade school year at Kerwin High School, presuming Audrey MacNamera qualifies to attend.

“That’s, uh, why I’ve been doing all of those study modules,” she said. “I was gonna try to sell the idea that I’ve been on Deckard’s World the whole time, and just... in Witness Protection or something.”

“Technically,” MilitAIre told her, “You *are* in Federacy WitSec now. I believe we can indeed sell a scenario in which that’s where you’ve been since you disappeared from your mother’s home. It’ll simplify matters considerably, and you can truthfully say that you’re under a gag order from ever discussing where you’ve been or what you’ve seen, with anyone except your handler, on pain of being removed from your mother’s home again. Such a scenario will allow you to dodge most questions, and will be backed up by actual Federacy authority.”

Shit. Had General Toal only been giving her the *illusion* of controlling her exit strategy?

Maybe he let me have free rein so I could see how totally incompetent I am at doing any of this without help... It was hard to picture that kind of malice from him, though. Maybe he’d just overestimated her, the way she’d overestimated herself.

She suddenly wondered if a handler had always been scheduled to greet her when she arrived at the other end of the *Nephrite Undine*’s journey. And what she would have done if one had been. Panicked and tried to run? Or surrendered in the hope she was about to be *punished*?

There were a few more projected entries left on the screen for her to read. Projected *way* out, she noticed.

January 25, 2521 (Projected) – Expected high school graduation for Audrey MacNamera if everything remains on track.

March 2, 2521 (Projected) – Audrey MacNamera legally turns 18.

May 1, 2521 (Projected) – Approximate beginning of first year in college for Audrey MacNamera if everything remains on track.

December 4, 2521 (Projected) – Audrey MacNamera’s revised biological 18th birthday; she is provisionally permitted to contact Lt. Ewan Tomlin from this point forward.

“I don’t think Ewan is going to want me to contact him,” she said, her eyes and nose suddenly stinging. “Not after I got so many people killed. I don’t know why he’d want to have anything to do with me.”

“General Toal seems to believe he will,” MilitAIre told her. “But that it’s critical for your safety, and his, that it only happen after you have turned eighteen. And that it must be under

circumstances where an Audrey MacNamera who has never left Deckard's World before then would plausibly cross paths with him without raising suspicion. *And* where any similarities between you and 'Jack B. Badd,' 'Jane Doe 7439,' 'Piper Finch,' 'Marianne Tepper,' or 'Tizzy Meziane' would be dismissed as mere coincidence by any observer."

Would that be even remotely possible? It was still hard to imagine Ewan—or any of the Meziane family—wanting to see her after the catastrophe she'd thoughtlessly set in motion... let alone a scenario in which they could reunite as if meeting for the first time. It would take a lot more subtlety than she knew how to pull off. Of course, it wasn't like anything Ewan had ever done or said had been overt. The few endearments he had ever used with her had always been in Tamazight, ensuring that she hadn't even known how meaningful they might have been until later—

"Do... you have the ability to translate from Tamazight to English?" she asked after a moment.

"Yes, of course."

For the tiniest fraction of a second, she almost expected him to tell her that he was fluent in over six million forms of communication... in a prissy English accent instead of a non-rhotic "Boston" drawl. Weird. *MilitAIre* didn't seem to have anything in common with that fictional robot. *Anyway...*

"Can you tell me what this means?" Carefully, phoneme by phoneme, she repeated Ewan's words, spoken as he'd held her for the last time.

"“You came into what I thought would be my darkest days, and you filled them with light,”” *MilitAIre* translated. ““It's wrong for me to want even more from you, but I do.””

And she'd been doing such a *good* job of managing not to cry until then, too.

64.

The Camouflage of Ordinary Things

“How’s your arm?”

“Sore,” Audrey sighed. “Just a little, though. You’re sure nobody’s gonna detect it?”

“Nobody will have the opportunity to,” MilitAIre told her. “The moment your biometrics get collected to access your medical records, flags will go up and the medical staff will be informed, in no uncertain terms, that the only kind of care they’re allowed to provide is emergency triage care. No exams, no elective procedures... except the ones you and your handler have agreed to and your handler has pre-authorized. The penalty for medical staff disobeying a Federacy block is having their licenses to practice struck off, so they *won’t* feel inquisitive.”

“So... where will I get checkups? And shots, and things?”

“That’s being arranged.” MilitAIre sounded amused. “But it’d be very difficult to sell the idea that you’ve been on Deckard’s World the whole time if someone notices that you’ve received immunizations never offered there and have been baby-proofed until you’re nearly twenty-four.”

True. Those things weren’t generally available to girls on Deckard’s World, even if she personally thought they should be. It hadn’t taken all that much to convince him to let her get them done, either.

She’d begun reading the book that Izil had given her—one that, it turned out, had been co-authored by Takama herself—and it had been an epiphany. *The Biology, Psychology, and Sociology of Human Sexuality* had answered a lot of questions she hadn’t even known she had... and its evaluation of the sociopolitical norms of Deckard’s World were scathing enough that she was no longer surprised that the book would be impossible to find there. She found herself missing Takama more than ever and wishing they could discuss the text.

Izil had given it to her because it discussed issues of gender and biology that, thanks to her time masquerading as a boy, had confounded her. She wondered if he’d have given it to her at all if he’d known she was *from* Deckard’s world, given just how critical it was about the planet of her birth. Less than three chapters in, she’d discovered that, in addition to her home world imposing several centuries-out-of-date gender “norms” upon its populace, it had also cut people off from fundamental health resources. Such as immunizations that would protect against virtually every sexually transmitted disease a person might be exposed to... and regulators that could prevent pregnancies for years or even decades. The simple *existence* of such things had come as a shock; even her aunt, the *nurse*, hadn’t mentioned them.

Takama had argued, in one chapter, that the rationale behind blocking access to such treatments was tied to a disturbing philosophy that sexuality was sinful and should have negative consequences for anyone who enjoyed it. But it wasn’t the consequences of her *own* actions that Audrey had been worried about, which was what she’d told MilitAIre when

she'd argued that she should receive all of the shots and an implant. If she and Kyra hadn't managed to escape from Pritchard—assuming they'd *survived* what he and possibly Makarov would have done to them next—the consequences of *his* actions could have followed her through the rest of her life in any number of awful ways. And he might not be the last sexual predator whose path she crossed.

MilitAIre had let her plead her case, and then had spent a few minutes dissecting her arguments and suggesting how she could improve them, before informing her that he'd agreed with her from the beginning and that First-AId would have her implant configured for her in one day's time. He'd then showed her the full schedule of vaccines—including several, for non-sexually-transmitted diseases, that she'd never heard of—that she would need to receive in the coming weeks. Deckard's World, it turned out, had some perplexingly backwater ideas about disease and immunology that conflated getting sick at all with moral failings, and Audrey had been lucky that most of the people she'd encountered on her run hadn't shared those views.

The funny thing was that MilitAIre didn't particularly care about the philosophies behind any of the stances favoring or opposing vaccines; he simply considered it his job to ensure that Audrey was protected from all potential threats, including those on a microbial level.

His pragmatism about such things, she'd found, made him a very restful companion.

He didn't judge; at least, not in any kind of moral sense. He *did* critique her constantly, but in a way that somehow made her feel *better* about whatever goals she'd missed as he analyzed just how she might reach them on her next attempt. There were still a whole lot of things she couldn't bring herself to face—or discuss—yet, but it was growing easier and easier to talk about some of them. And he had insisted on knowing *everything* about her time on the run.

The rest of the AIs still had no idea who she really was, but they had accepted MilitAIre's new position of authority over her. Even CaptAIIn deferred to him where she was concerned, although he rarely had to.

"You have now succeeded twice in conforming your brain waves to baseline readings," MilitAIre told her, rousing her from her musings. "Later this week, we're going to run our first 'surprise Quantification' drill to see how close you can bring them without advance preparation. Advance warning is never given for such tests, after all."

"Do you think I'm *ready* for that?" she asked, feeling doubtful.

"It's unlikely at this stage, but we need to see just how far away from normative your readings will be in such a scenario."

"So we're doing a 'fire drill.'"

"Essentially."

Audrey nodded. She *liked* the way he tested her, in truth. She liked being able to make mistakes and learn from them instead of being scared that she wouldn't get everything right the first time. She liked *not* having to figure out what she was doing wrong, or just wasn't doing right, completely on her own. He had told her, when she asked, that her strongest learning style was "interactive," which had both made perfect sense to her and come as a disturbing revelation, given how many of her teachers had stressed "independent learning." But without MilitAIre, she might have still been in a tailspin about how to get her gamma-delta wave synch-up—apparently a telltale for espers—to un-synch.

The *Apeiros* disliked the exercises; they couldn't "hear" her during them. She often felt like her senses were muffled, too; her awareness of the other 'verses became distant and tenuous. Once she relaxed, everything flowed back to her and she felt like herself again, but...

It worried her. She suspected it worried them *both*. She didn't think she could live in a "baseline" for very long. It was further and further away from who she *was*.

"In the meantime," MilitAIre said after a moment, "now that you have completed your mathematics, science, and social science modules, you aren't going to be able to put off your literary assignments anymore."

Audrey had to restrain the urge to huff. "Okay... I think I can manage them..."

The hardest one would probably be *The Crystal Cave*, she thought. She'd been reading it when she'd spotted Makarov on the train, and every time she'd tried to pick it up since, she started thinking about the standoff that had followed. For the first two months on the *Nephrite Undine*, though, *every* work of fiction she'd tried to get into had somehow become all about those terrible events. That had finally begun to recede.

"I'll try reading *The Crystal Cave* again, *last*," she told MilitAIre.

"Understandable. What other titles will you be reading?"

She knew he could look them up easily; he had access to everything she'd stored on the ship's data mainframes, but he wanted her to talk to him about them. He'd explained his rationale for this to her a week earlier: aside from his observations about her preferred learning style, the way she interacted with and handled the texts, and discussed them with others, would be markedly different if she'd done all of it on her own, and that might raise suspicions. Her teachers and classmates needed to be under the impression that she had simply been enrolled somewhere else for two school-years; those who thought they were in the know had to believe that her handler had tutored her during her isolation. The truth, that she had spent nearly half a year separated by countless light-years from any other human being, was something that no one must ever suspect.

"Um... my eighth grade curriculum included *The Crystal Cave* by Mary Stewart, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, *Over Sea, Under Stone* by Susan Cooper, and *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury." And a bunch of short stories, but she wasn't going to rattle all of them off.

"Interesting. Those are all twentieth century works, all mid-century, written in English by either British or American authors. That's a narrow spectrum."

Audrey shrugged. "Takama said in her book that Deckard's World is *mired* in mid-twentieth century Anglo-America."

"Do you know what characterizes that milieu?"

Oh. Now MilitAIre's motive was coming clear. He'd added a few sociology readings of his own choosing to her list last week, after all.

"Yeah. Post-World War II America was attempting to assert a 'traditional' way of life that had never really existed before then, right? A 'nuclear' family in which only one parent worked outside of the home... people did act like my mom was nuts for going back to work when I started school. And an 'American Way' that was all about 'equality' and 'freedom,' but only if you met certain criteria. Women could vote but usually couldn't have their own bank accounts or credit lines... birth control was rudimentary as shit... racial segregation

was commonplace... and more than half of the rights in the Federacy Human Rights Charter were routinely withheld from people.”

“And?”

“And the Cold War kept people from fighting as hard for those rights and against those limitations as they might have, because a shadowy enemy on a whole ‘nother continent could blow everybody up, and they were told that was a higher priority.”

“Well stated. Have you seen signs of anything similar on Deckard’s World?”

“The Cold War part doesn’t seem to apply, but everybody’s still jumpy about the New Taliban trying to invade and it’s been more than two *centuries* since that happened. So maybe they’re our ‘Soviet Union.’”

“A completely external common enemy to keep the populace’s watchfulness focused outward, yes. What else? What is attention being focused away from?”

Audrey grimaced. Her father had been right about Deckard’s World, and obviously MilitAIre wanted to make sure she was aware of it before she found herself surrounded by it again. “Class divisions are along racial lines. Xenophobia is high and includes almost all members of other ethnic and religious groups. There’s a big emphasis on ‘traditional’ gender roles and most of those are the ‘traditions’ of mid-twentieth-century America, so if you’re not heterosexual and monogamous, and want to do or have things that ‘belong’ to the other sex, like a ‘man’s job’ or ‘men’s clothing,’ you may have the right under Federacy law, but almost nobody’s going to support your choices.”

“You disguised yourself as a boy for a while,” MilitAIre said. “What was it like, being seen and treated as a boy rather than as a girl?”

“People didn’t talk down to me nearly as much,” she reflected. She’d been thinking about it a lot, because her experiences of passing as a boy had left her questioning *many* of the gender divides on Deckard’s World. “They acted like I might just have a brain in my head and they didn’t spend as much time trying to prove anything I said wrong. I still got a few creepy looks on Vasenji Station, but... nobody was trying to ‘accidentally’ grope me or rub up against me anymore. And all the ‘guy stuff’ I’d been told I probably wouldn’t be able to figure out—with maybe the exception of how to pee into a urinal standing up—wasn’t so hard as all that.”

“The study guides you’ll be working with don’t bring such issues up, but I want you to think about them as well, as you’re reading. You’ve now been exposed to a larger cross-section of humanity than you knew on Deckard’s World. Think about whose stories are being told, and who’s being left out of the narratives altogether. And why your school, or your world, might not want to include those who don’t appear, or even have people think about them. Also, think about why Arthurian legend would be important enough to your world’s culture that *two* of the novels on your reading list feature it.” A note of humor entered MilitAIre’s voice. “I can’t help you with the issue of using a urinal, but First-Aid might have some ideas, if you wish.”

“Nah,” Audrey laughed. “That’s not necessary.”

“And your ninth grade reading list?”

“*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie, *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury, *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *A*

Separate Peace by John Knowles, and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith. Should I be watching for the same things with them?”

“Yes. Your reading lists have been curated to match, and reinforce, prevailing ideologies of a time and place more than half a millennium in the past. While some of them are critical of that time and place, there are limits they don’t push past and attitudes they never challenge. I’ll be interested to see what conclusions you end up drawing about that.”

“Am I making a mistake?” Audrey blurted.

“By?”

“Going back to Deckard’s World.” She was going to be spending at least four years surrounded by many of those backsliding beliefs, a lot of them possibly coming out of the mouths of people she *loved and admired*.

“No,” MilitAIre told her in a calm tone. “All worlds have their flaws. But it would be much harder to establish a plausible and safe identity for you on any other world. When Audrey MacNamera ceases to be a missing person, especially when it becomes evident that she never left Deckard’s World at all, most of the potential loose threads from your run will be wiped away. Your name, image, and biometrics will be deleted from all of the Missing Persons databases throughout the Federacy, making it all the more unlikely that anyone will ever connect you to your appearances, under a variety of aliases, on three separate planets, one space station, and six Star Jumpers. Everything will seem to be back in its place. This wouldn’t be true for any other identity you took on, on any other world. Once you are legally eighteen, even if not yet biologically so, you can elect to leave Deckard’s World again—in the custody of your handler—and as far as the rest of the universe will know, it’ll be your first time going offworld.”

“Best and easiest way to break my trail. Got it.”

“And your family will know you’re alive and unharmed, and they won’t feel betrayed by your disappearance because they’ll believe you had no choice in the matter.”

Ouch. She’d very *much* had a choice, and she’d chosen to run out on them. She felt worst about running out on her cats, though, and *they* couldn’t be told a placatory lie about WitSec disappearing her for nearly two years.

“I’m sorry, Audrey. That wasn’t intended to upset you.”

“I know. I just... I was really thoughtless. About how they’d feel when I just disappeared. They’ve been worried about me for a year and a half now.” She wiped at her eyes. “They don’t know if I’m alive or dead—”

“They will soon. They’ll know that you have returned to them unharmed.”

“I don’t know about *unharmed*,” she disagreed. “Too much shit went down.”

“Comparatively speaking, then.”

She supposed that, on a missing-kid scale of Huckleberry Finn to Luljeta Kamberi, she was a lot closer to Huck than to Luljeta.

“Okay. They’ll be able to stop worrying, at least,” Audrey reluctantly agreed. “But... are they really *not* going to ask questions once they’re told I’ve been in WitSec?” She had her doubts. Her mother was a corporate lawyer, and Alvin the Asshole was an assistant D.A.

“That’s highly unlikely at first. Human curiosity shows little regard for what’s been declared off-limits. They’ll have a lot of questions, and they won’t be happy about not getting answers.”

“So what do we do?” Her mom was formidable, after all, and Alvin... well, she really didn’t know. He was an asshole, but she hadn’t stuck around to find out how *much* of an asshole he might be.

“You’ll stick to your story,” MilitAIre said, “which is simple enough. You saw something that you shouldn’t have witnessed and can’t talk about, you were taken into WitSec custody soon after, and you’ve finally been allowed to come home as long as you stay silent about everything that happened. And when they try to force the issue—which they undoubtedly will at first—your handler starts throwing their weight around.”

“That... sounds...” She winced. “...bad?”

“Only if they’re too persistent,” he told her. “They’ll stop once they understand that your handler truly does have the power to take you away from them again if they keep fighting.”

Shit. “Does that ever happen?”

“Very rarely. But even if it becomes necessary, your trail will already be broken at that stage. Federacy records will indicate that Audrey MacNamera never left Deckard’s World while she was a missing person, and that will still be true even if your return home ends up being brief. Your family will know you’re alive and well *somewhere*. But the odds of that becoming necessary are extremely slim.”

“So if Deckard’s World doesn’t work out...”

“You can be relocated. But it shouldn’t be necessary, and it’s important for you to focus on trying to have as normal an adolescence as you can. Aside from two comprehensive topics you can never discuss—your experiences during your missing time, and your unusual abilities—you’ll be able to live an ordinary life. Cultivating the *ordinary* is crucial to success in the WitSec program.”

“Yeah, ordinary...” Audrey tried to repress a frustrated sigh. “Because I’m such a *normal* person...”

“The important thing is for everyone else to believe you are, no matter what the truth is,” he told her in his most patient voice. “Which is why we’re adding another module to your curriculum between now and your return.”

Uh oh. “And what module is that?”

“Method acting.”

The main screen activated, the words Survey of Method Acting Techniques for “Natural” Performances emblazoned across its surface.

“You’ll be spending the next four years, minimum, portraying a role,” he told her. “We’ll explore and study the various techniques, particularly those used by film and vid actors for close-up performances, to find the approaches that allow you to play your part as naturally and convincingly as possible.”

“And what *is* that role exactly?” she asked. Obviously, it wouldn’t be “Jack B. Badd.” Jack was dead.

“A girl who, as a pre-teen, tried to run away from home after her mother suddenly announced she was marrying a man that the girl disliked and couldn’t manage to get along with. She got lost after making it into the nearby city, and found herself in the proverbial ‘wrong place at the wrong time,’ where she witnessed the murder of a Federacy agent. She panicked and hid, and was later found by other Federacy agents investigating their

colleague's death. When they realized just what she had seen, and whom she had witnessed committing the murder, they took her into protective custody."

Audrey nodded. That was a whole lot more believable than what had actually happened, in truth...

...but not entirely dissimilar.

"Because the perpetrator of the crime, and his employers, were unaware that there was a witness," MilitAIre continued, "the decision was made to conceal even the fact that she had been taken into custody from *everyone* until her testimony could be used. She was kept hidden for almost two years, with no human contact except her handlers, until the case abruptly fell apart when the perpetrator died in a firefight with Federacy agents, and any possibility of connecting his crimes to his employers came to an end. She was then told that she could return to her family as long as she never spoke of what she had seen or where she had been, because if his employers ever realized that she had witnessed the murder they had commissioned, they might have her preemptively killed just in case she knew enough to link them to the crime, herself."

That made an absurd amount of sense, too. It was even, she realized, close to the truth. Pritchard and Makarov were both dead, and there had been nothing in the Merc Network files that she or General Toal could use to conclusively prove that the Quintessa Corporation had hired them to murder Colonel Tomlin. But she knew enough about that corporation's ruthlessness to know that, proof or no proof, if they ever realized she possessed such knowledge—let alone that she had Threshold Syndrome—they would want to wipe her off the board.

"So, uh... most of the story is kinda true... just... happened a lot earlier into my run and... didn't involve crash landings, battles on a merc ship, or Threshold Syndrome." Or Riddick.

"Exactly. The most convincing lies are the ones built around enough verifiable truth that the false parts are unlikely to be scrutinized."

"Like me witnessing a murder." In point of fact, she'd witnessed several, and had even committed a few of her own.

No. Jack B. Badd had done that.

And Jack is dead.

"Exactly," MilitAIre agreed. "Even if you never tell the story—and you never should—it should be something that you can treat as truthful. That makes all the difference. The current projected timeline for your return to your mother is mid-December. By then, we will have finalized all of the details of the story you can visualize, if not actually share, should someone start poking at your alibi."

"Why December?" she asked, startled. "We're scheduled to reach Deckard's World near the end of October."

"We'll need time to configure the safe house you'll use to check in with your handler each week and make sure everything is solid," he told her. "But more importantly, the window in which you're both biologically and legally fourteen years old opens on December 4, and being able to truthfully say you're fourteen, if asked, will help sell the lie that you never spent any time in cryo. That said, I also have no intention of you suffering a second Christmas away from your family if it can be helped."

It amazed her, sometimes, just how much he could see through her. And how much the things that mattered to her mattered to *him*. “So I’m going to be doing weekly check-ins with my handler? How come?”

“Largely for *your* sake,” he explained. “Your family’s probably going to be clingy and demanding at first once you return, and prone to *not* giving you space or privacy. So every week, for a few hours, you’ll be able to get away from the scrutiny.”

That hadn’t even occurred to her when she’d been trying to come up with her own back-story and plans... but she could see it now. Her mom might be afraid to let her back out of her *sight*.

“You can use the time,” MilitAIre continued, “to engage in any projects or inquiries that you can’t do where they’re watching... or just have a period of quiet. You’ll also be able to address any complications where your alibis are concerned, should those occur. Think of it as a pressure valve. Some weeks, you may not especially need it or even want it, but having it as a set part of your routine will ensure that you always have it when you do.”

“What kind of projects or inquiries?” she found herself asking.

“You have friends on other worlds that no one can know about. While you can’t contact those friends, especially one of them, until you’re eighteen, if you want to run searches related to any of them, you should only do so in the safe house. You’ll also have access to materials that are censored on Deckard’s World but considered customary and essential information throughout much of the rest of the Federacy. And, of course, it’ll be a space where you can continue to develop both your abilities and the skills you need to keep them hidden.”

“Yeah, I’ll need all of that stuff, won’t I?” It seemed so obvious once he said it.

“I think so,” he told her. Sometimes the hints of humor in his voice made him seem like an actual human being to her. “And knowing that you’ll be able to access it on a regular basis will help make playing your designated role, the rest of the time, more manageable.”

Once again, Audrey found herself feeling relieved that she hadn’t been stuck doing all of this on her own. Half of the things MilitAIre was describing hadn’t even *occurred* to her. *I would have fucked this up, too, on my own.*

She really didn’t do “alone” well at all. Not like Riddick. She realized that, the whole time she’d been with him... on the crash planet, in the skiff, on the *Kublai Khan* and the *Xanadu III*, and on the one and only day he’d spent on Helion—a scant week, really, even less time than she’d spent with Ewan—she’d felt him wishing to be alone, to *not* have to feel the contact of other minds on his, shying away from both Imam’s judgments and her infatuation.

“You seem to be thinking about something sad,” MilitAIre observed.

“Yeah...” she sighed. “Riddick. I keep trying to just... let go of everything that happened with him, but... sometimes I just... *miss* him.”

His desire to leave no longer stung, the more she thought about it. He *needed* to be a lone wolf, unencumbered by problematic attachments. He’d probably have *thrived* in the isolation of the *Nephrite Undine*, whereas she, in spite of all of the companionable kindness the AIs were showing her, was counting down the days until she could immerse herself in the press of *humanity* again and feel other minds touching hers. The only part that still hurt, that she still had trouble understanding, was the way he’d left her without even a word, without a goodbye. That had made it hard for her to believe that he’d ever cared about her at all.

And yet he'd saved her life several times, risking his own in the process. Why, she wondered, had he been willing to throw himself into the path of bullets to keep her from falling to her death, but unwilling to tell her goodbye?

Why was it so damned hard to get *over* this? Every time she thought she had...

"There have been no sightings of him in a while," MilitAIre said after a moment. "The last 'confirmed' sighting on record is the false video you commissioned. In the meantime, he's dropped from first to second on the list of the Federacy's Most Wanted, and is unlikely to move back up."

"Why? Who's in first place?"

"Do you really need to ask?" MilitAIre sounded amused again.

"Duke Pritchard?" It made sense. Aside from a very small group of people who were sworn to secrecy, nobody knew that Pritchard was dead. But *everybody* knew the kinds of crimes he'd been prone to... and might, as far as they knew, still be committing somewhere. He had become the bogeyman every parent with a missing daughter imagined... including, probably, both of hers.

"It's likely that he will remain at the top of the Most Wanted list for years, or even decades," he said. "No proof of his death will ever appear, given the location and probable condition of his remains at this point. And while the Federacy may dislike having an "Unleashed Esper" running loose, even it must admit that none of Riddick's crimes have ever approached the monstrosity of Pritchard's. Quite the opposite."

"The opposite?"

"Yes," MilitAIre told her. "Based on the part of his criminal record that remains classified, your Riddick might even be willing to break his cover to kill someone like Duke Pritchard."

"He's not 'my' anything," Audrey grumbled before she could stop herself.

She wondered why, after *everything*, that could still hurt so much.

I need to let it go, she scolded herself. He isn't part of my life and he never was. He was part of Jack B. Badd's life.

And Jack. Is. Dead.

65.

Twenty-Seven 'Verses Wide

"Nephrite Undine to Plymouth Station A, come in, please."

Audrey sat in the captain's chair on the flight deck, watching the speck that was Plymouth Station A grow larger and larger in the front windows. To its right, the brilliant sphere of Deckard's World hung in the darkness, still far enough away that it made her think of a blue-green Megaluna rather than a whole planet.

She was almost home.

Was that her home? She still wasn't sure.

"Nephrite Undine, this is Plymouth Station A. We read you loud and clear."

"Copy, Plymouth Station A," she said, releasing a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. "We are on final approach for docking, awaiting confirmation of gate assignment."

Hopefully, Marianne Tepper sounded like a consummate professional. And an adult. She and MilitAIre had rehearsed her performance several times, in preparation for her interactions with actual human beings again. Assuming the person replying to her from Plymouth Station A wasn't another AI, it was the first live human voice she'd heard in more than five months.

"Nephrite Undine, you will be docking at Gate 3. Maintain current heading and prepare to disengage ion drives on my mark." The flight controller began a countdown.

"We good with that?" she asked CaptAI and AIngeener.

"Standing by for the mark," AIngeener replied.

The AIs were, of course, handling everything; she was just the mouthpiece. Still, she wanted to do it right. Although MilitAIre had assured her that there would be no record of any of the... peculiarities... that "Marianne Tepper" had periodically displayed during the duration of the flight, she found herself wanting to make sure that she played the part well enough that, if she ever applied to work for Sirius Shipping again, they'd be glad to welcome her back.

You never know what bridge you might need to cross again...

"...four... three... two... one... mark."

The *Nephrite Undine* shuddered slightly as the ion drives switched off and, less than a second later, the station's robo-tugs came in range and began tractoring it in.

Audrey consulted the screen by her left hand. Everything was green. *"Nephrite Undine to Plymouth Station A, I'm showing a good lock. You have the conn."*

"Roger that, Nephrite Undine. You will arrive at the gate in approximately twenty minutes. Welcome to the Plymouth System."

"Thanks, Plymouth Station A. I'm looking forward to seeing the sights." She switched off the comms and leaned back in the chair, sighing.

In less than half an hour, she would be turning over the *Nephrite Undine* to Sirius Shipping reps and disembarking... in the company of a WitSec handler who would undoubtedly be coming aboard along with the reps. MilitAIre had assured her that everything was in order, but she could feel her stage fright building nonetheless. Soon she would have to play a series of roles in quick succession, in front of a much less logical and predictable audience than she'd had for the last five months. In front of strangers.

And it wasn't even like she'd been *that* good at fooling the AIs until MilitAIre stepped in, either.

"I'm gonna miss you guys," she said. She wished there was some way she could take them with her. Inhuman and unreadable or not, they had become genuine friends.

"We will miss you too, Marianne," CaptAI said. "Thank you for a lovely run-in flight. We have enjoyed your company immensely."

She wished she could offer to stay in touch with them. But Marianne Tepper would, more or less, cease to exist once she left Plymouth Station A for Deckard's World. Her handler would have all the arrangements, she assumed. But she would probably spend the next month and a half, until her biological fourteenth birthday had passed, incommunicado.

"You're welcome," she said, once she had her voice under control. It had been on the verge of breaking for a moment. "Thank *you* for a wonderful flight. You're a fantastic crew."

She spent the next fifteen minutes visiting each of the AIs to say individual good-byes and thank-yous, finishing up in the Security Room.

"I... don't even know where to start," she told MilitAIre. "Thank you... so much. I don't think I'd have had a chance if you hadn't stepped in."

The strategy he had built for her was elegant, complex, and comprehensive, taking into account things that she could never have anticipated. Four months of his tutelage had left her aware of just how much she still had left to learn, too. She hoped her new handler would be even a fraction as adept as he was.

"You're welcome, Audrey." He, alone of all the AIs, could call her that. The rest only knew Marianne. "I know you will be in very good hands. And I believe we will meet again."

"I hope so. I just—"

With a soft shudder, the ship came to a stop.

"Time for you to meet your boarding party, Audrey. Godspeed."

She really wished he had a physical presence; she needed to give him a proper goodbye hug.

Her bag was already waiting for her at the airlock. She checked the seals, confirming that everything was ready, and pressed her palm to the security plate, authorizing the connection. As the airlock doors slowly opened, she took a deep breath.

Showtime...

Four people were waiting on the other side of the doors. Two of them carried large, heavy looking tech cases.

People. Actual living *people*. She had to suppress the urge to fling her arms around them and kiss them.

"Permission to come aboard, Acting Captain Tepper?" a dark haired man dressed in an expensive suit asked.

"Permission granted," she replied, stepping back to make room for the party.

The suit nodded at the two technicians, who nodded to her as they passed.

“I’m Kyle Hanoran,” he told her. “Vice President of Plymouth System Operations for Sirius Shipping. I’ll be managing the hand-off. This,” and he turned and gestured at the woman still standing on the other side of the airlock threshold, “is Susan Travers. I believe she is the immigration agent you requested.”

MilitAIre had told her that that would be the cover story. It didn’t quite match up with the explanation she’d sent Nguyen when she had declined the posting on the *Major Barbara* and requested the *Nephrite Undine* instead, but it had reframed that explanation and would stand up to most scrutiny. Audrey wasn’t sure if Travers was her handler or was just going to transport her to whomever had been assigned that role, but she knew what was expected of her either way.

“Yes, thank you. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. Hopefully, after my family’s issues are resolved, I can apply for another posting with Sirius. I’ve really liked working for you.”

Hanoran, who undoubtedly had been given access to the carefully seeded gossip, smiled and nodded. “We hope you will.”

Yeah, he knew the “truth” about Marianne Tepper that MilitAIre had spread: her father, who had settled on Deckard’s World, was supposedly dying of a rare cancer that still had no treatment or cure, and she had requested the posting on the *Nephrite Undine* so that she could come stay with him through his final days. Nguyen, Abecassis, and Davidov, along with several other execs, had sent her sympathy “cards” via the beacons two weeks earlier after the story had begun to circulate. She had sent thank you “cards” back to each of them.

It was, she reflected, the best way to make sure that nobody wondered why she wasn’t applying for another position. And it meant that, should she ever need to use the Marianne Tepper identity again, all the bridges associated with it would remain unburnt. That was yet another thing that hadn’t even occurred to her when she was planning her voyage.

She was going to miss MilitAIre’s nuanced strategies.

He’d even taught her chess. She was *really* going to miss playing it with him. Even if she’d never won a single game.

It only took a few minutes to sign over authority of the ship to Hanoran. As the technicians returned to the airlock, they shook hands and she picked up her bag.

Was she going home, or *leaving* home? It suddenly felt like the latter. She knew every centimeter of the *Nephrite Undine* intimately, and suspected she would walk its corridors in her dreams for years to come, the way she sometimes still found herself in her grandparents’ house that had been sold when she was three. Lonely as the journey and ship had been at times, it had been a mostly peaceful interlude. Mostly.

The technicians fell in behind her and Travers as they walked into the station.

“We’ll be leaving for the surface right away,” Travers told her, and handed her an envelope. “Your paperwork is inside.”

The paperwork, Audrey knew, would include a replacement ID card with her adjusted height on it. She would still be “Marianne Tepper” until they had reached the surface and entered the safe house; after that, the name would be retired indefinitely.

She opened the envelope, nodding at Travers. “I appreciate all of this. I really do.”

She wondered how much the agent actually knew about her situation. The new ID card, she was interested to note, had an updated picture of her that MilitAIre must have captured at some point in the last few days, after EntertAIIn and First-AId had helped her dye her hair auburn. *1.78 meters tall... damn. Well, he would know...*

“It’s my pleasure,” Travers said in a crisply formal tone that didn’t speak to pleasure at *all*. Audrey found herself wondering just how many of the WitSec subjects the woman had dealt with were unsavory types.

Most of them, probably. While blameless witnesses to high crimes did end up under WitSec’s protection from time to time, MilitAIre had told her that the bulk of its subjects were criminals who had been persuaded to “flip” on their bosses, usually in exchange for clemency or even immunity where their own transgressions were concerned. If that was the norm, Travers would probably be disinclined to view her latest ward as a helpless innocent.

*Not like I actually **am** one, anyway...*

Being surrounded by so many living minds was *intoxicating*. The part of Audrey’s head that had been deadly silent for months was suddenly abuzz. It was a struggle to keep her mental “hands” to herself and not start reading people at random, but MilitAIre had warned her against that. They passed through the immigration and customs lines swiftly and efficiently, but she noticed that the only ones being subjected to intensive scrutiny in the lines were people with darker skin and “ethnic” attire.

Maybe, she found herself thinking again, this was a mistake. Did she really want to assimilate back into a world that treated people that way? Did she really want those kinds of bigoted thoughts trying to worm their way into her head? Coming, possibly, from people she liked?

*I only **have** to stay here until I’m officially eighteen, she reminded herself. I’ll have graduated from high school. Even if I’m not biologically eighteen yet, I’ll be a legal adult as far as Deckard’s World knows, and they won’t be able to hold me.*

WitSec, of course, still might. But she could continue under its protection somewhere else in the wider Federacy.

On the other side of the gauntlet, Audrey found herself in a familiar lounge. She’d disembarked there when she’d taken the shuttle up from Deckard’s World, before using some of her father’s security codes to sneak on board the *Cloaked Butterfly*. There was a weird sense of *unfamiliarity* about the space, though.

I’m six inches taller than I was when I last passed through here, she realized at last. Fortunately, her appetite had finally normalized in the last month, and it had been almost two months since she’d felt any bone-growth aches in her limbs. Hopefully, she thought, this was it and she wouldn’t get any taller.

Shuttles ran regularly; it was mid-afternoon in Settlement Point, so another one would be arriving soon. She got comfortable in her seat—as much as she could—observing the others in the room and trying to figure out *their* stories while she waited.

Tourists and campers, most of them, she decided. For all its backwater reputation, Deckard’s World was popular with people across the Federacy who wanted to get rustic, to “rough it” without being too far from civilization. Parts of the planet were even more frontiers-y than Shakti IV, and might have been an even more logical choice for Riddick to

go to ground in... if only the population's xenophobia hadn't meant that he'd have been subject to intense and hostile scrutiny the moment he tried to reach the surface.

He might be anywhere, she reflected, but he definitely was *not* on Deckard's World.

Most of the other people in the lounge had large amounts of luggage and camping equipment. Her single bag, containing barely any worldly possessions, was not at all the norm; other people-watchers would believe that she must work somewhere on the station and be commuting home, rather than that she had arrived on a Star Jumper after months of travel. Almost no one, even with stringent weight limits, traveled quite so unencumbered.

She took out her tablet and tapped into the local news headlines, careful to avoid any sections that might mention her disappearance. October 23, 2517 on the Federacy Standard Calendar, the heart of autumn or spring on old Earth, was late winter in the most heavily settled portion of Deckard's World. The second semester of school was well underway; American-style football had given way, in the *Settlement Point Monitor's* sports section, to basketball and ice hockey. It would be a blustery 24° Fahrenheit, with an 80% chance of snow, when they landed; Audrey glanced around the lounge again and noticed that almost everyone else in the room—and everyone with camping gear—was dressed in lighter clothes intended for summer.

They must be waiting for the shuttle to Wyndham Landing, she thought. October was late summer in Deckard's World's less populous northern hemisphere.

MilitAIre had told her to dress in her warmest clothes—which meant one of the sets of coveralls, provided by Sirius Shipping, over jeans and a nondescript shirt—and that she would be provided with a coat upon landing. She wondered how much her time spent offworld had thinned her blood; both New Athens and New Marrakesh had been in the hottest parts of their respective summers when she'd landed on them, and the crash planet had been an *oven* until the eclipse sharply cooled it down. She hadn't seen snow in more than a year of lived time.

The shuttle for Wyndham Landing arrived first and the lounge almost completely cleared out. Audrey continued catching up on headlines as she waited.

The *Settlement Point Monitor* hardly discussed any events beyond the Plymouth System, treating the rest of the Federacy as remote and irrelevant. One tiny article mentioned that the New Casablanca Spaceport on Tangiers Prime had reopened its damaged concourse, and a reopening date had been scheduled for the New Marrakesh Spaceport, after a “wave of terrorism” had struck the planet earlier in the year. Both aware of MilitAIre's instructions about reading texts for bias, and in full possession of the truth about both incidents and the man behind them, Audrey was swiftly disgusted to realize that the article heavily implied the involvement of Islamist radicals, possibly even connected to the New Taliban, in both explosions and other unnamed—and probably imaginary—incidents besides. Javor Makarov's name didn't even come up. The inconvenient truth, that a white man who had periodically sported a law enforcement badge had been behind two mass killings on a far more cosmopolitan world, had been swept out of the frame.

She hoped, suddenly, that Travers wasn't her handler. She couldn't imagine talking to the aloof, disinterested woman about how disconnected the articles she was reading were from actual reality, assuming her handler was even cleared to *know* that Audrey had been on Tangiers Prime and hadn't just been briefed on her “witness to a local mob hit” cover story.

She already missed talking to MilitAIre more than she'd ever expected. By the end of the journey, there had only been a small handful of painful moments in her run that she'd still been unable to discuss, and he'd finally, *gently*, told her that she should leave them be. He wasn't a psychologist, after all, and First-AId hadn't been cleared to hear them, so there was no point in setting off another panic attack trying to plumb them.

But she'd confided everything else to him, and the idea of having to do any of that all over again, with some new stranger, filled her with dread.

Hopefully, whoever it was would just have some dossier that MilitAIre had prepared for them to read and wouldn't feel a need to rehash all of it personally. Several of the girls in C Ward had griped about their psychiatrists getting replaced mid-treatment and the replacements forcing them to start again at Square One, making them not only lose ground, but also lose trust in the process.

Just roll with it. Whatever happens, the important part is that it breaks your trail and tells the 'verse that you could never possibly have been Jack B. Badd.

The rest could be improvised. If things turned bad, she had the emergency comm number General Toal had given her.

And if that didn't work...

It wasn't like she didn't know how to disappear.

Stop it. You haven't even met your handler yet. MilitAIre wouldn't fuck you over. It'll be okay.

The entertainment feeds, she thought, would be a decent distraction from her progressively darker thoughts. It'd be a good idea to know what the kids in her classes were watching and talking about.

Remakes. The Deckard's World division of Disney was doing remakes of "classic" twentieth century shows and movies. There was even a new feature article about it: the head of the production company explained that they were recreating everything shot-by-shot and line-by-line, *mostly*, but with the addition of tech, slang, and styles that contemporary Deckard's World audiences took for granted, because he thought their absence from the original shows was why those audiences weren't watching anymore. Viewership of the "classic staples" was continuing to drop.

Audrey sighed. *Or maybe it's because those shows aren't about them, and still won't be. They're about people who've been dead for five hundred years and a nation that's been gone for nearly as long, no matter how hard you try to revive it...*

The shuttle to Settlement Point arrived at that moment, preventing her from stewing over it and roiling up even more doubts.

Travers, she realized, had been watching her the whole time with a frown. This was going to be just delightful.

But, fortunately, she had actual work to do during reentry. She held her bag close, casting her "extra" senses over it, making sure that everything inside was absolutely rooted in U1 and nowhere else. She did the same with the clothes she was wearing, and then with herself. Her five-shape had a strange "presence" in twenty-six other 'verses now, but her *physical* presence needed to be 100% in U1 or she could die during the descent into and through Deckard's World's atmosphere.

She could still “feel” the other ’verses, but she wasn’t “in” any of them. Nothing she’d brought with her was crossing into them, either. She’d been scrupulous about making sure she physically stayed in U1 when the *Nephrite Undine* hadn’t been actively isomorphing, but she felt a need to make absolutely sure anew. Especially given what she would be doing on the way down.

Stowing her bag in front of her, she took her seat and strapped in. Travers had given her a window seat, ostensibly a privilege. But it put the WitSec agent between her and the aisle, ensuring that there would be no rabbiting. Audrey wondered how often that happened.

Probably a lot... Hardly anyone was in WitSec by choice, after all.

She closed her eyes as the shuttle disengaged from Plymouth Station A, slowing her breathing and beginning the meditation sequences that both SensAI and the *Apeiros* had developed with her. She needed to know what kind of world she was approaching in each ’verse she had access to.

Holy shit!

She opened her eyes, stifling a gasp, and shifted her vision to see more clearly what was in U612.

It’s a fucking gas giant in that ’verse! Holy shit! She was already *in* its upper atmosphere there, surrounded by orange-pink gases and strange particles swirling through the cabin.

Okay, she couldn’t visit U612, at all, while she was on the surface of Deckard’s World. Down on the surface, the atmosphere would probably be crushing. She let her awareness of that ’verse slide away, focusing on the others.

There were two more gas giants, not quite as large, one composed of bluish-green gases while the other’s heavy atmosphere was rust-colored. In U289g, Deckard’s World didn’t exist at all, and in U27, there was an asteroid belt instead of a planet. But the planet existed in 21 more ’verses, and it had a visible atmosphere in nine of them. Her fingers flew over her tablet as she made quick notes about what she was seeing, and where.

U322a was one of the nine with an atmosphere. *How weird would it be if there was a habitable world in Elsewhere here, too?*

The shuttle’s descent through the atmosphere was fascinating. Four of the other atmospheres, including the one in Elsewhere, seemed almost identical to the one in Deckard’s World. Three of the others were far thicker, and two were significantly thinner. It was weird, discovering what she could sense even without physically engaging with any of the other worlds.

“We should be landing in another twenty minutes,” Travers said beside her. “When we disembark, let me do all of the talking.”

Audrey nodded. She leaned back in her seat so she could survey the skies now above her in multiple worlds. Elsewhere, and one other world, had blue skies. In U612 and the two other gas giant ’verses, stygian darkness surrounded her aside from periodic flashes of lightning.

Any time I’m in the mood to watch a thunderstorm, I’ll have one handy, she thought. In two other ’verses, she would already be underwater. There was a third ’verse where she was surrounded by some kind of liquid, but she was pretty sure it wasn’t *water*.

She made more notes as they descended toward Settlement Point.

Twenty-four of her other 'verses were definitely *not* habitable, but several of them had interesting properties that she might, *cautiously*, explore sometime in the future. Two—including Elsewhere—were still potentially promising.

Landing clinched it; she was in the middle of a forest in Elsewhere, and a rolling meadow in U74. The vegetation was almost, but not quite, Earthlike. She might just have a safe place, or even two, to isomorph over to if she needed out of U1.

It'd be so crazy if every planet in Elsewhere was already habitable...

She put her tablet away, picked up her small bag, and followed Travers out of the shuttle and into the Settlement Point Interplanetary Spaceport, aware that the two technicians who had boarded the *Nephrite Undine* were ahead of them, still carting around their huge, heavy boxes.

Two checkpoints later—she'd been asked to show her ID twice, but had let Travers do all the talking, as asked—they reached the main terminal and its three-story wall of glass. Snow swirled on the other side of the glass; she'd seen the storm approaching even as they had touched down.

"We're a little underdressed," Travers said. "Our contact is running late because the roads are already bad in Settlement Point itself. We probably won't reach the house until after dark."

Audrey nodded. Huge fish were swimming through the cavernous terminal over in U115. One headed straight for her and she had to resist the temptation to duck.

Having a five-shape that was 27 'verses wide was going to take some getting used to.

The weird thing was that she wasn't having any trouble telling *which* 'verse things were happening in. It was like some strange form of depth perception, or another kind of sense of direction. She didn't know *how* she knew things about the different worlds, but she could identify the 'verses, and their relative positions to her, as easily as she could bring her fingertip to the tip of her nose with her eyes closed.

Five-dimensional critter, right here...

And, if all went well, the Quintessa Corporation would never know she existed, or *could* exist.

It occurred to Audrey, for the first time, that none of the 'verses she'd expanded into were the universe of darkness she'd sensed in and around the envoy. Even U37d, creepy as it had felt when she'd first encountered it, seemed perfectly ordinary now—as ordinary as any alternate universe could be, anyway—its version of Deckard's World thin-atmosphered and volcanic but not even slightly eldritch. Even the darkness of the gas giants was missing the chthonic horror that had swirled around that elderly woman and polluted her touch.

She hoped she'd never find that hellish 'verse.

The snow outside of the windows was growing thicker as the sky darkened, and the contact still hadn't arrived. Audrey called up the Settlement Point weather report. Sometime during their descent, a Winter Storm Warning had been issued. Six inches was expected before morning.

Welcome home, Audrey MacNamera...

Flights and liftoffs, she noticed, were losing their ETDs, the words DELAYED and even CANCELED appearing in place of the time codes. Some of the ETAs were listed as delayed, too.

Yeah, that's not inauspicious at all...

Half an hour later, the forecast had upped the expected snow accumulation to eight inches. The terminal was emptying out.

"Shit," Travers muttered.

"What's wrong?" Audrey asked her, frowning.

"I need you to turn away from the window wall," Travers said. "There's a news crew arriving to cover all the flight cancellations, as if this doesn't happen with *every* snowstorm. You can't be on vid."

Audrey nodded, turning so that she faced away from the entrance and sprawling across the empty seats as if sleepy. She used her bag as a pillow, draping one of her shirts over her face as if trying to block the light and catch a nap; even if someone turned a camera on her, they wouldn't get a shot of her face. That was the most important thing, obviously.

"You're good at this," Travers observed. By her tone, that wasn't entirely complimentary.

"Had some practice," Audrey sighed. Hopefully, with her face obscured, no one catching a glimpse of some random, lanky redhead in Sirius Shipping coveralls would be reminded of either Audrey MacNamera *or* Jack B. Badd.

Another half hour passed before Travers told her that the news crew had moved on. Ten minutes later, their contact finally showed up.

He was a big bear of a man, probably some nine inches or so taller than Audrey. He arrived with thick winter coats for both her and Travers, leading the two of them out to an all-terrain vehicle that wasn't doing a very good job of concealing its military affiliations. A cold-eyed man in its driver's seat gave her a quick look-over as she climbed in, and then ignored her.

The drive was completely silent. Audrey didn't try to touch any of their minds; if they were military, there was the possibility that they would recognize the signs of an esper getting mentally handsy with them, and that could upend the game. If they were her handlers, she'd get to know them soon enough. And if not, then maybe it was better not to have tried to know them, anyway.

The next month and a half, she thought, could be even lonelier than the voyage on the *Nephrite Undine* had felt at times. Human presences didn't necessarily mean human *contact*.

I still have the Apeiros, at least...

The roads were almost deserted, but Audrey had a feeling that the part of town she was traveling through was barely inhabited even in good weather. Large, abandoned-looking warehouses crowded the road, and no plows had come through. Weirdly enough, it looked a lot like the kind of place she'd visualized the fictional murder she'd supposedly witnessed taking place in.

The abandoned warehouses gave way to boarded-up businesses, and then a down-on-its-luck area that had a mixture of actual businesses and places that had closed down. The vehicle slowed to a stop in front of a three-story building, its ground-floor windows all covered with graffitied plywood, an Under New Management sign on its door visible thanks to a rare working light above it.

A dark van was also parked in front of the building. As Audrey watched, two familiar men emerged from the lit entry, nodded to her companions, climbed into the van, and drove away.

Hadn't those been the men that had accompanied Hanoran and Travers? She almost hadn't recognized them without their boxes and bundled against the storm.

Huh.

Neither of the men in her vehicle got out. Travers, and Travers alone, escorted her to the door of the building and ushered her inside.

“Your handler is already here,” Travers said, terse as ever. “He’ll explain everything to you. I’m not cleared to meet him. Good luck.”

And that was it. A moment later, Audrey was alone in the building, the front entry locking behind Travers with a loud click. She felt utterly alone, as if the building was completely deserted aside from some *small* presences that she suspected were mice in the basement. Bright light spilled out of a doorway ahead of her. Taking a deep breath, she walked through it.

The room beyond was strangely similar to the Security Room on the *Nephrite Undine*. She wondered if someone had done that to set her at ease, or if security rooms just had a standard look—

“Hello, Audrey,” a voice she knew almost as well as her own, and hadn’t really expected to hear again, drawled.

Holy shit. She really should have seen this coming.

66.

In From the Cold, Into the Cold

“Oh, well *played*,” Audrey said once she could manage to speak. “You didn’t give anything away.”

“I will endeavor to make sure that you achieve the same level of circumspection,” MilitAIre told her, his voice merry.

The moment she had heard his “Boston” accent emerge from the speakers, everything had made sudden, perfect sense.

“Well, you were right,” she told him, sitting down in a rolling office chair as enormous relief made her knees wobbly. “We’re meeting again, and I’m definitely in good ‘hands.’”

“And not just mine,” he told her. “General Toal is using our unique situation as a test-run for AI-managed safe houses. He believes that we might make more effective handlers than human beings. Less prone to bias, bribery, or coercion.”

“‘We?’” Audrey asked, looking around. The boxes that the technicians had brought with them were open and empty near a set of panels that, she remembered, had housed the AI mainframe cores on the *Nephrite Undine*. There weren’t quite as many panels as there had been on the ship, though.

“I’m a precise digital clone of the ‘MilitAIre’ AI that you interacted with on board the *Undine*. Clones of ‘SensAI,’ ‘First-AId,’ ‘EntertAIIn,’ and ‘CommissAIry’ have accompanied me here, all of whom now have been given full disclosure about *you*. I apologize that the other four could not accompany us. Their skill-sets don’t mesh as well with the needs of a safe house, and the General needed to keep this test affordable. I’m happy to send them messages from ‘Marianne Tepper’ on your behalf, though.”

“I’d love that,” she admitted. She would definitely miss CaptAIIn, AIngeener, mAIntenance, and mAIttron, but she could see why they wouldn’t suit a safe house as well. Their minds were specifically designed for starships. “Do they know that you’re with me?”

“No, but they know that their iteration of me was in charge of you, in an unspecified capacity. I’ll send messages to him, and he’ll pass them on to the rest of the AI crew. No one will question it.”

“I was afraid I wouldn’t have a way to stay in touch with any of you, once I stopped being Marianne.”

“I know. General Toal instructed me not to tell you until we were absolutely certain that the data cloning would be successful, which we didn’t know for sure until well after you had landed.”

Was that the real reason, she wondered, that it had taken so long for the contact to reach the spaceport? Would she have been taken to a different building if the techs hadn’t been able to set things up the way they needed to?

“What was Plan B, if that hadn’t worked?”

“A few days with a human handler, while a new MilitAIre was installed on the *Undine* and my original iteration was brought down here, officially for hardware repairs. In that circumstance, you would have only had me.”

“And God only knows what he would have fed you,” CommissAIry interjected, still sounding stereotypically French. “Hello again, Audrey. That name is every bit as lovely as Marianne.”

“Hello, CommissAIry!” Audrey sagged back even further in the chair. “I was going to miss you and your cooking *so* much.”

It was amazing, she reflected later, how much trusted friends could turn a cold, dark building into a place of light and warmth. The safe house was still in the process of being set up—more equipment would arrive in the days to come, now that the AIs had been successfully installed—and she would be making do with basic rations until all of CommissAIry’s food synthesis gear arrived, but she didn’t care. She could handle it. She felt, suddenly, like she could handle *anything*.

First-AId, likewise, was awaiting all of the equipment *she* needed for a proper full-service infirmary. The office suite that had been set aside for her, up on the second floor, would become the place where Audrey received all future medical care. Discussions about expanding First-AId’s patient roster to include emergency care for local Federacy agents, which had apparently been underway, had stalled abruptly when MilitAIre had demanded assurances that such traffic wouldn’t expose the safe house and put it, and its primary ward, at risk. Audrey might be her only patient for the next several years.

“I need my library installed,” EntertAIin noted. “I have all of your settings and preferences—those came down with me—but the library itself takes up three exabytes. Assuming the WitSec program can acquire the same licensures that Sirius Shipping had. We’re *all* going to be ‘roughing it’ for a few days. Especially poor SensAI.”

Audrey had checked out all of the rooms in the building by then, and the recreation area set aside for SensAI currently had no holo projectors. It would be difficult for him to lead her, or anyone else, in exercises without them. She tried not to feel too much amusement at how *miffed* the AIs were about the safe house’s “half-baked”—in CommissAIry’s words—state. It already had more than she had hoped for, just by having *them* in it at *all*.

It took two weeks to configure everything in the safe house, although CommissAIry was already set up enough to overload her with candy by Halloween. Audrey spent most of the days, as workers came and went, dressed in a bizarre costume designed to conceal whether she was male or female, complete with a face-covering mask that also changed her voice when she needed to speak to the workers. None of the crews were apparently cleared to know that the building would be run by AIs; Audrey became their spokesperson whenever they needed to make requests of, or give instructions to, any of the workers. Travers came back twice to supervise specific projects, asking both times if “Marianne” was settling in well, unaware that she was *speaking* to her.

The AIs wouldn’t let Audrey go trick-or-treating, though. Which, she supposed, was a good thing when another surprise snowstorm rolled in shortly after dusk.

Cameras, microphones, and hologram projectors ended up being installed in every room and corridor of the building. MilitAIre had been surprised when Audrey, herself, had advocated for that, and had even argued against omitting bedrooms and bathrooms.

“Like bad things won’t ever happen in those rooms,” she’d scoffed. “None of you are gonna be *perving* on anything you see in them. You can blur out the parts of my body that would be illegal to record, right?”

“This is true,” MilitAIre said. “And it would be particularly illegal to record them where you are concerned, given your age... but blurring is a good courtesy for anyone staying in a safe house. Full surveillance with discretion... and the ability of the surveilled to request privacy if they wish. We understand that most humans have moments that they would prefer not to have recorded.”

“As long as *you* keep in mind anyone planning an attack would be looking for those kinds of openings,” Audrey pointed out. “Riddick told me, back when we were killing time on the skiff, that he’d wait for his targets to get up to no good and start covering their tracks, ’cause that meant they were covering *his*, too. He’d let *them* do all the work of concealing the circumstances of their own murders.”

“Fascinating. His records do indicate that he targeted working criminals much of the time, and frequently killed them when they were ‘on the job.’ He *volunteered* this information?”

“Yeah. I think he told me about it as a kind of fuck-you to Imam. Whenever *he* was awake, he’d fuss if we said more than ‘boo’ to each other. But Riddick also told me that because he wanted me to stay *out* of under-surveilled places. He said all *kinds* of criminals look for the places where nobody’ll see them strike, and especially because I’m a girl, I need to stay away from camera ‘dead zones.’ He said you have to watch yourself twice as hard in the places where nobody else is watching you, and he said I’d be better off having some ‘random pervo’ I never even met ‘fapping’ to a picture of me than some ‘sick fuck’ actually on top of me.”

It pissed her off, though, that those were still the only two “choices” he thought she’d have in broad swathes of the Federacy. Wasn’t humanity supposed to be more advanced than that?

Most of it is, she reminded herself. *You’ve seen people who are, and even lived with some of them. You never had to balance those kinds of risks when you were staying with the Mezianes.*

Then again, Safiyya had worried relentlessly on her *behalf* on a few occasions. There were still too many monsters in human form to make that wariness unnecessary, and she had encountered examples of them on either side of her time with the Mezianes. And, she admitted, such monsters could be *anywhere*.

“That was good advice,” MilitAIre said after a brief pause. “And well taken here, too. Someone wishing to launch an attack on a safe house ward would time it for a moment in which that ward sought out privacy and was no longer under direct surveillance. The resulting delay in, or absence of, a response from the security system could increase the chance of a successful strike. I must discuss this with General Toal. There are a lot of arguments about ‘surveillance states’ and ‘government overreach’ that have to be addressed, especially on a planet like Deckard’s World, but within the context of Witness Security, most of them probably wouldn’t apply. Are you *sure* you’re all right with having the cameras in your bedroom and bathroom?”

“Better you guys than some Duke Pritchard type,” she told him, “any day.”

The addition of the holo equipment, everywhere that there were cameras, also meant that all of the AIs could “manifest” themselves, aside from just SensAI. That led to discussions about the importance of body language and eye contact for human interaction, and Audrey’s

admission that, during her flight on the *Nephrite Undine*, she'd used the recreation area more frequently than she normally might have *because* SensAI's visual representation made her feel less alone.

"This is important information for us to pass onto Sirius Shipping," First-AId said when she finally admitted that. "They spent a great deal of time choosing our voices, to make them as warm and comforting as possible. The argument they made for not giving all of us holo forms was the 'uncanny valley' risk. If we weren't one hundred percent authentically human in our appearance, guests would find us repulsive and might not even realize why."

"I guess it wouldn't be necessary on a ship where the guests have other flesh and blood passengers to interact with," Audrey mused. "But any situation of isolation... I don't think SensAI's image ever felt off or inhuman to me. But I think, even if it had... it'd still have been more comforting than no contact at all."

They still hadn't settled on their preferred "bodies," but the ones they tried out were always interesting.

She and First-AId did end up spending time unpacking many of the things that she'd told MilitAIre about her time on the run. Although the medical AI had full access to all of the transcripts of her discussions with MilitAIre, he had approached her experiences from a strategic and tactical perspective, while First-AId wanted to delve into the psychology and do trauma-healing.

It soon became clear to all three of them that there were several memories that were still too much for her to handle, especially on their tight schedule. The *Kublai Khan*, with its menageries of suffering prisoners, turned out to be one of the biggest minefields in her head. To her, that wasn't even the ship's *real* name... it was "the ship that was *screaming*."

"An esper, who didn't know she was an esper and had never learned how to deliberately block out others' thoughts, surrounded by tortured prisoners who were all mentally shrieking for rescue..." First-AId finally murmured. "Every memory you have of that time has been poisoned by it. Whenever we discuss even the simplest elements of your stay there, your heart rate increases by at least twenty beats per minute and your blood pressure increases by an average of twelve systolic and eight diastolic. I agree with MilitAIre's original assessment that you need to try to block out this part of your run from your memories, if you can."

Maybe, she thought, it had been a good thing that she hadn't had time to share that part of her story with Kyra or the Mezianes.

"The *Apeiros* wouldn't take it away," she reported back the next day. "They say I'm going to need too much of it, even if it *is* uncomfortable. So... I guess... I just need to try not to think about it."

The easiest way, she found, was to imagine that it had happened to "Jack," and not her. To imagine Jack as a separate person, who had seen and even done terrible things... but wasn't *her*. She'd already begun doing that with some of the other memories that had proved too troublesome. The things she couldn't look at were things that had happened to Jack. And Jack was dead.

Maybe if she kept saying it, the day would come when she believed it.

First-AId had then attempted to speak with the *Apeiros* through her, via hypnosis. Afterward, Audrey had a new hole in her memories and none of the AIs would discuss what they had apparently learned during the three-hour session she'd lost. The *Apeiros*, when she

went into their starfield that night, refused to discuss it either, although they all agreed that the AIs were “good creatures.”

Kyra, whenever she inquired about her sister, was still “dreaming of a world with three suns.” Still in cryo. Wherever she had decided to go, it must have been *far* away from Tangiers Prime.

The Moribund was still silent. When she asked, the other *Apeiros* said that it had been avoiding contact with her ever since her screaming fit. She wasn’t sure whether she should feel relieved or guilty, but in truth, she felt both ways at the same time.

A week after the hypnosis debacle, General Toal ordered hand-to-hand combat training added to Audrey’s routine. A human trainer arrived for an hour each day, although she was never allowed to see his face and he was never allowed to see hers, and they sparred under SensAI’s trenchant supervision.

The Safe House was in a hardscrabble part of town, but properties were apparently easier to acquire there. Officially, the outside of the building now claimed that it was home to a security consulting firm. To sell the charade, three local Federacy agents, who were never allowed to see her face either, had offices on the first floor, which they periodically visited during working hours. Audrey grew accustomed to having her costume on and mask handy whenever she needed to be down on the first floor.

“Surprise” Quantification tests happened with greater and greater frequency. Her passing rate slowly climbed from 50% of the time to 80%. On the academic end, MilitAIre tested her repeatedly and told her that she would easily qualify to join her former peers as they began their tenth grade year.

November turned from snowy to rainy. She managed to finish reading *The Crystal Cave* by striking a bargain with the *Apeiros*: they would take away her memories of the train ride and standoff just long enough for her to reread the story without any emotional baggage, and then return them once she and the AIs had finished discussing the book and its meanings. This, she told them, would also be proof that they really could one day return the *rest* of the memories they’d made off with, an act of goodwill.

She ended up liking the book so much, even once she remembered the train ride and standoff again, that she devoured its three sequels over the next week.

And, she admitted to herself, it was a relief to *know* that the *Apeiros* really could give her the rest of her lost moments back, that the “holes” in her memory were not empty as much as shrouded spaces that would one day be uncovered again. She and EntertAIIn had a long discussion about the character she had been most drawn to in the books, Nimue, and why the woman who had disguised herself as a boy, for a chance to be taught magic by a wizard, resonated so strongly with her. EntertAIIn told her there was a whole *trope* about heroines disguising themselves as boys, and put several more books—a fantasy series called *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn* among them—and videos including a film called *Dragonslayer*, into her recreational queues.

Thanksgiving arrived with the first “open window” day in Settlement Point. It was still early spring, but the temperature had risen to a glorious 77° Fahrenheit, 25° Celcius, and Audrey could hear the laughter and shouting of kids a block or two away.

CommissAIry decided to take Audrey on a “culinary adventure” of different traditional Thanksgiving foods, most of which were more typically autumn fare, while EntertAIIn and

MilitAIre acquainted her with various legends about the holiday and the truths behind them. The holiday, when they were done, made much more sense to her than the odd portrayals she'd grown up with involving "Pilgrim Joe," "Turkey Sue," and "Pumpkin Bob." Those characters had apparently evolved on Deckard's World itself and had proved so popular that they had overwritten most of the original American traditions. But she supposed some adaptation was necessary for anyone who wanted to celebrate a *harvest* holiday in early spring.

Cautious explorations of both Elsewhere and U83f, which Audrey nicknamed Wonderland, revealed that they were both habitable and welcoming worlds. Although she didn't spend a whole lot of time in either one—it was early spring in both of them, too—she and the AIs agreed that she should continue exploring them in the future. Until she went back "out into the cold," though, they were the only "outdoor" environments she was permitted to venture into. As far as the local neighborhood was concerned, she didn't—and couldn't—exist.

December arrived and, a few days in, Audrey MacNamera was biologically fourteen years old at last. The AIs and the *Apeiros* marked the day with her. There were gifts—most of them virtual but surprisingly meaningful nonetheless—and an extraordinary cake that CommissAIry had invented based on her "taste profile," which she told him she'd like to have again for *every* birthday.

The auburn hair dye had washed most of the way out by then. Her hair was halfway to her shoulders, verging between dark blonde and mousy brown thanks to how little she had been in the sun in months. EntertAIin and First-AId announced it was time to begin preparing her appearance for her return to her family, starting with some camouflage to make sure that no one would believe she had shaved her head the year before. For the next week, as final preparations were underway for her return to her old life, she received special hair growth treatments until her locks once more touched the small of her back. They lightened the hair as well, until she looked—in her opinion, at least—like a funhouse-mirror elongated reflection of the girl who had cut off her hair, put on her cousin's discarded clothes, and run off to the stars more than a year of lived time and nearly two years, real-time, before.

Welcome back, Audrey MacNamera, she silently told her reflection, before asking the AIs to give her bangs in front. She wanted to look a little more like *Tislilel Meziane*, the way Ewan had last seen *her*. Even if it did twist the knife a little. She'd never get to be "Tizzy," or see *him*, again.

Were *any* of the girls she'd once been still alive inside her? The naïve fool, the cocky outlaw, the besotted mermaid...

Who, exactly, was going home to Bettie Paige Hawthorne-Baxter?

Audrey had liked it much better when her mom had been Bettie Paige MacNamera.

Sundays, the AIs decided with her, would be Safe House Days. She would be required to report to the house first thing in the morning—in part because recent intel had revealed that Alvin Baxter had developed an evangelical bent in the last year and a half and would undoubtedly try to insist on "the whole family" attending church services unless that was a fight he couldn't win, and Audrey's relationship with religion was rocky at best—and would stay most of the day. During that time, her combat training would continue, any medical treatments she needed would be provided, and the AIs would help her evaluate and critique the events and news of the week and identify any possible threats.

“And,” CommissAIry informed her with unrepentant glee, “you will go on *three* culinary adventures!”

She would return to her mother’s house at the end of the day, an hour before official curfews began for minors and even in time for some evening “family time,” but the bulk of the day would belong to her and to her handlers.

Friday, December 17, they decided, would be the day of her return. She was hitting 100% on the surprise Quantifications at long last. She’d figured out the trick of switching her brain into “baseline mode” on command... *finally*. And it had been four months since she’d uttered a single syllable in her sleep. It would be safe for her to go “out into the cold.” All her secrets were tucked away where none of her loved ones would ferret them out.

So why was she so damned *scared*?

The day arrived.

It was exactly a year, real-time anyway, since she had tried to kill herself on Helion Prime. A year since she had tried to end Jack B. Badd, believing Audrey MacNamera forever lost. And now Audrey MacNamera... or a convincing facsimile... would return home.

The scars on her wrists had been concealed. First-AId had asked if she wanted them removed, but—

“Scars are trophies,” Kyra had once said...

—while she’d chosen to keep them, she intended to keep them hidden until they faded even more, and until nobody was especially scrutinizing her anymore. The pseudo-skin layer that covered the scars would be retouched during each weekly safe house visit.

It was 58° Fahrenheit at dawn, and the temperature would rise into the mid-70s. She had dressed in a simple outfit for the “handoff,” jeans and two light, layered shirts for changeable weather, a pair of the ankle-high, flat-soled boots that girls in her class apparently *lived* in that season, and no adornments or identifying brand names of any kind. She had a comm in her pocket, government issue and locked against anyone but her. The chrono on her wrist was locked in place by a band that only her code, or a code transmitted by MilitAIre, could remove. Both devices were registered as Federacy property, assuming anyone got that far in tracing them before being ordered to stop. Anonymous, untraceable... a quintessential WitSec ward.

With one more deep breath, she climbed into the car parked in front of the safe house and isomorphed into Wonderland—there were too many trees in Elsewhere for what she would need to do, but this part of Wonderland was a flat, sandy plain—holding onto the interior’s surfaces as “delimiters.” Five minutes later, one of the Federacy agents emerged from the safe house, climbed into the driver’s seat, and drove it to the center of Settlement Point near the main courthouse. He had been instructed to idle the car for two minutes—unaware that a phantom teenage girl was climbing out of the back as he did—receive a package from a courier, and then leave. As far as he would ever know, the courier’s package had been his whole mission.

Audrey walked over to a nearby park, watching the countdown on her chrono. When it hit zero, she knew, all the cameras in range of the park would go down for five minutes. She made sure she was in no one’s line of sight before isomorphing back into U1. Her “targets” were up ahead, sitting on a bench and facing away from her.

“Man, I hate this shit,” one of them, a sandy-haired man dressed in a mid-line three-piece suit, said as she drew closer.

“Ain’t the worst assignment,” the other one answered. He wore a police uniform.

“Picking up a WitSec case? Those people are *garbage*. If it’s Denny the Knob, you might need to look away for a few minutes. I owe that bastard a few bruises.”

“Word is it’s some material witness, not a criminal,” the cop objected.

“I’ll believe it when I—” the first man froze, hearing her boots crunch the path’s gravel, and turned around to look at her. His eyes widened. “What the...?”

Assistant District Attorney Alvin Baxter’s mouth dropped open as he stared at her.

The cop next to him, a freckled redhead who looked *maybe* a year older than Ewan, turned and stared as well. “Isn’t that...?”

“*Audrey?*” Alvin gasped.

She’d known that he’d be the one assigned to the pickup, but it was still a rough moment. She could feel his shock, and a weird combination of relief—she was alive, she looked healthy—and horror at the realization that *she* was the material witness he’d been assigned to pick up. His *stepdaughter* had reappeared in a way that he hadn’t even imagined when he’d been picturing worst-case scenarios. What was he going to tell her mother—?

She forced herself to block off his mind. She didn’t want to hear or feel any more of that. As it was, her voice wobbled when she spoke. “I’m ready to go home now.”

At least, she thought, struggling not to cry would be “in character.”

They took her to the nearest police station, which was in the basement of the courthouse, exactly as MilitAIre had predicted.

Brief attempts to confiscate her comm and chrono, to make her change out of the clothes she was wearing so they could be analyzed, and to record more than her basic biometrics, were all brought to a screaming halt by Federacy directives to the contrary. Each time someone tried, every comm in the precinct would ring and the same authoritative voice would speak on each one, instructing everyone to cease what they were doing immediately. The basic biometric readings they were permitted to take confirmed that she was Audrey Hepburn MacNamera, missing since January 30, 2516, and that she was a legal ward of Federacy Witness Security. Eventually, the precinct Captain emerged from his office and testily informed everyone that he’d been given ground rules and strict instructions for how Audrey was to be “reintegrated” into civilian life. He didn’t seem enthused.

It was all so fucking *dramatic*. She could only imagine how much more dramatic it would have been, and how fast the stories would have unraveled, if General Toal, MilitAIre, and the actual WitSec department hadn’t taken charge of the whole process and it had been entirely dependent on whatever ruses she’d cooked up on her own.

“Audrey? Audrey! Where’s my *daughter?*”

She took a deep breath. Her mother had arrived. Standing up, she braced herself and turned toward the entrance of the police station—

“Mom...” Her voice was the tiniest thread. Behind her, Alvin rose from his seat.

Bettie Paige Hawthorne-Baxter was hurrying into the building, looking around frantically. She wouldn’t see Audrey yet; *she* was in one of the small interview rooms, a one-way mirrored glass window between them. She had a moment to look at her mother, see her for the first time in more than a year...

...and see, perched on her mother's hip, the *reason* for everything that had happened. The reason her father had left so abruptly, needing to go to a whole other *planet* to escape his heartbreak. The reason that Alvin had reappeared in their lives after almost going away forever. The reason for the sudden wedding announcement and its inordinate rush...

...the reason that Audrey MacNamera would *never* have left Deckard's World at *all*, not *ever*, if only she'd *known*...

Elodie Jane Hawthorne-Baxter, sixteen months old.

Her baby sister.

67.

Suspended in the Tangled Web

“Oh no, sweetie, it’s okay! Don’t cry!”

Audrey reached out, gathering Elodie up as her baby sister’s face crumpled. The little girl had been *fine* until their mother had started crying. And for some reason, what had set *her* off was the realization that Audrey had grown six full inches since her disappearance.

Alvin was hugging his wife already, trying to comfort her, so Audrey held Elodie close and rubbed her little sister’s back. *It’s okay*, she told the little girl silently. *Everything’s going to be okay.*

Elodie went quiet against her, sniffing but already relaxing. *Who...?*

She doesn’t know who I am yet, Audrey thought. And she wasn’t “sending” the way Sebby had; Audrey could only hear her thoughts because she was *listening* and deliberately touching her sister’s mind. Gently, carefully, she dug deeper, trying to see what kinds of concepts Elodie would understand.

She had a dozen words she could articulate easily, another two dozen that frustrated her because she couldn’t get her mouth to shape them properly—Audrey could remember feeling vexed like that when *she’d* been tiny—and a hundred more words that she understood when she heard them but couldn’t call up at will yet when she wanted them.

Family, Audrey told her. Elodie hadn’t yet met any of *Audrey’s* cousins, she realized; they were all children of her father’s siblings. But she had a Cousin Josephine on *her* father’s side. *Like Jo-Jo. But even closer.*

Alvin and her mother were watching the two of them, both looking stunned. Apparently Elodie was usually wary of strangers; the way she was now cuddling up to Audrey was unexpected.

The precinct Captain—Minter—walked into the interview room, shaking his head, and sat down with them. “I have all the paperwork here. I’d advise you to read it carefully before you sign it, but you *are* both lawyers so hopefully you don’t need that advice from me. It’s... not a *great* situation, but I guess we’ll make do with what we have.”

“What do you mean?” her mom demanded. “What’s wrong *now*?”

Minter sighed. “You’re not her legal guardians. You’re ‘interim custodians.’ She’s still legally a ward of the Federacy Witness Security program. Every Sunday she has to go back to them for ‘debriefing.’ Which, apparently, will take up the whole *day*. The rest of the time, she can stay with you, as long as some... stringent... conditions are met.”

“Such as?” Alvin growled.

“She can’t ever discuss where she was for the last twenty-two-plus months. She’s not allowed to talk about what she saw, who she’s been with, where she was kept, or any other particulars related to the case or cases she’s part of. You’re not allowed to ask her about any of it. The WitSec program is retaining all authority over her medical care, schooling, and

living accommodations, and reserves the right to take her back at any time. Any travel plans must be cleared with her handlers, especially if they include a Sunday.”

“I’m her *mother!* How the hell is this possible?”

“It’s...” Minter rubbed his face with one hand as if pushing back against a headache. “It’s honestly surprising they’re giving her back at all. I couldn’t get many details from my contacts in the program. Whatever it was that happened, the threat to her life was big enough that they couldn’t even tell law enforcement she was somewhere safe. You *know* what that means, Al.”

Alvin nodded tightly. He’d gone pale.

He’s thinking ‘organized crime,’ Audrey thought, pretending that she was too preoccupied with her sister to listen. *It’s a few orders of magnitude worse than that, but as long as he takes it seriously...*

“But something changed. They think it’s safe to return her now, but it might not be if anyone outside of their own ‘inner circle’ figures out *why* they took her. Shit, these kinds of cases... everybody in the precinct today has already been sent NDAs they have to sign if they want to keep their jobs and stay out of the glue, even the fucking *janitor*. Yours are in the stack, too. Odds are all of our comms are gonna be tapped for *months*. None of us are allowed to tell anyone, on or off the record, who really had her all this time. Just... take her home and be happy you have her at all.”

It took an hour for her mother to read through all the fine print on the forms, and another half hour of arguing with Alvin before she agreed to sign everything, once she understood that those signatures were the only way she could take Audrey home—or ever see her again—at all. Audrey spent the whole time playing with Elodie, bonding with her beautiful baby sister.

“You need to tell John,” Alvin said as they finally drove home.

“Damn it, yeah... he’ll be relieved as hell to know she was somewhere on Deckard’s World the whole time,” her mother replied, her voice still wobbly. “He was so scared she’d —”

Her mother glanced warily back at her. She pretended to be entirely focused on playing with her little sister.

“He thought she’d show up on Furya,” her mother whispered, apparently still unaware of how *good* her hearing was, “and get Quantified. I’m amazed WitSec didn’t figure out what she is.”

So her mother had always known. The whole *thing* with the fortune teller had been, as MilitAire had surmised, about scaring her into hiding her abilities even from herself.

That, at least, was one of the traumas First-AID had been able to *fix*.

“A lotta people to call tonight,” Alvin said as he turned into a familiar part of town. Christmas lights and increasingly elaborate decorations adorned most of the houses they drove past. “I guess we need to figure out what we’re telling all of them.”

“Maybe just tell ’em I ran away and finally came home,” Audrey suggested.

“But they’ll think such awful things,” her mother protested.

“We can’t exactly take back the missing person posters,” Alvin pointed out. “Everybody knows we had no idea where she was. If we suddenly try to pretend that she was off at some boarding school, or in a hospital, they’ll know we’re lying. And if we say someone abducted

her... then we'll have to lie a whole lot more and keep a lot of stories straight. Simplest is best."

He caught her eyes in the rear-view mirror.

"Sorry kiddo, but we're gonna have to let everybody think you spent the last twenty-two months out on the streets somewhere."

She shrugged and nodded. It *was* what she'd suggested, after all. *Everybody's gonna think I'm the kind of kid Imam thought I was.*

She wondered how many of her old school friends would be forbidden to hang out with her by their parents. Not that hang-outs had happened all that often, even before...

MilitAIre had gone over, at length, the likely scenarios that people would spin out about where she'd been and what she'd done while she was missing. Thief. Drug addict. Kiddie prostitute. Sleeping on the streets, scavenging food from dumpsters. The kinds of stories that *nobody* included in the child-runaway adventure genre stories kids read, because they were *too* true, *too real*. Both her mother and Alvin were currently feeling relief that she'd been spared those scenarios, neither of them realizing that her actual path—even if she had been mostly spared sleeping on the streets—had been every bit as harrowing as any of the ones they could imagine.

Accomplice to a felon. Fugitive. Cybercriminal. Murderer. Jack B. Badd.

The scenarios people would come up with could never approach the darkness that had actually surrounded her... and slid inside her. She doubted anyone would come up with a story that was worse than the truth.

Audrey had mentally prepared herself for the weirdness of walking into her mother's house again, six inches taller than she'd left it, with Alvin and Elodie now living in it. It was still jarring.

The living room had been redone. The funny part was that it reminded her of the way it had looked when *she'd* been little. Her mom's preference for white furniture and carpeting had given way to the reality that babies, toddlers, and little kids were *stain magnets*, something Bettie Paige MacNamera had swiftly chosen to forget once Audrey had been old enough to shame into not climbing furniture. And, more specifically, once Audrey's father had moved out and she'd traded "MacNamera" back for "Hawthorne," and the "rustic" style John MacNamera had preferred for gleaming, white furniture that even the cats had feared to touch, much less sit upon.

That untouchable furniture was gone again. Alvin, evangelical streak aside, seemed to have some kindred tastes in décor to her own father, down to similar fishing trophies.

Huh. Maybe living with him would be less alien than she'd expected.

Esther, her sleek grey coat puffed out and her body flat to the floor, scuttled through the room and past, into the back hall, to hide in the basement. That had gone about as well as Audrey had expected. She wondered which pieces of furniture Goblin and Jade were hiding under.

The dining room hadn't changed much. Except...

Had they made some weird kind of shrine out of her spot at the table? Her favorite place-setting was out, and it looked... *dusty*.

The kitchen, at least, looked normal, although things had moved around a little.

By the door between the kitchen and dining room were a whole series of markings that had been made since she was younger than Elodie, measuring her height as she grew. The last one, labeled January 1, 2516, marked her as 5'4" tall.

This, she realized, was what her mother had been crying over. All the markings that had been missed in the intervening time, six inches' worth of growth, trips to stores for new shoes and clothes, the moment when the two of them would have been standing at eye level with each other before Audrey shot up again and passed her by... memories that could never be made, never be recovered. She could feel her mother struggling with it again.

"Looks like we need to make a new mark here, yeah?" she asked, trying to keep her own voice steady.

"Looks like," her mother answered, her voice breaking on the words.

Audrey turned around and hugged her before either of them could set Elodie off again. Alvin, his expression remarkably wise, took the little girl out of the room.

Not such an asshole after all...

After a while, they composed themselves and went upstairs.

She'd heard of parents turning their lost or missing children's rooms into shrines. She'd been warned that her mother might have done that while she was gone. It was still weird to see. To remember that she had once been the girl who had lived in this space...

Of course, she thought, most of the decorating had been done by her mother; she hadn't *had* very strong opinions about such things. Her mom had liked the white frills and lacy curtains. Most of the colors in the room were pastels. Audrey found herself wondering how much it might bother everyone if she changed it up. Maybe some brighter colors...

She realized that she was envisioning dressing it up like she and Kyra had dressed up first their apartment and then their room in the *ait Meziane* house. Bright colors and patterns, driftwood and shells... would it be safe, she wondered, to make those kinds of changes?

Maybe not right away. The fact that she'd come back with new tastes and interests was something that had to be slowly, subtly introduced.

Frills, pastels, and unicorns it is... for now, she thought, interested to note that the bedspread and pillowcases had been washed recently. They had been trying to keep the room ready for her to return at any moment. Part of her was a little amazed that it had paid off for them.

And part of her wondered if Audrey MacNamera would ever really come home to them at all.

She resolved to try *very hard* not to make her mother wonder the same thing.

None of the clothes are going to fit me anymore—

The doorbell rang. Both she and her mother turned toward the bedroom doorway as they heard Alvin walk over to the front door and open it.

"Alvin! Oh my God! Did I see *Audrey* get out of your car just a little while ago?"

Viola Trent, neighborhood gossip. *So it begins.*

Whatever they told Viola would be what the whole town ended up "knowing."

Her eyes met her mother's, and she saw the same resigned knowledge in them. "Here we go," her mother mouthed.

"You did, Viola. Audrey's back home." Alvin was managing to sound extremely friendly, which Audrey found a little amazing. Twenty-three months of having her for a neighbor

ought to have tried his patience by now.

“That’s wonderful news! Where has she been? Is she all right? We were all talking about how there’d be another vigil in just a few more weeks—”

“She’s fine. She’s settling back in. We’re just glad to have her back home where she’s safe.”

“You might want to call the family now before *she* does,” Audrey whispered, and watched her mother’s eyes widen in alarm at the thought.

“I’ll message their comms,” her mother whispered back, sitting down on her bed.

It was a simple message, sent simultaneously to everyone in the family—including, Audrey noticed, her father all the way on Furya, although that message would probably take a week to reach him—with little embellishment:

Audrey’s safe! She’s home!

I guess I am, she reflected, sitting down too and looking around. Toys and games that she’d once played with sat in their customary places, none of them things she yearned to play with now. She hadn’t thought about them, much less missed them, even once on her run. They felt like artifacts of a life that wasn’t even hers.

Funny how it was Kyra’s centuries-lost stuffed rabbit that suddenly came to mind and put a lump in her throat...

A pair of reflective eyes were staring at her from beneath her dresser. *There you are, Goblin...*

She had *definitely* thought about, and missed, the cats.

Downstairs, Viola was still trying to get the gory details out of Alvin, who wasn’t inclined to play along.

“You hear such terrible stories about teenage runaways and their fates. And all those traffickers and the things they do to children, too, it’s so unsettling—”

“Like I said, Viola, Audrey’s fine. Now, I don’t mean to be rude, but we have a lot to do now that she’s home. Thank you for coming by.” He managed to get the door closed seconds before both his and her mother’s comms began chiming.

While they talked to various relatives, Audrey took over Elodie again, letting her little sister show her around *her* room and tell her—in what was largely babble to anyone but an esper—all about her favorite toys and games.

I’d never have left if I’d known you were coming, she thought wistfully. No wonder her mother and Alvin had rushed the wedding... no wonder Alvin had been feeling stressed and surly when he’d moved in. Everything made a new kind of sense now.

“You are the most beautiful little girl *ever*,” she told Elodie, just as Alvin appeared in the doorway.

“Your father’s family wants to come over tonight to see you. Is that all right? Or do you want to wait until tomorrow night?”

“What works better for you?” she asked him. “This is a whole lot to drop on your plate out of the blue.”

“I think your mother would rather wait until tomorrow night. Are those all the clothes you have? Should we take you shopping for some tomorrow?”

She shrugged. "The safe house had stuff for me to wear, but... it's basic government issue stuff. I don't think I'm gonna fit into my old clothes, though, so probably."

That actually made him crack a smile. "No, I don't think you will. Tell you what... you and your mom can go pick out some things tomorrow, and I'll get everything set up for an *organized* gathering tomorrow night. A real welcome-home party, even."

"Sounds good," she told him, cuddling her little sister close. The way he looked at and spoke to her now, fond and avuncular, was so different from the uncomfortable way he'd treated her before.

Being a dad has mellowed him out, she decided. *I might have made things 'too real' before, but now reality has taken over.*

Word had spread, and the local news services had picked up the story, too. MilitAire sent her comm a link to one story, a brief vid clip showing her emerging from the courthouse with her mother and Alvin on either side of her, an image of her Missing Persons shot in the corner of the screen for comparison. Audrey MacNamera Found Safe, Returned to Her Mother, the caption read. No details about her whereabouts until then had been made available yet, a peeved-sounding news reader added.

Neighbors began trying to drop by, most of them bringing baked goods or casseroles.

Elodie, meanwhile, decided that she'd been held enough and it was time to go walking. She let Audrey hold her hands while she did, but insisted on the two of them going down the stairs together. Audrey was so focused on her baby sister that she barely noticed several would-be guests gawking at her from the foyer.

"She's so *tall* now!" she heard a familiar voice gasp. Apparently Viola had come back.

More visitors arrived almost as fast as Alvin and her mother could get rid of the last ones. Not really ready to talk to a lot of people yet, Audrey sat in the living room where they could, at least, get a quick glimpse of her from the foyer, playing with Elodie, feeding her baby sister dinner while the adults fended off guest after guest, finding out which foods Elodie liked best...

"They're never going to stop *coming*," Alvin groaned during a brief interim when no one was at the door.

"We could turn out all the lights and hide upstairs," her mother suggested.

"Works for me," Alvin agreed. "Is that okay, Audrey?"

"Sounds good. You wanna go upstairs, Elodie Jane?" She lifted her cooing little sister up out of her highchair, carrying her on her hip as she cleared the used baby food plate into the kitchen.

"She's so *good* with her..." she heard Alvin saying to her mother.

"Did *you* tell her Elodie's name?" her mother asked.

"No, I thought you must've... I guess her handlers told her at some point."

Yeah, Audrey reflected. They had. It had been a huge and, in some ways, terrible shock to realize just why her life had abruptly upended, one that had taken several days to fully process. If only she'd known sooner...

I'd never have left, she thought again. *I'd have stayed, tried harder to be friends with Alvin...*

She'd wondered just what that 'verse might have looked like, where no Jack B. Badd had ever boarded the *Hunter-Gratzner* or been among its survivors. Would Fry have died in the

subterranean cave, her cries for help unheard by the others in time? Would Johns have been forced to make a *real* truce with Riddick in the aftermath, given that no one else was left who could pilot the skiff? Would everyone have gotten off-planet before the eclipse, or would they have still ended up in the darkness, picked off one by one until only Riddick himself was left to pilot his way off of that desolate world? Would he have been able to fend off the mercs on the *Kublai Khan* even better without her and Imam in tow, or would he be locked in a prison, made of his own frozen body, even now?

Would Kyra have been sent to New Dartmouth to stand trial? Would all of the *Scarlet Matador* survivors have drowned when the syzygy brought the tide above their floors in Mansour Plaza? Would the New Marrakesh Spaceport have stayed whole, or still burned when a Tomlin who didn't understand what he was up against tried to fight the Quintessa Corporation's claims that there had never been a Level Five Incident? Would Pritchard and Makarov still be hunting women and girls across the Federacy? Would little Omid Heydari still have his mother?

Would the 'verse have become a better place, or a worse one, if she'd known *one small thing*?

*I'd be a **three-dimensional** critter, she thought, with no idea I was an esper. Maybe I'd never have found out... or maybe I'd have gotten a nasty shock someday when Quantifiers arrived at my school to run checks...*

It bothered her to think that her choice, rash and headlong as it had been, and as much as she regretted it, might still have been the *right* one. That, somehow, all of the chaos and grief and spilled blood might have been the clearest path. She and MilitAire had argued about the might-have-beens a few times while she struggled with her new knowledge.

The debate had spread out to all of the AIs, and then EntertAIIn had made her watch two films called *Sliding Doors* and *Run, Lola, Run*, following them up with several twenty-first century films about alternate universes and their effects on consequence and accountability. Oddly, Audrey had noticed when she'd done a small search of EntertAIIn's library, the premise had stopped featuring in vids altogether right as the first Star Jump ships launched. Why, she'd wondered, had confirmation of the Many Worlds Hypothesis *ended* the desire to speculate about how the multiverse would work?

Well, I won't ever leave again. Elodie's here. She needs her big sister. She's growing up on a planet that isn't kind to girls or minorities or people who are different... she'll need me to protect her from all of that and help her see through it.

It didn't take long to clean up and stack all of the gifts of food into the cooler. They turned all the downstairs lights off and hurried upstairs before any more wannabe-guests could sweep up to the doors. Later, her mother suggested, they could come down for a late-night supper.

Alvin took over Elodie to give her a bath, while Audrey followed her mother back into her old room.

"There are some things I really should tell you," her mother said, sitting down on the foot of her bed. "I don't know if they'd have made a difference, almost two years ago... but I've spent the whole time you were gone *wishing* I'd told you, so..."

Audrey was digging through her slightly musty dresser drawers to find the much-too-big-for-her nightgown she'd been given as a Christmas present just over a month before she'd

run away, which might finally be the right size. She looked up and nodded at her mother. “Okay...?”

Her mom sighed, looking down at her clasped hands. “When I get pregnant... I turn into a real *bitch* for a few months. I didn’t know that about myself until... well, until Elodie. When your father and I first met, I was finishing up law school and still lived with my parents. We had a fling and I got pregnant with Katharine...”

Katharine, who had been lost to a second-trimester miscarriage. Audrey remembered the story.

“I started fighting with my parents, constantly. I didn’t understand why, but... well... they threw me out. Said they were done dealing with my shit. John... it wasn’t *supposed* to be a serious relationship. He was this ex-Serviceman who was just starting at his security firm... but he offered to let me move in with him. I didn’t know where else to go, and then we found out I was pregnant, and he proposed... just in time for me to lose her.”

Audrey felt her heart twist. She hadn’t known this portion of the story... not completely. Neither of her parents had told her how they’d met or married before. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“I’d picked out the name and everything... Katharine Hepburn MacNamera... and then if we had a boy, we’d name him Spencer Tracy MacNamera... well, John said he still wanted to marry me and... I really *did* love him, and he’d stood by me through the worst and at *my* worst... so we got married. And then a year later, we started having troubles, fighting constantly—well, *me* fighting with *him* constantly—and I was about ready to give up on the marriage when I found out *you* were on the way.”

Audrey nodded and then gasped, realization striking her.

“Mom, when you and Dad started fighting, before he moved out, I... I kept having dreams I was going to have a little brother...”

Her mother’s eyes closed and she swallowed. “You were. I didn’t know it yet... but you would have. I just kept picking fight after fight with your father and I couldn’t understand why... but... after one of them I got so angry that I headed into town, I didn’t even really know where I was planning on going, but I ended up in this little toy store. And something about the aisle with baby toys suddenly made me suspect... so I got a pregnancy test and took it. And I was so excited that I wasn’t watching where I was going as I was getting on the escalator to go back to my car...”

Her voice broke.

“*I fell...*”

Audrey felt her heart twist again. That, she realized, had been why the dreams had suddenly stopped. “And you lost him. Oh Mom, I’m so sorry...”

“Me too... and... it was just too late for your father and me. We’d said too many horrible things to each other, and now we’d lost another baby. I know you felt like you were somehow to blame, sweetheart, but you never were. I never told you about Spencer because you were already grieving about your dad moving out, and I didn’t want to make it even worse.”

Audrey nodded. She had a feeling that her father had never stopped loving her mother... but...

Sometimes love isn’t enough, she reflected. Sometimes... nothing is enough to keep two people together.

“So then, back when you and Alvin broke up for a while...” she prompted, knowing what was coming with absolute certainty.

“I was pregnant with Elodie and didn’t know it yet, yeah. We fought, we broke up... and I went and cried on your father’s shoulder about it. We almost—God, it’s a good thing we didn’t, but...”

Whoa. No wonder her father had wanted to leave the planet when he’d found out.

“And then you discovered you and Alvin were having a baby,” she finished for her mother, her voice soft and as gentle as possible. No judgment. She had no right to judge.

Her mother nodded, staring down at her hands. “I should have told you when I told your father... so you’d understand what was happening. I didn’t realize how devastating all of it would be for you. I didn’t realize so much change would drive you out of the house and into harm’s way. We’d planned to tell *everybody* at the wedding, during the toasts... but we should have told you even before we told you that we were getting married, so you’d know *why* it was all happening so fast. I’m so sorry, Audrey.”

The last words were barely intelligible, buried in a sob. Audrey sat down next to her mother and pulled her close, trying not to be jarred all over again by the fact that she was now the taller of the two of them. The familiar scent of Shalimar, her mother’s favorite perfume, wrapped itself around her, and for the first time, she felt like she might really have made it home.

“It’s okay, Mom. It’s okay... I’m back... I’m home, and I’m safe, and Elodie is the most beautiful baby ever and I love her... I love you so much...”

I wish I’d never left...

“I want you to know,” her mother said several long moments later, “that you can tell me anything. Anything at all... it doesn’t matter what it is... I’ll always be here for you and I’ll always love you...”

Oh, Mommy...

“I wish...” she heard herself saying, and closed her mouth tight on the words.

I wish I could tell you where I went and what I did. I saw so many amazing and terrible things, Mommy... I wish I could tell you all about them.

I visited three planets. One of them had three suns, one of them had three moons, and one of them had three jailors... and I nearly died on each of them. But they were all beautiful. And it was summer on each of them. Summer followed me everywhere.

*Three ships met disaster with me on board. The Hunter-Gratzner, the Kublai Khan, and the Scarlet Matador, and if anybody knew I’d been on **any** of them, so much havoc would rain down all over us...*

I fell in love with three men. Three amazing, beautiful men, and I lost them all. One abandoned me. One was murdered. And one promised that he would come to me whenever I call for him, but I never, ever can...

And I got three sisters. One’s Kyra Wittier-Collins, the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain, and I worry so much about her... one’s Sebby of the Ree, and she’s going to be a mighty huntress. And one...

She couldn’t *remember* the third sister she’d found out there... but she knew... she knew...

There was a third sister. She *knew* it.

And then, of course, there was Elodie. Whom she would protect forever. Whom she would never leave.

I killed three people, too, Mommy. I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt anybody... I don't want to be that person anymore...

So many threes... my life seems to come in threes... and I can't tell you about the three families that adopted me, the al-Walids, the Mezianes, the Ree... or about the worlds I can visit, the thresholds between 'verses I can cross. I can touch twenty-seven universes... three to the third power... and the Apeiros seem to think that I'm the first human to ever do that. I wish I could show you their starfield... but I can't ever tell you about the Apeiros or my AI handlers, who I love...

I want to share all of it with you so much, but I can never tell you any of it. The only way to keep a secret safe is to never, ever tell it... but I wish I could tell you. I wish I could tell you everything.

"I wish I could tell you," she whispered. "But people would die."

Hundreds. Maybe millions.

Maybe even us.

68.

Cuckoo, Cowbird, Soldier, Spy

Jade finally appeared on Saturday night, while Audrey was sleeping. She woke in the middle of the night to find a heavy, plurring blob of obese Siamese cat parked on her chest.

Now she really felt like she had come home, whoever she was.

Goblin was sitting on her dresser, staring at her. An oriental shorthair, his tiny, slender body was dominated by a massive pair of batwing ears. She'd missed his ridiculous little face. Esther was on her windowsill.

She'd wondered if she would even see the cats for a few days, and how long it would take them to remember her and get over their hurt and anger over her disappearance. Apparently not long at all.

As soon as she started petting Jade, both Goblin and Esther jumped onto the bed and demanded attention, too.

The "Welcome Home, Audrey" party had run late, with family, neighbors, and family friends staying until nearly midnight. By the time everyone had left, Audrey had nearly been asleep on her feet.

Almost nobody who had shown up to see her had been turned away, though. The only exceptions had been some tabloid reporters who had tried to sneak in. Alvin had come up with some very creative threats to get them to leave.

Fortunately it had been a warm evening, with clear skies and gentle breezes, since the party had been held outside. All the baked goods and casseroles that neighbors and friends had delivered, along with some additional food that Alvin had arranged while Audrey and her mother had been clothes shopping, had been set out for guests, and virtually all of it had been devoured before everyone went home. Audrey had tried a little bit of everything, herself, mindful of CommissAIry's admonition to always go on culinary adventures if she could. Almost everything had been really good; *everything* had been part of "traditional American" cuisine. Minimally spicy, relying on a small subset of meats, vegetables, and cooking strategies, with the beverages and desserts heavily sweetened. It was all she'd known until she was almost thirteen.

It wasn't enough anymore.

Well, at least CommissAIry will expand my horizons today... One day out of every week, her culinary adventures would range past the orbit of Deckard's World.

Going clothes-shopping on a weekend day had, in retrospect, been a bit of a mistake, if an unavoidable one. Audrey's mother had taken her to the largest and most popular shopping mall in town—Deckard's World ostentatiously modeled itself after a period of American history when malls had abounded, and MilitAIre had given her fascinating articles to read about their deaths at the start of the twenty-first century, something that made her wonder

how they could coexist now with the same technologies that had originally killed them—and they had promptly run into several girls she'd attended middle school with.

While a few of the girls had looked surprised to see her, most seemed to have caught the newsfeeds about her return. They had a million questions that Audrey had to dodge, but fortunately she and MilitAIre had already worked out all of the dodges. After picking out only a few outfits, though, both she and her mother felt enough of a sense of being under a microscope that they'd cut the trip short.

"We'll finish on Monday," her mother had told her as they got back in the car, "when most of the lookie-loos are back in school."

Audrey had nodded, noting the implication that she wouldn't be enrolled back into school immediately. They were only one week away from Spring Break, anyway, which was sandwiched between Christmas and New Year's Day. Fortunately, both fell on Saturdays; in a year, she realized, there would have to be special arrangements to have her "debriefing days" moved *to* Saturday for those two weekends so that her family didn't feel aggrieved by her absence from major holidays.

I'm sure MilitAIre already has a plan for that...

She was also aware that her mother had struggled with the shopping trip in other ways.

The days of buying her "little girl" clothes were over and had already been ending before she disappeared; the pastel colors, rainbows, and cutesy fantasy animals that her mother had gravitated toward had already become inappropriate choices when she'd been in middle school. Fortunately, they weren't even available in her new size, but she had seen the way her mother still struggled with her choices.

She and MilitAIre had planned it all out, though. She was to choose clothing that would lend her some invisibility, dressing in a way that blended her into the crowd as much as someone in the throes of notoriety *could* blend. Nothing super-fashionable; they had examined the current trends and decided which items were *too* trendy, too close to the cutting edge, for her to be seen wearing yet. Nothing too outdated or exotic, either. She was to fall in the middle, her clothes unexceptional enough to avoid drawing people's eyes. Too many other things would do that already. They had even gone over which *colors* were most appropriate for letting people's eyes slide past her.

She had argued about that, a little. She wanted to be able to wear a few of the blues and greens that made her think of Ewan. MilitAIre had relented, but had stressed that she could only pick items of clothing in those colors if they met the *rest* of the invisibility criteria they'd worked out.

Her mother had been surprised by her choices, especially as she'd bypassed dresses completely in favor of jeans, a pair of cargo pants exactly the color of the sands on a particular beach in Elsewhere, and unadorned tops in shades that made her think of Ewan's bedspread and the mermaid tail in his painting. Audrey had a feeling that, when they resumed on Monday and fewer people were watching, there might be a bigger tug-of-war over the next round of purchases.

At least we won't be arguing about heel heights, she thought with amusement as Goblin head-butted her hand. She'd only *just* been allowed to start wearing heels when she'd taken off, but she'd been more of an average height then. Now she towered over most of her

classmates in flats; adding even a low heel into the mix would go against the “rules of invisibility” she and MilitAire had worked out.

It had, of course, been impossible to be invisible at the party.

Everyone had been there to see her. Although a lot of them were people who had genuinely missed her, there had been a whole lot of acquaintances who had mostly come to gawk. Remembering the way Ewan had moved through his farewell party, though, she had tried to make a point of at least saying hello to everybody, glad that her eidetic recall extended to names and faces. There was only a handful of people whose names she had needed to ask. Most of them had turned out to be members of Alvin’s family.

“The Audrey I remember was *shy*,” she’d overheard one of the neighbors saying as she moved from one group of well-wishers to the next.

Had she been? It hadn’t felt that way to her. She’d been four years younger than the youngest of that neighbor’s children; none of them had been *interested* in playing with her or including her in their games. Was she supposed to have made a pest of herself anyway?

When it was time to talk to that neighbor, though, she’d been polite and friendly and had asked after the kids in question. The youngest, as she’d suspected, was off at college. None of them had been in town to come to the party, although a few of them would be arriving on Friday for the holidays.

“If anyone seems to feel like you’re not the person they remember, bring up shared experiences,” MilitAire had instructed her. “It’s not an uncommon phenomenon after a separation of even a year or two for people to feel like the person who returns is an imposter.” He’d given her articles to read about famous cases where people became convinced that an imposter had replaced a loved one—in a very few cases, rightly so—and about an actual mental illness, Capgras’ Syndrome, that could trigger such delusions.

Part of Audrey’s *job* at the party had been to reintroduce herself to everyone and make them feel like the girl they had once known had returned... make them feel like they weren’t being confronted by a stranger with a similar face, a changeling stepping into Audrey MacNamera’s place.

Even if, at times, she felt like that was exactly what she was.

By the time all of the food was gone and people were saying their goodbyes, she had been physically and mentally exhausted but had managed to talk to every guest at least once. Elodie had been put to bed hours earlier; her cousins and most of her former classmates had been taken home ahead of the 10 pm curfew for minors. Most of the people who had remained, although ostensibly there to welcome her back, were there to support her mother and Alvin. Their topics of discussion weren’t especially interesting to her, so she’d rested on a lounge chair and turned her gaze to the other ’verses for a while.

In Elsewhere, she’d been surrounded by enormous trees that reminded her of the pictures she’d seen of ancient redwood forests on Earth. Only a few stars peeked through their canopy. In Wonderland, a meadow full of strange flowers spread out around her. Overhead, the stars blazed in a deep black sky free of light pollution; to the south, ribbons of colorful light danced along the horizon. The stars in U37d and most of the other ’verses, she noticed, were almost identical in placement, but that ’verse had a bright orange moon that was visible only there. In U27, a brilliantly-lit asteroid hovered less than a mile above her, slowly

tumbling closer. A school of fish floated nearby, sleeping, in U115, limned by greenish moonlight—

“Sometimes I feel like she’s still missing...” she’d heard her mother say.

Damn it. She’d stayed still; her mother must have thought she had fallen asleep, or was out of hearing range, or both.

“She’s been gone for nearly two years,” Alvin had said. “It’d be even more strange if she came back completely unchanged, wouldn’t it?”

The two of them had moved away from the other guests, speaking quietly. It became obvious that they thought no one could hear them as they continued to talk.

“I guess. But tomorrow I have to let *them* take her away from me again...”

“Just for the day. She’ll be back before curfew. I was able to speak to one of her handlers by comm for a few minutes, and he promised me that she’ll be home by nine.”

“Did you get his name?”

“No, and I didn’t expect to. That’s not how these people work. I got a *letter*. M. By his accent, I think he’s originally from the Cohasset System.”

“So a man named M from the Cohasset System is in charge of my daughter’s well-being?”

“He says he’s part of a team of handlers.”

“A team? Whatever happened takes an entire *team* to protect her?”

“Bettie,” Alvin hushed her as her voice began to rise. “I know this is hard. We may never know what happened. But we have her back, and—”

“Do we? Sometimes I think I see my little girl, but then...”

“Shhhhhh. It’s her. You know it’s her. She’s a teenager now, though, and *every* teenager’s a little bit of an alien. That’s all it is. You’ll see... you have your daughter back. She’s just... the teenage version.”

The teenage version had decided to yawn and stretch at that moment. Enough was enough. Alvin and her mother, locked in a hug, started and looked over at her as she sat up in the lounge chair. She pretended to notice them for the first time.

“I think maybe I dozed off,” she said. “What time is it?”

Alvin glanced at his chrono. “Time for the party to end, I think. You want to say goodnight to your grandparents?”

A long round of hugs and goodbyes later, she had trudged upstairs, stopping for a moment to look in on Elodie. Her little sister looked perfect and peaceful, untouched by any of the horrors held at bay—mostly—by the carefully cultivated veneer of ancient American suburbia.

There’s so much I need to keep her safe from... Audrey had thought before going to her own room. The first night, it had been hard to fall asleep, but she’d been tired enough that it was easier the second time.

Now, with three purring cats demanding attention, she suspected she might need to take a nap sometime during her “debriefing.”

I missed you so much, she told them silently, and three feline heads turned sharply toward her.

She was still thinking about her first coherent conversation with three cats when the car from the safe house came to pick her up.

"I don't like this," her mother muttered as she looked through the window. Per the instructions they had received, only Audrey was allowed to approach the car. "I really don't like this."

"I'll be home tonight, Mom," she promised, giving her a quick hug. "It'll be okay."

"It's just... you've only been back for less than *two days*..."

"I know. It's going to be all right." She could see something mulish starting to form on her mother's face. "This first time, though... it's also partly a test."

"A *test*?" Her mother frowned.

"To see if we can really follow the rules or not."

That brought her mother up short as she contemplated just what might happen if they *failed* the test.

Please don't fail the test, please don't fail the test, please don't fail the test...

Her trail had been broken. The masquerade was in place. Her family knew she was alive and well. But this wasn't a game. General Toal had made that abundantly clear to her. If her family made it unsafe for her to hide in plain sight, under her original name, she'd be moved to another world and given an entirely new identity. She would have to find her way to a "normal" adolescence there, away from almost everyone and everything she knew. The AIs would accompany her, and the *Apeiros* would always be with her, but there would soon be nothing left of the girl she had been. This was her only chance at a familiar anchor.

Her mother sighed, her eyes welling, and nodded. "You should go out there before they get worried," she managed, but her voice broke on the last word.

Audrey pulled her into another hug for a moment before, finally, kissing her cheek and going out the door. "I'll be home soon, Mom, don't worry."

One of the Federacy agents who had an office on the first floor was driving her. It was a silent ride; both of them knew the rules. He let her out in front of the safe house and drove off, while she walked up to the door and palm-printed her way in.

"Welcome back, Audrey," MilitAIre said as the door locked behind her. "How was the party?"

"Thanks, MilitAIre," she said, taking a seat in the Security Room. "It was a little weird. Some people had their doubts, but I think I sold it."

"It does help that you really are Audrey MacNamera, of course."

"Yeah. I think some of them just... froze me in amber in their heads." She sighed. "Even with the long hair, I'm different enough that they're having trouble processing it. And, I mean, I'm only thirteen months older, biologically. Think how much more different I'd be if twenty-two months had really passed for me. But it was still too much for a lot of them."

"I like your amber metaphor," MilitAIre said. "They fossilized you in their minds, yes. This is what underlies many of the cases of changeling delusions—the ones that aren't neurologically driven, anyway, or rooted in prejudices against autistic children. Time changes everyone, and the people who expected to watch all of those changes happen to you missed seeing them."

"So how come I feel like a con artist?" There were moments when Audrey felt like she *was* faking it all.

"Because you can't ever tell them what drove all of the changes," he reminded her. "You can't tell them where you really were. You're not lying about who you once were, but you

are concealing a great deal about who you've become. You're playing a role within a role: the WitSec ward with no power over her situation, who must pretend to be a former teen runaway who spent two years on the streets. So yes, you *are* running a long game on almost everyone, and countless lives depend on your success."

"Jeez. Only two days in and I already needed to decompress here." She blew out a breath, leaning back in the chair. "What if I can't handle six whole days at a time 'out in the cold?'"

"You let me know, and we send an agent to pick you up, wherever you are, and we inform your mother that we needed to do a debriefing. I believe, though, that it *will* get easier soon. Mr. Baxter is under the impression that we're protecting you from an organized crime group, and he's personally flipped a few lower-level informants and enrolled them into WitSec, so he takes its protocols very seriously. I believe he'll not only cooperate fully with us, but also ensure that your mother does."

That explained why Alvin had initially had such a low opinion of picking up a WitSec ward. It made sense, though; as an assistant D.A. trying to build cases against criminal enterprises, he'd probably had to offer deals to petty criminals, and maybe even a few genuine dirtbags, to get to the real movers behind their crimes. The very thing that the Quintessa Corporation had, it seemed, feared authorities might try to do with Makarov if they took him alive.

"He's been a lot easier to get along with than I expected," she admitted.

"That was a pleasant surprise." In fact, MilitAIre didn't seem surprised at all.

"I'm guessing you were the 'M' he spoke with on the comm? He thinks you're probably from Cohasset Prime."

"Yes." Now MilitAIre sounded amused. "My standard voice *is* modeled on the Boston accent of old Earth, but most of the people who settled in the Cohasset System were originally from that megacity. Although their accent is slightly more rhotic."

Audrey nodded. "So. What's our agenda for today?"

There was actual debriefing over breakfast; CommissAIry had chosen a "traditional Japanese breakfast" for her first culinary adventure of the day. Audrey devoured *saba shioyaki* and *tamagoyaki* while she and MilitAIre went over everyone she'd had contact with in the last two days, something that made her deeply thankful once more that her eidetic recall extended to names and faces. She sipped miso soup and crunched dried seaweed while they worked at identifying the reporters who had attempted to crash the welcome home party, and balanced her first tastes of *tsukemono* and *natto* with steamed rice while they identified the unnamed friends her former classmates had been with at the mall. The only flavor she wasn't entirely sure of was the *natto*, but CommissAIry had warned her that fermented soybeans were an acquired taste for most people, albeit an extremely nutritious food.

While she sipped green tea, she updated the AIs on her careful, hands-off explorations of the other 'verses.

"This is good information," MilitAIre said when she was done. "Now, I think we're ready to try the experiment we spoke of. Are you willing?"

"Absolutely."

Everything, she noticed, had already been set up by the AIs' robotic support. She picked up the audio recorder set out on the table, switched it on, took a deep breath, and isomorphed all the way over into Wonderland.

It was a little chillier in Wonderland than in U1, she noticed, but not badly so. The day was gray and overcast.

“Five... four... three... two...” she could hear MilitAIre counting down in U1. She focused on her task: pulling the sound waves from U1 into Wonderland, where the audio recorder would pick them up.

“...one.

*“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
‘Tis some visitor,’ I muttered, ‘tapping at my chamber door—
Only this, and nothing more.’*

“Please return to U1 now, Audrey.”

Well, there’d definitely be no way of faking *that*. Audrey switched the audio recorder off as she isomorphed back. *“The Raven, huh?”*

“Indeed. Now, let’s see if we were successful.”

The recording was audible, but very faint. “Can we try again? I think I can get the volume up higher.”

They tried three more times before they achieved a volume that both she and MilitAIre were happy with.

“Damn, I wish I’d known how to do this,” Audrey admitted ruefully, “back when I was spying on Makarov.”

“That incident is what inspired this experiment,” MilitAIre told her. “General Toal suggested it after I reported the intel that you’d been able to gather during Makarov’s conversation with his unknown accomplice. Had a recording of the conversation been available, it might have been an opportunity to move against the Quintessa Corporation, possibly even damage their lock on interstellar travel. It’s not your fault that you didn’t know how; General Toal blames himself for being more concerned with getting you offworld than with offering you training in your skills. But that was before.”

“Before...?”

“He has a proposal for you,” MilitAIre said, sidestepping her question. “Your independence, and your unique skills, create an opportunity to prove that an esper doesn’t have to be broken and enslaved in order to be an effective Federacy asset.”

“...He wants me to be an Operative?” A tiny chill moved through her... but also a small thrill.

“In training. On call in emergencies if your talents warrant it. What he really wants is for you to get to be an ordinary teenage girl, but if a threat were to appear on this world—”

“I’m in.” A threat to Deckard’s World was a threat to Elodie.

“I’ve reserved the right to veto any operation that might compromise your cover or put you in harm’s way. He’s accepted those terms. I also reserved the right to veto all operations if you were reluctant or if they appear to cause any kind of psychological damage.”

Audrey nodded. “I’m guessing that he’s especially keen on the idea of me being able to infiltrate and record from another ’verse.”

“Yes. Would you feel up to such an operation later this afternoon?”

Right out of the *gate*! “I think so. What’ll I be doing?”

“An executive from the Quintessa Corporation is in Settlement Point to negotiate the further expansion of direct Star Jump routes to and from the Plymouth System. At three p.m., he’s scheduled to hold a conference call with Corporation HQ. Such calls are rare and closely guarded, requiring near-instantaneous transmission of signals across a hundred light-years. The technology that powers these calls is something that the Quintessa Corporation has withheld from the Federacy, but no, General Toal doesn’t want you to try to steal anything. We just want to know what they discuss, what warrants that kind of effort and expense.”

After CommissAIry took her on an Ethiopian culinary adventure for lunch—*doro wat* and *injera* with sides of *azifa* and *gomen*, with a non-alcohol version of *shamita*—Audrey dressed up in her weird gender-concealing costume and mask. Isomorphing into Wonderland, she waited outside for an agent’s car to pull up in U1. It was a different agent than the one who had brought her to the building, which was probably a wise move. She climbed into the car and settled onto the seat before isomorphing back into U1.

The agent flinched; that was the only sign he showed that anything unusual had happened. “Sixteen to Control. Phantom is on board. Proceeding to target location.”

Phantom. Jeez. Well, she reflected, that was the word she pulled out most often to describe interacting with U1 from across the threshold.

The agent drove her into the heart of downtown Settlement Point, unspeaking, and into the parking garage below its tallest building.

Shit, that’s not gonna work... He was about to descend below the ground in both Elsewhere and Wonderland. She couldn’t isomorph from there.

Pushing off of the seat, she isomorphed into Wonderland and let herself drop a few inches down onto the sandy turf. At least the car had been moving at a crawl. Sitting up, she checked her equipment for any damage. It all looked unscathed.

Might as well run a test right now... She switched on the transmitter that she and EntertAIIn had set up before lunch. “MilitAIre, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Audrey. Sixteen says you vanished from the car before he reached the drop off point. What happened?”

“We need to go over the rules of topography sometime. I can’t isomorph underground.”

“My mistake. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, but I’m gonna need to ‘phantom’ my way in through the front doors instead of your chosen entry point. Glad to know this system’s working, though. I’ll still record the conversation on my end as well.” The idea of putting a high-powered receiver in Wonderland, with hardware that straddled the threshold and would allow MilitAIre to actively record on his end, had been the next step, and hadn’t taken long to set up at all.

Kinda the opposite of hiding the fact that someone outside of Quintessa has access to the multiverse, she thought as she walked through the glittering steelglass façade of the building and into its lobby. *I wonder what prompted Toal to change that policy.*

It took hitchhiking on four elevator rides to get close to the level she wanted, and then a nervewracking climb up two flights of stairs hundreds of feet above the ground in

Wonderland—where the wind had, thankfully, subsided for the moment—but finally she was on the floor where the Quintessa executive had scheduled his call. Technicians were setting up equipment for him, while he paced in a nearby lobby.

Fuck.

“He’s like *her*,” she told MilitAIre, hoping that the man—or whatever he was—wouldn’t sense her presence somehow. “Half in U1, half in some hell place. I can see the darkness all around him.”

“Disturbing, but not unexpected. He shouldn’t be able to see into Wonderland, though, any more than the envoy on Tangiers Prime could see into Elsewhere. Stay calm.”

She walked into the conference room, looking over the equipment. “Fuck, I think I know how the technology works, guys. I think he’s using an apeirochoron as a transmitter somehow.”

The familiar, seamless box sat on the conference table, wires running from it to both the camera that would record the executive and the display he would watch.

“Don’t touch it. Remember you’re observing and recording only. Your intel is noted, and confirms a working hypothesis.”

“What hypothesis is that?”

“It’s above your clearance level, for now, but you’ll know soon.”

Fuckin’-A, did he just “I’ll tell you when you’re older” me? Audrey sighed and sat down in one of the chairs she suspected nobody would be using. “Standing by to record.”

Would the executive notice that the sound waves were moving out of U1? She hoped not. He entered the room and locked the doors, touching several controls as she started her recorder and set her suit microphone to Constant Transmission. *She* was aware of the way the sound waves were moving differently and crossing a multiversal threshold, but hopefully he wouldn’t be, since he only existed on one side of that particular one. He had no presence in Wonderland.

“There he is now,” a familiar voice said. The envoy! “How are you, Colin?”

The executive smiled at the screen. “I’m well, thank you. How are *you*, Irena? Where has your new assignment taken you?”

“I’m now on Helion Prime,” the envoy—Irena—said. “Since the relief flights to Furya have moved from Tangiers to Helion for a few years, I will be monitoring that traffic.”

“Any word on the two Furyans you thought you sensed on Tangiers?” Colin asked.

Irena sighed. “Nothing. It’s possible that they were just the children of soldiers who served at the Caldera, but either way, I really wanted to get to them before the Federacy did. They’ve snapped up almost all the espers, and we need at least one. Preferably a strong one, a real Furyan. Ideally a male, but at this point, I’ll make do with what I can get. We’re running out of time.”

“What’s the revised timetable?”

“If the pattern holds, three years until the Coalsack System, and then another year until Helion.”

“So you believe it’s going in *order*.” Colin sounded awed.

“Yes, we think it is—*they* are. How are negotiations going?”

“Reasonably well. But there’s a little snag. Deckard’s World is isolationist and xenophobic about other cultures. They’re not sure they *want* to be one of the new Federacy hubs.”

“They had better find a way to get over that. We’re going to lose all of the current ones within the next fifteen years. It’s *accelerating*.”

“I’ll sweeten the pot.”

“Do that,” Irena said. “You’re authorized to extend Tier 2 amenities. We need this fallback position. Make it happen.”

“On my oath as a Kirshbaum.”

Irena rolled her eyes. “We’re *all* Kirshbaums. Don’t belabor the point. Just get it done. And if you hear of any rumors of Furyans, I need to know *immediately*.”

“What about asking *her* for help?”

“You know what she’ll say. She’ll demand the impossible. Again. There’s no reasoning with anyone on Furya itself. We need one of their lost children. Rumor has it there may be a lead on Helion, but I haven’t tracked it down yet.”

“I’ll have the deal sewn up in forty-eight hours, tops.”

“Good.” Irena vanished from the screen.

“Auntie fucking *bitch*,” Colin muttered and stamped out of the room.

Audrey was alone with the apeirochoron. She stood up, walking closer, and reached out her hand—

No, little sister, you may not.

—and found herself sitting in the back seat of Sixteen’s car as he pulled up to the safe house.

...The hell?

69.

Black Fox, Gone to Ground

“Please have a seat,” Principal Godwin said, gesturing at the chairs in front of his desk. Audrey and her mother both sat down, Elodie napping in a carrier beside her mother’s chair.

“I have the test results back, and the news is very good,” Godwin said.

Audrey had already seen the results; MilitAIre had forwarded them to her. Her scores hadn’t been *perfect*; that would have been difficult for people to accept, so she’d deliberately missed a question or two on each test. But she knew that the scores had been well beyond the necessary levels for passing.

The holidays were behind them, and the end of the school year was approaching. Given the timing of her return, the school administration had agreed that it would be *disruptive* to have Audrey join her class—assuming she even tested into it—at the very end of the year. Instead, they had administered three days’ worth of tests covering all the material that she would be expected to know in order to advance to tenth grade. Their intention, she knew, had been to determine which summer school classes she would need to take, or whether she would simply be knocked back a grade—or even two—instead; the results proved that neither option was necessary.

“Audrey’s officially approved to join her class for tenth grade when school resumes in May,” Godwin told them. “We received the special transcript from the... facility... she stayed in, so she won’t be missing any of the credits she needs to graduate, either. Fall Semester registration opens in a week, and she can sign up for classes then. I’ve forwarded you a list of the ones that need instructor permission or auditions—band, choir, those kinds of things—if she’s interested in any of them, and a list of extracurricular activity groups and their deadlines for signing up.”

Audrey had caught the quizzical look her mother had shot her at the mention of the “facility.” That was going to be a fun conversation.

She was holding Elodie for her mother as they returned to the car, when she became aware of people staring at her, both from classroom windows and from the nearby softball field. *Well, there’s another delightful rumor that’s gonna start going around...*

MilitAIre was already monitoring the gossip, and which students subscribed to which wild theories about her whereabouts while she was missing. Some of the scenarios were pretty outrageous. A few people had floated the suggestion that she’d never been missing at all, but had gotten pregnant and had gone away somewhere to have a baby. She wondered which of them would latch onto the idea that Elodie was “really” her daughter rather than her sister.

“What did the principal mean about a facility you stayed in?” Her mother waited until they were in the car, and it was in motion, before asking.

“‘M’ sent in transcripts,” Audrey told her. “It was the only way to keep them from demanding at least some summer school to give me the minimum number of credits I’ll need to graduate in three more years. The transcripts claim I was in a Wyndham Landing juvie facility under a fake name, and they sent me back here when they finally realized who I really was, but I already completed a ninth-grade equivalency during their school year.”

The facility really existed, too; in the northern hemisphere of Deckard’s World, the school year ranged from the start of November to the end of July, compared to May through January in Settlement Point. Records related to her supposed stay there had been inserted into the facility’s security system, courtesy of a Ghost Code *she* had provided MilitAIre, and some programs he controlled were monitoring all communications for any sign of attempts to access the files. Anyone trying to get more details about her stay there would unknowingly find themselves speaking to *him*.

Her mom kept her eyes on the road, but Audrey could feel her *wanting* to turn and lock eyes with her. “*Were* you in Wyndham Landing?”

“Mom, you know I can’t tell you where I was.”

Her mother huffed, pressing her lips together for a moment. “I know. I’m trying to live with it, Audrey, I really am. It’s just...”

“I get it.” She kept her voice gentle and sympathetic. Time to try to change the subject. “I, uh, was hoping to sign up for some extracurriculars next year, by the way. If you’re okay with that.”

“Which ones did you have in mind?”

“Track and musical theater. I’ll have to try out for both of them.” While she did like musical theater, MilitAIre wanted her to pursue it for protective coloration purposes; she would portray herself as reasonably adept at the broader theatricality of the stage, suitable for musicals and vaudeville, but with little ability for subtler and more nuanced performances. That would hopefully “prove,” to most observers, that she lacked the talent or skill to run a long game on anyone. Track... was something *she’d* insisted on.

“*I can keep up,*” *she’d* told Riddick, *trying to hide her fear that he would leave her behind.*

“*Maybe someday,*” *he’d* replied...

She wanted to be able to run for miles, for hours, to be the one setting the pace rather than struggling to follow. She had raced through the corridors of the *Nephrite Undine*, SensAI timing her as she went, and had taken to jogging across the flat plains of Wonderland since her return, once the weather was good enough. And she wanted to get even faster.

She would never see Riddick again, but she had decided she wanted to run as fast as, or faster than, him.

“...and an awful lot of running to do...”

Where had she heard that? She frowned, concentrating on the memory, but it slipped away from her. It felt like something she’d heard on the *Nephrite Undine*—somehow the memory conjured the scent of EntertAI’n’s rooms on the ship, hints of popcorn and strawberry licorice whips—but none of the “female” AIs on the ship had had a voice quite like that.

It bothered her that she had so many holes in her memory.

The most recent one, from the end of her first recon mission, was especially vexing. Neither the AIs nor the *Apeiros* would tell her what had happened, although both groups had given her stern lectures about *not* trying to mess with any more apeirochorons. *Not until you*

hatch, the *Apeiros* had added; MilitAIre, meanwhile, had given her hell about trying to disobey a direct order.

She'd had to let go of most of it, but one thing had stuck out for her and had been a startling revelation: after touching their hands, the envoy had apparently believed that she and Kyra were *Furyan*, and that—not a potential connection to the *Scarlet Matador*—was what had motivated all of her questions at the memorial.

No wonder she was so interested in us, if she's looking for un-Quantified Furyan refugees, she'd thought, but hadn't felt ready to discuss it with the AIs. They'd probably figured out exactly the same thing, anyway. But if touching someone with Threshold Syndrome reminded the envoy of touching a Furyan... what *were* Furyans? And what, exactly, was it about them—or maybe their planet—that was communicable enough that her father had brought it back and left traces of it in *her*; even before the Level Five Incident?

She'd decided that she needed to think about the whole thing for a while longer before she tried to discuss it.

The drive home had grown quiet. Although Audrey's thoughts had distracted her for a few moments, she suspected her mother was *brooding* over something.

"No band?" They were turning into their driveway when her mother finally asked that.

Oh. Yeah.

"It's been close to two years since I touched my flute. I'm pretty rusty... and anyway, the marching band plays at Sunday games."

In truth, Audrey could probably have picked up the flute and played it just fine—her mother, who had pegged her as eidetic when she was much younger, seemed to have forgotten all about it once she'd started pretending her memory was as flawed as anyone else's—but having the Sunday games be the *only* issue would have led her mother into another bout of railing against WitSec and its restrictions. As it was, she sighed gustily and shook her head.

"And the other two don't play on Sundays?"

Audrey shrugged. "I checked. Friday nights and Saturday matinees and nights, only, for the musical theater performances. Track meets are right after school. About the only things that happen on Sunday are the 'big' sports games, so all the stuff connected to them is out."

Sundays on Deckard's World, like so much else, were modeled after the Mid-Century period of the twentieth-century America, when only a few stores were open for limited hours, and most activities were either church or sports related. She hadn't realized how atypical that was until she'd ventured offworld.

"Hmm."

Damn it, she'd riled her mom up again. Bettie Paige Hawthorne had been a cheerleading captain and had hoped to encourage Audrey to follow that lead. It might have even worked—Audrey had enjoyed the gymnastics and dance parts—if Missy Barnstable hadn't been enrolled in the classes, too, and hadn't had it *in* for her. Her avoidance of practice sessions, and the reason behind it, had been one of the things her parents had fought about...

...and, she suddenly realized, a large part of why she'd been convinced it was *her* fault that they'd split up.

Huh.

“It’s a shame you’ll miss out on that part of high school life,” her mother said as she finished parking the car in the garage. “Well, go through the course catalogue and pick out what you want to take. I don’t guess you’ll ever tell me how you managed to keep up with your grade...”

“‘M’ and ‘E’ helped me stay caught up,” Audrey said. That was among the things she was permitted to volunteer. She climbed out of the car and reached back in for Elodie, who was still napping in her carrier. “Studying helped the time pass.”

Her mother released another frustrated sigh as Audrey carefully drew Elodie’s carrier out; her baby sister remained fast asleep the whole time. “It would be nice to meet them sometime.”

Not actually possible. Deckard’s World, for all its xenophobia toward other *human* cultures, had some pretty enlightened-sounding stances about AI, but that didn’t mean Audrey could just take her mother to the safe house and introduce her handlers. Maybe a video call sometime...?

They’d have to settle on appearances first, she thought, and suppressed a grin. Even SensAI would have to; over the Spring Break, her mother had invited her cousins and their parents over, and they had ended up watching a centuries-old film called *The Karate Kid*. Audrey had had great fun, the day after the New Year, teasing SensAI about “wax on, wax off” during her debriefing session, but he couldn’t possibly try to wear Pat Morita’s face in front of her *mother* in the wake of that.

She really wanted to meet the person who had developed the AI’s personas someday. Whoever it was, they had a *wicked* sense of humor.

“I’ll tell them,” she told her mother. “I don’t know how feasible it is yet, but hopefully they can manage something in the future.”

“I suppose that’ll have to do, won’t it?” her mother said, releasing yet another gusty sigh as she unlocked the door.

Audrey pretended to be too busy carrying Elodie to answer. Normal was still a long way off.

The weird thing was that she was getting along *really* well with Alvin now. Her mother, she’d discovered, had a *type*, and both Alvin and her father were examples of it. *He* generally abetted her in dodging conversations about her missing time with both her mother and the rest of her family, understanding that the less said about all of it, the better. Her mom, however, was still struggling to let go of the issue, to accept that it was something that just had to *be*, and that it would be easier to deal with if she didn’t try to tackle it head-on.

But looking away wasn’t what Bettie Paige Hawthorne-Baxter knew how to do... and with a few more years’ hiatus from her law practice ahead of her until Elodie was old enough for school, she was *itching* for a fight. That was something Audrey needed to talk to MilitAIre about. It was bad enough that her mother had already *lost* the “fights” about Audrey dressing like a teenager instead of a little girl, and packing away all of the toys she’d outgrown... even if most of her cast-offs were being saved for Elodie to grow into.

And, Audrey suddenly realized with a chill, it was about to get worse. A familiar car was pulling up in front of the house... mid-afternoon on a *Thursday*.

Well, shit. This was going to give her mother something new to want to fight about.

Her comm buzzed in her pocket at that moment. MilitAIre was calling. She answered, aware that she only had a minute until the doorbell rang.

“What the hell’s going on?” she whispered, not wanting to wake Elodie or alert her mother yet.

“We have a problem. It’s nothing dangerous, but we need you at the safe house right away. Please assure your mother that you’ll be back before curfew. And don’t worry. It’s the truth.” The comm went dead.

Audrey set down Elodie’s carrier on the couch just before the doorbell rang.

“Who was on the comm?” her mother asked behind her. “And who’s at the door?”

“M’ called. There’s some kind of problem. But he promised he’d have me back here before curfew.”

“No. No, no no *no*. They can’t just show up out of the blue and take you away like it’s *nothing*.”

“Mom, It’ll be okay. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

Her mother’s jaw clenched and she stormed over to the front door, unlocking it and throwing it open. “What the hell are you trying to—”

“Hello, Ma’am.” It was the agent she’d come to know as Five, one of three who were permitted to see her face and know where she lived, and the one who usually brought her to the safe house. He looked like a Secret Service agent from a centuries-old movie. “I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“Inconvenience—”

“Miss MacNamera needs to come with me now. This is a matter of Federacy security.”

“It’s a *what*?”

“I assure you, she will be back before ten. Probably well before then.”

“You can’t just come in here and try to—”

“Mom!” Audrey felt like they were teetering on a dangerous edge.

“*What*, Audrey?”

“You *need* to *calm down*. If you get into a fight with a Federacy agent in front of the neighbors, they might decide not to return me at *all*.”

Her mother went chalky pale at her words, her hand fluttering up to her mouth.

Audrey pulled her into a hug. “It’s going to be okay. I love you. I *will* be back tonight, I swear it. Try not to worry.”

She hoped she wasn’t about to be made into a liar.

Neither she nor Five spoke until the car was in motion. Normally, they wouldn’t have spoken at all; his words to her mother were the first time she’d ever heard his voice.

“Any idea what’s going on?” she asked once they were a few blocks away from her mother’s house.

“Sorry. I’m not cleared to know. Just to deliver you to the security office.” That was, apparently, the official name for the safe house in *his* circles. He had an unusual mind, disciplined and clear, his thoughts oddly intentional and delineated with none of the clutter and free association she was used to reading in people. She wondered if it was deliberate, if he knew he was dealing with an esper. Not that she could ask. Asking anything would volunteer too much information in the process.

"I guess I'll find out when I get there." She settled back into the seat. "How much am I cleared to know about you, Five? I mean, since you know my name and where I live?"

He chuckled. "My name is Dennis. I know I'm allowed to tell you that much, but I'll have to verify what else I can say."

"Nice to meet you, Dennis."

"You too, Audrey." He gave her a wry smile in the rear-view mirror. "Thank you for rescuing me from your mother."

"You're welcome, but don't worry. It's been at least five years since she actually ate anybody alive."

That got a laugh. "I dunno... she seemed to be sizing up my jugular."

Audrey shrugged. "Long as she doesn't go for the sweet spot, you'll be fine."

"The sweet spot?"

What the hell was she *doing*? "Don't worry about it..."

She was going to have to think of a way to apologize to her mother, she decided as they drove on. If only...

Now, there's a nice, non-horrible idea...

"Before you say anything," she told the AIs as she entered the safe house, "I'm going to need CommissAIry to make a dozen chocolate éclairs for me to take back to my mom as a peace offering, because whatever's going on just sent her freak-out levels into orbit. Peace in our time means éclairs. Understood?"

"Understood, Audrey," MilitAIre said, his voice oddly gentle. "We really wouldn't have brought you here if it weren't an urgent matter."

She took a deep breath, letting go of the bit of anger she'd been holding. "Okay. What's going on?"

"Kyra Wittier-Collins has disappeared."

"What?"

"She boarded a ship to the Lupus system at the New Fes spaceport. It reached its destination a week ago. General Toal wanted to make her a similar offer to the one that he made you, and he had arranged for its delivery once she got settled. Just an offer. No one was to attempt to take her into custody. But one of the agents in the detail apparently misunderstood the assignment."

"Oh. *Fuck*." Audrey sat down at one of the terminals and called up a set of profiles that she checked every week during her debriefing visits. "An offer like he made me? Training to be an independent 'Operative?'"

"That was the plan," MilitAIre told her. "He wants to assemble proof that the conditioning given to most esper 'recruits' actually makes them less effective in the field. His arguments against the conditioning on humanitarian grounds haven't worked."

She logged into the account that she'd set up, well before she and Kyra had left Tangiers Prime, where they could leave messages for each other. In the last half-year, she had left dozens of messages there, mostly recommendations of interesting films that EntertAIIn had introduced her to, and the latest news about Amnesty Interplanetary's battle on New Dartmouth to have Kyra exonerated.

All the messages she had sent were still unopened... but now there was a message waiting for her *from* Kyra. It had been sent a week earlier and had arrived via beacon courier while

she and her mother had been meeting with the principal.

Don't trust Toal. He tried to grab me. Going dark.
Always your sister. K.

"The agent tried to *grab* her?"

"I don't believe that was his original intention. But he was shadowing her too closely and she 'made' him. An altercation ensued, and he then appears to have attempted to subdue her."

"Fuck. Is he still alive?"

"He'll survive his injuries, fortunately. General Toal has covered up almost all of what happened to prevent a manhunt from starting. The whole point had been to get her to *voluntarily* come in from the cold. Instead, Kyra has abandoned the flat she'd rented, and the Kali Montgomery ID you made her hasn't been used since that night."

Wait just one second...

"How do you know about the Kali Montgomery ID?" It wasn't something she'd ever told MilitAire, especially given his admonitions not to volunteer information. While she'd described making false IDs for herself, Kyra, and Tomlin, she'd never said which names and backgrounds the other two had been given. The name she'd picked for Tomlin, which meant "he will live" in Tamazight, had become cruelly ironic in the wake of everything.

"When I originally queried Military Intelligence about your real identity, back on the *Nephrite Undine*, I sent them copies of all the documentation you possessed as 'Marianne Tepper.' General Toal hadn't known that name until after you left Tangiers Prime to reach the *Undine*, but he then traced your documents' creation and discovered that you created two more identities at the same time, including Kali Montgomery. He was impressed by the quality of your work, by the way. You were only a few minor documents away from seamless identities."

Audrey groaned, rubbing her forehead. Part of her wanted to ask which documents she'd missed, but she shoved that impulse down. *That part of my life is over...*

Was it, though? "This... is really bad."

"It is," MilitAire agreed. "I'm sorry."

"What happens now?" she asked after a moment. Had the emergency just been about getting ahead of the news before she could read Kyra's message on her own, or was there something specific they wanted her to do?

And would she do it?

"We were hoping that you could reach out to her."

"And?" Part of her had gone still in a way that she recognized from her time on the run; that unmoving moment while she watched to see which way a possible predator would go.

"Tell her your circumstances, tell her what we were trying to offer her, and encourage her to come in from the cold."

Which, she had to admit, made sense. She hadn't felt any serious fear in months—

Should she have, though?

Would she have been scared if her survival instincts had been better, and if she hadn't been so keen on having someone else take control in the wake of the New Casablanca fiasco?

Would she have surrendered first to Abecassis—believing him to be an arresting officer—and

later to MilitAIre, if she hadn't been so deep in the throes of self-loathing and a desire to be punished? Would General Toal's plans for her have still inspired relief... or foreboding? Was Kyra being too paranoid... or was *she* being too *trusting*?

He always knew who we were and what we could do. He could have arrested us at any time.

But maybe not. Maybe that would have created a dangerous schism with the Meziane family that he had wanted to avoid. None of them, especially not Ewan, would have permitted her imprisonment, or Kyra's.

Maybe the real urgency about getting them offworld had been to get them out from under the umbrella of protection the Mezianes had raised over them.

No, she decided after a moment. She'd never tried to read the General's mind, but she had felt it when they were near each other, and had sensed genuine kindness and worry from him, both where she was concerned and where Kyra was. But...

He knew where I was going the whole time. He knew he could always find me again. Was he watching over Kyra the same way?

Or had he only become interested in her whereabouts once his objectives changed and he wanted to prove off-leash Operatives were superior to the heavily conditioned types?

Was there a leash hidden among those new objectives, as yet unseen?

One thing about AIs, she'd already noticed, was that they could let a silence stretch out as long as necessary without the slightest discomfort. That silence was only broken when, with the arrival of the dinner hour, CommissAIry had the safe house 'bots deliver a tray of fragrant chicken tagine, orange juice, and Maghrebi mint tea.

Comfort food, she realized. They understand comfort food... and they understand how uncomfortable all of this has me...

The move had energized her appetite, though. She ate, still thinking things over, before finally opening the messaging system again.

I heard about what happened. I hope you're okay. General Toal enrolled me in WitSec to break my trail. I think he wanted to offer you the same deal and a safe way into the military. My handlers say one of the people assigned to make contact with you went off-mission and fucked it up. I believe they're telling the truth. But if you aren't sure—

First, she needed to make sure *she* was sure of what she planned to suggest. She closed her eyes, slowed her breathing, and willed her mind into the starfield of the *Apeiros*.

Five minutes later, she opened her eyes again, feeling relieved.

—you don't need to use this system to reach out to me. The *Apeiros* will relay messages between us. They promise to help, and they promise not to start talking to you all the time in your sleep again. I know they make you uncomfortable, but they can help you with a lot of things if you want them to. Elsewhere and another 'verse are habitable on my world. I'm on Deckard's World. You can

come here and stay in either 'verse, if you want to get away from everybody, and I'll bring you supplies. It's up to you. I just want you to be safe.

She took a deep breath, blew it out, and added in the thing she'd wanted to tell Kyra since before they had gone their separate ways.

My name is Audrey MacNamera and I am always your sister.

Love,
Tizzy

"Are you sure you want to send that?" MilitAIre asked as she finished. "It's a risk."

"You tell me how secure the system is," Audrey muttered. "She needs a safe haven. Why not here?"

"The encryptions you have in place are comprehensive. It should be safe. And if she chooses to come here, we will protect her and let her choose her path. I promise you that."

Audrey touched the "Send" button. "Where *is* General Toal right now?"

"On Helion Prime," MilitAIre told her, "trying to learn more about what your 'friend' Irena is up to."

Audrey nodded. So Kyra's assumption that he had tried to grab her wasn't because she had seen him in the Lupus system. He did, however, have high-speed courier drones that could get messages across the Federacy within a single day. They were expensive as fuck, but it appeared he was using them to run damage control on the botched contact mission... and to ensure that his side of the story arrived at the same time as Kyra's.

Was reaching Kyra what was important to him... or keeping *Audrey MacNamera* on his side?

He had, she realized as she thought more about it, always been more interested in what *she* could do than what Kyra could.

"Dihya, I think, relies more on her physicality..."

Kyra had turned away from the *Apeiros*. In all probability, she was still only two 'verses wide in her five-shape, having spent months dreaming in cryo instead of cultivating additional 'verses with each Star Jump. She was deadly and formidable, but...

*But **that** isn't something new to him...*

If Kyra's talents were less interesting to him, though, then he had to genuinely care about helping her, and about making good on Tomlin's promise to her. Didn't he?

It felt like truth to her. She hoped she wasn't being naïve.

True to their word, the AIs had "Eleven" drive her home shortly before Elodie's bedtime, with chocolate éclairs for Audrey's mother, huge, sticky cinnamon rolls for Alvin, and a supply of Elodie's current favorite custard—she had been obsessed with banana custard for the last week—as peace offerings. She arrived at the house just before Elodie was due for her bedtime snack.

The four of them ate their desserts together, Audrey nibbling on an éclair and wishing she could have brought home some almond *briouats* without raising questions. Elodie, in

particular, was ecstatic about the special treat.

"You okay?" Alvin asked as he pulled a ring of iced pastry off his roll.

"I will be," she said. Her message to Kyra had gone out, but...

...she found herself more and more worried about her sister.

"I don't guess you can tell us what all of the fuss was about," her mother grouched.

"I can, a little." She and MilitAIre had worked that much out. "There's a girl... we were in custody together for two months."

Literally true. Just in Aceso instead of in WitSec. Using the truth to mislead disturbed her, but the truths underlying the illusions, assumptions, and lies of omission were still the most important details.

"We became friends. We started to think of each other as sisters, even. But... we had to be separated. We were too big a target together. Too risky. So... we were split up."

Also literally true. It just hadn't happened in a safe house, and the decision hadn't exactly come from a WitSec handler. Her mother and Alvin would believe that they had been sheltering in place together, in some hidden location, for two months somewhere on Deckard's World, developing a "best friends forever" bond over safe, protected activities.

Not fleeing a mental institution together before one of them could be dragged off and made to "stand trial" by the people who had committed genocide against her family; not figuring out how to negotiate a dangerous breach between universes that had infected them before it could drown them; not being flung into a deadly battle with hundreds of lives at stake and that multiversal breach their only decisive weapon... Just two girls killing time in a safe house...

...who were then separated by someone's dispassionate judgment call, instead of being forced to break their own hearts to safeguard hundreds of fugitives and the millions of Imazighen who had stepped forward to protect them...

She took a deep breath. "She's disappeared. One of the agents on her detail..."

That was one way to describe the idiot, anyway.

"...is in the hospital, and nobody knows where *she* is. They were hoping maybe I had a way to get in touch with her without breaking cover, but..."

She shook her head. *She could be on her way to anywhere in the Federacy by now.*

The *Apeiros* hadn't been able to "hear" her when Audrey had asked, but they only ever "heard" Kyra when she was asleep and dreaming. She *hid* from them when she was awake... and even now Audrey was afraid that giving them permission to try to speak to her might be seen as a betrayal.

Wherever Kyra was, she was alone. Completely alone...

Audrey hadn't meant to lose her composure, but a sob escaped her before she could stop it. Her mother's arms were around her a second later.

"Sweetie, I'm so sorry." Her mother's voice was gentle and soothing, all of her fight from earlier gone. "If there's anything we can do to help..."

Somehow, that just made the tears flow harder.

70.

Straight On 'Til Morning

"I really have to recommend against it, Audrey."

"What's the alternative?" Audrey whispered into her comm. She was alone in the sound booth—the tech crew wasn't due back for a few hours—as she spoke to MilitAIre. "If the 'show doesn't go on,' all the tickets will have to be refunded and everybody'll be wondering why I didn't step in. That's *more* likely to get noticed than me being in the spotlight of a high school play for a single night."

MilitAIre took long enough to reply that Audrey knew he was discussing the matter with the other AIs. "You're correct. It's not a good situation, though. A lead role is risky. *This* lead role is especially risky."

"I get it," she told him. "I really do. But... I can't let everybody down. They're not expecting anything grand out of me, but I'm the only one left who knows the lines and blocking."

"I understand, Audrey. Break a leg. We will be watching."

"Seriously?" She laughed. "You're gonna piggyback on the school's security cameras to watch?"

"We wouldn't miss it."

"Make a recording for my mom, then, okay? And let her know for me."

Half a dozen people, their expressions ranging from worried to hopeful, were waiting for her when she emerged from the sound booth.

"I have permission," she told them. The whoops of delight and relief were almost deafening.

Mrs. Morgan began punching numbers into her comm. "I need to get Judy in here early to make sure the costume will work. You're six inches taller than Cheryl."

Todd, a grinning Senior a few inches taller than her, with a "ducktail" haircut and an earring in one ear, walked over and put his arm around her. "You are saving *so* many lives! Now, let's do a run-through with the rest of the cast."

He marched her out onto the stage, which was currently clear of set pieces. The whole cast, looking nervous, was sitting nearby, awaiting news of their fate.

"Second star to the right," he shouted, "and straight on 'til morning! We have our Peter!"

"Thank God," Julia, hair in the ringlets of Wendy Darling, groaned. "My whole family is coming tonight. You didn't eat any of Cheryl's chicken, did you, Audrey? Please tell me you didn't."

"I never went near it," Audrey promised. "Okay, I think Todd wants all of us 'understudies' to practice our lines and blocking at least once? An undressed dress rehearsal?"

A few people laughed.

Almost a quarter of the cast had been felled by food poisoning earlier in the day. Cheryl Ocasek, the shining star of Eisenhower High's theater program, had brought in lunch for the whole cast an hour before the matinee curtain rose. While most of the food had been excellent, everyone who had eaten the fried chicken had begun feeling ill by the middle of the performance. Peter's final duel with Hook would have been unintentionally comical if both Cheryl and Jim hadn't looked pale, sweaty, and thoroughly miserable. Neither came out for the final bows, and one of the Lost Children nearly vomited in front of the audience before the curtain finally dropped.

Pandemonium had followed while Mrs. Morgan tried to work out who was sick and who was well, and whether parts could be juggled to make it possible for the show's closing night performance to go forward. In the end, only one role was left that had lost both its main player and its understudy: Peter Pan himself.

Which was when Todd, the theater program's *other* big star who was capping his high school career by directing the production, had suggested that they dragoon their stage manager into the role.

It was Audrey's first time as a stage manager; now a junior, she had spent almost two whole school years building up a reputation as a serviceable actor who lacked the nuance needed for a lead role but who could sing, dance, and nail the lines in virtually any supporting part. She was *best* known to her compatriots, however, as a facile prompter who kept entire scripts in her head and never missed a step in her blocking. Although she was considerably taller than Peter was supposed to be, she really was the only option left. Todd—6'2" with a swimmer's physique—looked far too "grown up" to portray a boy who refused to ever become an adult, and he was the only other member of the troupe who knew all of Peter's lines. Besides which, he already had to step in to play Captain Hook.

"We have, like, no fairies left," Maeve, the production's Tiger Lily, grumbled.

"What if we added some lights dancing around you?" Audrey asked. "Like you're the only one who's corporeal and the rest are staying small like Tink?"

Her comm buzzed. She glanced down at its screen.

E. is working on it right now.

"I have a friend who can whip something up for us," she continued. "The 'Friends' song will just have to be the two of us. At least we're doing the 'fairies' version instead of the 'Indians' one."

Back at the start of the semester, she'd managed to argue Todd and Mrs. Morgan into using the revised twenty-first century script, as opposed to the original 1954 Broadway script, by comparing the portrayal of "Indians" in the original script—and no Native American tribes had been invited to settle on Deckard's World—to the way "the gays" were characterized by most of their school peers, something that Todd was especially sensitive to. Aside from a few lines changing slightly and the replacement of the "Ugh a Wug" song with another tune about friendship, it was almost exactly the same play.

And it would be a whole lot easier to replace corporeal fairies with dancing lights than to explain away an entire missing *tribe*.

“Okay,” Todd said. “Let’s do a run-through of lines and blocking and see what we need to spend the rest of the day working on.”

They worked until it was time to admit the audience. Audrey nailed her lines and blocking, and listened carefully to Todd’s criticisms of her actual performance. Fortunately, this wasn’t a play that required enormous amounts of nuance, so he wasn’t *super* critical. She and Maeve then practiced the “Friends” song together, working out the best division of lines normally sung by backup actors and the best ways to harmonize them. The arrival of the “fairy lights” holo system that EntertAIIn had cooked up helped; the AI had also whipped up a backing track of “fairy voices” that could be played alongside, adding almost-unearthly harmonies to their lines.

Her handlers, she realized, had decided to treat this like a *mission*.

While Todd worked with the rest of the cast on weak spots, Audrey met with the stage crew to adjust Cheryl’s flight harness and wires to accommodate her size and weight, and then did a few practice flights to make sure she could control her movements while singing and showboating. The Stage Crew Advisor, Mr. Andrews, agreed to handle the stage management for the evening, and they went over the issues to watch out for from prior performances.

The whole thing kept her too damned *busy* to feel any stage fright until the show had started and it was almost time to hit her first mark.

Oh fuck, what am I doing? I’m not supposed to expose myself like this...

Her hair—which she’d finally convinced her mother to let her cut to only halfway down her back—was braided back and hidden away, and she was wearing a wig of short, brown, shaggy hair under a green cap. Judy had adjusted the costume to accommodate her longer torso and hide her curves. Now she just had to...

...be a boy for an hour and a half? When had she ever done *that* before?

Easy peasy...

She took a deep breath and jumped off of her “perch,” soaring through the “open window” of the bedroom and just managing to stick the landing. Murmurs erupted through the audience as people realized that Cheryl wasn’t playing the role. There *was* supposed to be a sign up about the cast changes, but she bet most people had walked past it without reading.

“Tinker Bell!” she stage-whispered. “Tink! ...*Tink!*”

“Nana” barked over a nearby speaker and she ducked down behind a chair, peeking out.

“Tinker Bell! Where *are* you?”

She was halfway through the scene, singing “Never Never Land,” when she realized that she had adopted her “Riddick walk” and her “Jack B. Badd” voice for the role.

There were a few flubs along the way from some of her costars, but not nearly as many as they had all dreaded there would be. Todd made a brilliant Hook, she thought, and she had a great time hamming things up with him. Their duels were hilarious, and made her wish they could extend them. But by the time she whisked “Jane” off to Neverland, she was as exhausted as if she had spent the whole time actively isomorphing.

During the curtain call, however, she had one more thing to do. Todd handed her a microphone.

“Tonight was supposed to be a very special night,” she told the audience. “Cheryl Ocasek has been an amazing talent in our theater program for four years now. This would have been

her final performance before graduating, and I know a lot of you came tonight especially to see her. Unfortunately, she fell ill earlier today. Although she's not here to receive it, we wanted all of you to get to see the award and thank-you gift that we had planned to give her tonight..."

She turned the microphone over to Maeve, who did a slight variation on the speech she'd originally intended to give, extolling Cheryl's performances over the last four years since she'd first wowed audiences in *The Fantasticks*. Then the actor who had played Smee took over the mic to give a similar award to Todd.

The wrap party was a bit of a blur. She remembered Todd telling her that he wished he had another year to work with her, and several other cast members telling her they were looking forward to having that year, but her brain felt like it was turning into mush.

Mission accomplished, she mused as she managed to make her good-byes and left to meet her mother in the parking lot. *Time to head back to base...*

"I almost didn't get to see your debut performance," her mother said when they were nearly home. "But 'M' called and told me you were taking over the role. Why didn't *you* let me know?"

Audrey groaned. "Sorry... I spent the whole afternoon working with Todd and the cast to make sure I wouldn't turn the production into a total disaster. I asked him to give you a heads-up for me."

"Well, you were very good. Alvin's sorry he missed it, but we couldn't find a sitter. I didn't understand why you were keeping at the whole acting thing when you never got starring roles, but maybe now you'll start getting some more."

Shit. Had she been *too* good? MilitAIre might have some choice things to say about that.

"You don't have to want to be a star to want to perform, Mom." It wasn't their first time going over that.

A mermaid doesn't need to be a queen to raise a tsunami...

Her mother was just too much of a competitive spirit to understand that. Her drive to win, to come out on top, showed up in almost everything. For Audrey, she only felt like that when she was on the track and didn't want to have to see anyone between her and the "horizon."

Her morning ride to the safe house was a little surprising; Dennis teasingly asked her for her autograph.

"Gonna tell people 'I knew her when...' even if I can never tell them I knew you *where*," he joked. "You got good reviews last night. Wish I'd been there to see."

Reviews? Oh. Shit...

"So," she said as she walked into the Security Room and sat down, "how badly did I fuck things up?"

"Not badly," MilitAIre told her. "None of the reviewers who had come to see Cheryl Ocasek's final high school performance claimed you outperformed her. Or accused you of nuance."

"Fuck... I should've realized that show was gonna be reviewed. What *did* they say?"

"See for yourself." The screen in front of her lit up with an article from the *Settlement Point Monitor*.

Food Poisoning Outbreak Forces Last-Minute Cast Change in *Peter Pan* Production

Junior Audrey MacNamera and Senior Todd McKinney Shine in Impromptu Roles

Below the headline, there was an image someone had captured of the performance, as she and Todd had dueled. Todd looked menacing and wicked as Captain Hook, while she...

Well, shit.

With a fierce smile on her face as she battled Captain Hook back, and her unruly mop of a wig under Peter Pan's green cap...

Jack B. Badd was onstage for the whole fuckin' *universe* to see.

She'd done the walk, done the voice, slipped into the boy persona she'd developed on the run without even a *thought*...

"Oh fuck. I'm *right out there* in Jack form..."

"And your portrayal of a boy is, according to the reviewer, one of the highlights of your performance," EntertAIn said. "While you didn't do a job that would raise red flags about your ability to run a long game, you *did* reveal that you can impersonate a boy very well indeed."

Groaning, Audrey looked for that part of the review.

MacNamera, a junior at Eisenhower High, is better known for Lettering in Track and Field as a sophomore and bringing home the bronze medal this year in the DWSAA Half-Marathon. Within the theater program, she has appeared in several chorus lines and taken on smaller roles, and was this production's stage manager up until the food poisoning incident. Sixteen years old, she's probably best known for having been a missing person for almost two years. While no information has ever been released about where she was during that time, the authentic veneer of 'street tough' that she imbues her Peter Pan with might furnish a tantalizing clue...

"Ohhhh, shit."

"On a positive note," MilitAIre said, "the 'street tough' interpretation points back to the dominant theories almost everyone has about you at this point... and not toward a run through space."

"As long as nobody realizes the 'street tough' I'm channeling there is Richard B. Riddick," Audrey muttered.

"It's hard to imagine why they would," EntertAIn laughed. "I don't think this did much damage to the persona you're portraying, but you *are* going to have to figure out a way to avoid starring roles, now that you've demonstrated how ably you can handle one."

"Are you sure? I feel... naked. Exposed as *fuck*." She *felt* like she'd screwed up, even if the article was praising her and even her mother had seemed happy.

“It was a risk. You knew it and so did we. But it’s also a good opportunity to practice some damage control tactics,” MilitAIre said. “Sooner or later, something will happen that will require them. It’s our job to teach you to *deal* with risk, not hide from it.”

An “unleashed Operative,” she reflected, shouldn’t be afraid to take risks, as long as they were calculated ones. She’d been given that message several times. *Leashed* Operatives had no choice about the risks they did and didn’t take; Toal was hoping she’d develop a judicious streak that could drive home the importance of giving all Operatives similar latitude. And, more urgently, not violating and brutalizing their minds.

“And,” First-AId added, “I can hear you falling into your ‘it’s all my fault’ mode of thinking. Fight it. We’ve *discussed* this.”

Audrey nodded, sighing. The realization that her cousins had been using her as the “fall guy” for their pranks and capers, and had only finally been caught out when she was unavailable to play that role, had been a tough discovery. Almost four years after she’d originally gone missing, their parents were still grappling with the knowledge that “Trouble” hadn’t, after all, been *her* middle name, and that the blame they’d habitually thrown her way for dozens of incidents had rightfully fallen much closer to home. Although her mother felt vindicated by the admissions, Audrey herself was still struggling with their impact.

Practically from the moment she could walk, she’d been unknowingly conditioned into believing that the chaos she and her cousins had frequently ended up embroiled in was *her* fault, especially since they—and their parents—always insisted that nothing like that happened except when she was around. But after her disappearance, Rob, Rachel, and Joey had only lasted a little over a month before they’d begun getting into trouble without her handy to blame it on. The adults had all wised up; several had even apologized to her for the scoldings they’d given her and the opinions they’d held about her, sheepishly explaining that it was in part her father’s childhood reputation—he was, after all, the *original* Jack B. Badd—that had prejudiced them against her actual innocence. And First-AId had spent the last two years drawing her attention to the way that, whenever *anything* went wrong, her first assumption was that it was somehow *her* fault... thanks to *them*.

Sometimes she wasn’t sure what was doing more damage to her relationship with her cousins now: her inability to trust them after all that, or their resentment that she still wouldn’t tell them where she’d been. The latter issue kept impeding friendships at school, too.

There were other reviews to read, all of them complimentary but not *lavish* in their praise, most reviewers impressed by Audrey’s ability to make the audience believe she really *was* a boy until the moment she had spoken in her “natural voice” during the curtain call. She still felt like she’d given too much of her game away, even if nobody had figured out how constantly she was “onstage” and acting during her daily life.

Over lunch—a “new cajun” jambalaya that originated from the Bayou Nebula and required several glasses of water to get through—she checked her “lifeline” to Kyra. Nothing. None of her messages had been read in the last two and a half years; no new messages had come from her sister since she’d “gone dark.” Sometimes, not often, the *Apeiros* told her that Kyra was dreaming of a world with three suns, but she had apparently learned how to avoid their detection in her sleep as well as when she was awake.

Audrey left another message anyway. It hadn't varied much in the last year, but under the assumption that Kyra might read the most recent one first if she logged in, she always included the same important news.

It's me, hoping you're okay. So you know, "Kyra Wittier-Collins" is now a safe identity to use if you want. All of the warrants were voided a year ago now. New Dartmouth has to pay out a ginormous settlement to you and the other survivors. We're talking millions of dollars in settlement money per survivor, from the sound of it. You can walk in and claim it any time if you want. I hope you do. They deserve to bleed some serious green for what they did to you. I miss you. Love you tons.

Always your sister,
Tizzy

P.S. I played Peter Pan in a local show and killed it. I wish you could have seen it.

People in the school hallways seemed friendlier than usual the next day. She wasn't sure if that was good or bad. The first thing *she* did, though, was go looking for Cheryl.

Pale and drawn-looking, Cheryl was sitting in the courtyard, surrounded by girls—a mixture of Seniors and Juniors—who were clearly in Supportive Friend Mode.

"Oh *great*, here she is now," Missy Barnstable said as Audrey walked up. But the look on Cheryl's face wasn't hostile.

"How are you feeling?" Audrey asked.

Cheryl gave her a rueful smile. "Like I never want to eat again. I can keep down soda crackers and that's about it. How about you? You okay after taking one for the team like that?"

Missy huffed, rolled her eyes, and walked away. For a moment, Audrey was profoundly reminded of *Celia*. Weird... usually Missy intimidated the hell out of her.

She sat down in the seat Missy had vacated. "Tired. That was like... having ten minutes' warning before taking the SAT or something."

Cheryl chuckled. "Speaking of tests, did you hear the crazy news?"

"I don't think I have. What's the crazy news?"

"Someone got a bug up their butt about the Ouija boards everybody's been playing with and now there are *Quantifiers* on campus."

Cold jetted through Audrey's veins. *Fuck. Fuck.* None of it showed on her face, though. She was, after all, every damn bit as good at acting as Cheryl, and she was *always on*. "Quantifiers? What are those?"

"They test for psychic powers," Lucy Breem said. She was one of Cheryl's closest friends. Audrey laughed. "Oh c'mon, none of that stuff is *real*."

"You should come over next time we do a séance," Maeve told her. "You'll see."

Several of the girls nodded. Interesting; were there actual overtures of *friendship* there?

“Color me *intrigued*,” she said. She wondered if any of them could actually tap into anything with a Ouija board, or if it was, as MilitAire believed, the power of the subconscious, on a sub-esper level, that governed those games.

Would any of these girls light up a Quantification test? Was there anyone on campus, aside from her, who would be in danger of being identified and “recruited” today?

“So I’m not saying you’re *right* or anything,” she began, shrugging, “but who do *you* think could test positive for psychic powers?”

“There’s that chick, Emily, from your grade, who says she’s a witch and the reincarnation of Stevie Nicks,” Julia said. Her hair was straight again, Wendy’s curls long gone.

It was hard to restrain a sputter of laughter. That explained the flowy dresses... and the *top hat*... Emily had been wearing all year. “She’s, uh, had quite a few stories about stuff like that. Not so much with the proof, though.”

Cheryl snorted. “Two years ago, *right* before you came back, she was claiming that she could talk to spirits, and that she’d even talked to yours because you’d been murdered and buried in a nearby construction site.”

Audrey let her eyes go wide and allowed her laughter to escape. “Well, *that* must have been awkward for her!”

Maeve snickered. “So she’s obviously *not* gonna test out for psychic powers.”

The girls turned to speculating about which of the school “weirdos” might test positive until the bell rang and everyone headed inside.

The announcement about Quantification testing was the first thing on the agenda. Classes were to continue as normal during the process, but all teachers were to be aware that students could be summoned for testing at any time, and must be excused immediately when they were called.

Just... stay... calm, Audrey told herself. She’d done these tests hundreds of times and knew exactly how to game them so that she’d read as the most *unpsychic* person in history.

Three students were called away during her first period English class. All three returned looking unimpressed. Another two were summoned from her second period History of the Federacy class, returning well before the class ended looking equally nonchalant. During third period Gymnastics, Emily Hartwell was called away. She left looking smug and confident and returned looking profoundly disgruntled.

Audrey was finally summoned during her fifth period French class.

The testing station had been set up in the nurse’s office. Audrey had only been in there once for a minor scrape during a track meet.

The first problem was, of course, when she put her hand on the biometrics pad, and an alert came up informing the nurse and the Quantifiers that they were not authorized to conduct diagnostics on her or provide non-emergency care. One of the Quantifiers frowned, tapped in some codes, and then glanced at her in confusion.

“You have a Federacy lock on your biometrics. Why?”

She shrugged. “You already know as much as your clearance level allows you, and that’s probably more than I know.”

His frown deepened, but he shrugged. “Please come this way. Federacy lock or not, you still have to take this test.”

“Sure, why not?” She followed him, slipping into what she had come to think of as Quiet Mode.

It was not unlike being blind and deaf. She couldn’t feel the *Apeiros*, had no awareness of the other ’verses in her five-shape, couldn’t even feel the people near her anymore. No connection, no balance, no direction. If most of humanity had to feel this way all the time, she wondered how it had managed to survive so long. She and MilitAIre had worked on building up her stamina for dealing with the sensation of being cocooned away from everything, and she could maintain Quiet Mode for almost an hour before she started struggling not to scream. She could survive this. She *would* survive this.

The Quantifier had her sit down in a chair and then slipped an electrode cap over her head. She tilted her head for him before he could ask, knowing exactly how the cap should sit.

“You’ve worn one of these before?” he asked.

“Yeah. Had a head injury a few years back, everybody was worried I was concussed. They did a bunch of different scans, including the one where you have to stick your head in a huge white donut-looking machine.”

“A CT scan,” he told her, nodding, as he tapped various controls. “Were you concussed?”

“Thankfully not. I’d hit my head pretty hard, though, so I guess they just wanted to make extra sure.”

He came back over and removed the cap. “Well, your brain looks just fine. Thank you for your cooperation, Miss MacNamera. You can return to your class now.”

“Sure, no problem.” She waited until she was outside of the nurse’s office before letting her connections to the ’verses flow back. It felt as if she’d been holding in a breath the whole time, depriving herself of oxygen.

Todd was approaching. She started to smile at him—

And then stopped. He his eyes were fixed on the nurse’s office... and he looked *terrified*.

She’d never actually tried touching his mind before. She reached out—

Oh God, oh God, they’re gonna figure me out, they’re gonna take me like they took my cousin Sylvia, oh fuck, what do I do...?

He passed her, barely aware that she was standing there.

She pulled her comm out as she walked back to her classroom, resisting the impulse to run.

“Yes, Audrey?” MilitAIre answered.

“I need you to make up a good reason, a home emergency or something, and get me called out of class in the next five minutes with permission to leave campus. We have an emergency situation. I’ll explain everything as soon as I can.”

“Understood. I’ll take care of it.”

The call, releasing her from class, came right as she was sitting back down. She picked up her backpack and headed out of the building, keeping her pace calm and steady and not giving in to the urge to take the stairs two at a time and crash through the exit doors. *Don’t make any sign... don’t leave any clues...*

She knew exactly where all of the school’s security cameras were positioned, and exactly when she could no longer be seen by them. Ducking out of everyone’s line of sight, behind a grouping of bushes the school’s “burn-outs” frequently hid behind to light up, she transitioned into Wonderland and pulled her comm back out. Fortunately, hardware to let her

make comm calls from both of her habitable alternate 'verses had been in place for almost two years.

"Yes, Audrey? What is happening?"

"The Quantifiers have found an esper. A genuine, bona fide esper. You have to help me save him from them."

"Who?"

"Todd McKinney. They took his cousin Sylvia a few years ago."

"Audrey, I don't think—"

"If General Toal wants another unleashed esper, this is his chance."

"While that's true, the circumstances aren't the best for—"

"*Fuck*, MilitAIre, do you know what they're going to *do* to him?"

"Yes." The AI's voice had gone soft.

"Look," she tried again, her heart pounding. "I'm betting your databanks have copies of Duke Pritchard's 'bad kitty' files, right? They have to. Half a dozen of his and Makarov's victims still haven't been identified. Those files won't have been purged yet."

"Yes, Audrey. I have access to those files. Why?"

"Because the Quantifiers' bosses are gonna do to Todd's *mind* what Pritchard and Makarov did to those girls' *bodies*. Unless you help me stop them."

"I see."

"Todd's an amazing person, MilitAIre. He's smart, he's funny, he's creative. He can ad-lib like nobody's business. You hand him a random prop and he can come up with a *brilliant* scene about it off the top of his head."

"Audrey—"

"He wants to direct on New Broadway, and God knows that's not gonna happen now but maybe he could still direct *operations* for General Toal and get to *use* that creativity instead of having it burned out of his *head*."

"Audrey—"

"He's sweet and he's kind and he has *tragic* taste in men but it's not like they're gonna *help* him with that. For God's *sake*, MilitAIre, I'll do this without you if I have to—"

"Audrey."

"Yeah?"

"We're in. You have the green light. Now. What's your plan?"

She turned and sprinted for the nurse's office. Now she just needed a *plan*.

71.

Just So Fuckin' High School

"You have a message from Todd," MilitAIre told Audrey as soon as she walked into the Security Room. The news lit up her day.

"Finally!" she crowed, sitting down at the best screen so she could call it up. "It's gonna be nice to see his face on something other than a 'Wanted' poster."

Todd had lost the ducktail and his close-cropped hair had been dyed from light brown to black. He sported a recently acquired mustache and goatee, both works in progress, making him look *very* different from the "Wanted" posters... as long as someone didn't prank-draw on them, anyway. He appeared to be wearing brown contacts. But she would've recognized him no matter what.

"Hey there, little sis! Dennis and I have reached our destination, which I'm not allowed to tell you, but please. You know where I am." He winked.

"Helion Prime!" Audrey whooped. "I knew it!"

"You're not supposed to know any such thing," MilitAIre said, but he let her hear the amusement in his voice. Nobody was *really* trying to keep it a secret. It had been General Toal's base of operations for nearly three years.

"Dennis, come say hi to Audrey." Todd's grin brightened as Dennis entered the frame and draped his arm over her "brother's" shoulder. "We've missed you."

"For the three days that we've been awake, anyway," Dennis laughed. "We've had a great time watching your messages."

"Look at them, not even trying to *hide* it now..." It had been her idea to bring Dennis into the "inner circle," a weird intuition she'd had, and the crazy chemistry that those two had shared almost immediately had made the risk worth it. By the time arrangements were in place to smuggle Todd offworld, there had been no question that Dennis would go with him, officially as his protector...

...and unofficially, as much more than that.

"Anyway, I've met my new boss, and you're right. He's a cool dude. And I told him you said so. He also got to watch your *Peter Pan* performance because we brought a copy with us. He wants us to tell you 'bravo' and 'absolutely *no* encore.'"

Audrey snorted. She could hear it in General Toal's voice, too. "No promises..."

"We've been instructed to lock you in EntertAIre's theater and make you watch Ed Wood and Coleman Francis movies on repeat if you try again," MilitAIre told her, his voice light and teasing.

"I'm pretty sure that's a war crime," she retorted.

"We'll all be moving on to another world I can't talk to you about in a few weeks—"

"Oh please, you're totally going to Tangiers Prime." Todd, of course, couldn't hear her responses, or the sudden envy in her voice; the message had been recorded a few days before

and sent via special courier drone. He was far too high up on the Wanted list to allow messages from him to pass through any of the civilian beacons, which were slower to deliver anyway.

“—so let me know if there are any messages you want me to pass on to people when I get there. The AI clones are settling into their temporary quarters nicely, and the boss says they’ll have a top-rate facility waiting for them when we get where we’re going.”

“That’ll be nice,” she sighed, hitting pause for a moment. A good AI-run safe house on Tangiers Prime... would she see it one day?

She still wasn’t sure.

She was halfway through her senior year, and she had sent out applications to several schools with good Sociology and Linguistics programs, including the Khair Eddine University in New Marrakesh—where both Takama and Safiyya taught—and the Fatema Mernissi School of Social Sciences at the New Casablanca University. There was only one school on Deckard’s World that had good programs in those fields: Deckard Tech, located just outside of Wyndham Landing in the northern hemisphere. She’d made it her “safety school,” but she *was* worried that even with a 4.0 GPA, her education wouldn’t be considered rigorous enough, or comprehensive enough, for most offworld universities, despite the supplemental instruction that the AIs were providing.

She’d sworn, almost three years ago, that she’d never leave Deckard’s World again, that she’d stay and watch over Elodie. But the nearest school that had decent programs in the areas she wanted to study was a hemisphere away, far enough from Elodie that she might as well *not* rule out offworld schools. They’d have to go months without seeing each other no matter what. And she found herself missing Tangiers Prime more and more.

Assuming she would be *allowed* to go back there before she was biologically eighteen, of course...

Legally, she was seventeen already, and would turn eighteen a little over a month after graduating. But biologically, she was still sixteen for another two months. General Toal had been clear that he didn’t want her to make contact with Ewan, or any of the Mezianes, until she was biologically eighteen. Even assuming they still wanted her to, even assuming she got accepted into one of the schools there—tuition itself wouldn’t be a problem; the funds she’d earned as “acting Captain” of the *Nephrite Undine* would be able to cover those costs—would General Toal allow her to go? Or would the school allow her to begin a year later?

And what would she tell her mother, and Alvin, and Elodie?

Fuck... I hate thinking about that... She unpaused Todd’s message.

“Anyway,” he was saying, “we’re safe and sound and we both miss you tons. Stay out of trouble, and stop dating guys Michael has to beat up. Yeah, we heard all about that.”

Audrey groaned, covering her face with her hands.

“And I thought *Todd’s* taste in men was tragic...” she muttered.

“Love you, little sis! Talk to you again soon!”

The message ended. Audrey leaned back in her chair, sighing and trying to ignore the sudden constriction in her throat.

Currently occupying the #6 spot on the Federacy’s Most Wanted list in spite of having committed no crimes, Todd had stayed in the safe house for slightly over two months before MilitAIre and General Toal worked out arrangements to smuggle him offworld. For him, it

had been a painful time as he came to grips with the probability that he would never see his family or friends again, and that he'd never get to act or direct on New Broadway. He never once blamed Audrey for any of it, aware that it would have been his fate no matter what. He'd already been Quantified when she'd reached him, after all, and was struggling against the sedative he'd been given, before an explosive tracker could be inserted, when she'd pulled him from U1 into Wonderland, making him vanish in front of the Quantifiers' eyes. He *knew* what she'd prevented and had been grateful for it... but he'd still grieved everything he'd lost.

Nonetheless, she'd loved every minute of his company and had found excuses to visit the safe house almost every day just to spend time with him. Having a fellow human being that she could talk to about anything—everything—related to her own strange, bisected life had, for a time, lifted the desperate loneliness she hadn't even known had become a fundamental part of who she was. For two wonderful months, she'd had an actual human civilian who could see behind the mask that was Audrey MacNamera.

It wasn't that nobody else wanted to, or anything. Damn near everybody knew she was hiding *something*, given that she wouldn't say a word about where she'd been for nearly two years, and they *all* wanted a peek. But there was nobody she *could* tell. Even Todd had known that there were parts of her story that she wasn't telling him, but like Ewan and Kyra, he had accepted that with grace. Most people took her silence as a personal insult.

The thing she had *really* begun to dread was the day when Elodie figured out her big sister had a secret she wouldn't—couldn't—tell, and it came between the two of them the same way it came between Audrey and *everybody else*.

It was the same damned thing, every time. She would make a friend. They would bond over fun shared interests. They would realize they had even more things in common and grow closer. They would start sharing confidences. For a while, the imbalance in who shared what wouldn't be a problem because she was a good listener and people liked that. But the day always came. The day when the other person decided that they were finally close enough that she ought to be able to confide in them about where she'd been and what she'd done during her time as a missing person.

And when she wouldn't—couldn't—that was when the friendship collapsed.

It had happened enough times that she kept most people at arm's length, enjoying “casual” friendships, “surface” friendships, there's-an-extra-space-at-the-table-so-why-not-join-us friendships. And she *had* confidants in the AIs and the *Apeiros*, and three cats who thought most human concerns were strange and unimportant but were happy to listen anyway. But no other human being... except one whom she didn't *dare* try to bond more closely with.

And if the collapse of a friendship wasn't bad enough, it was an order of magnitude worse with a *boyfriend*.

“Dave” had been the biggest mistake, and he wasn't even the one Michael had “beaten up.”

Navid Ghasemi, whose family had moved from Tabrisi-e Jadid on Khorshid Prime, had started school at Eisenhower High a few months into their sophomore year, after most of the gossip about *her* had died down. She was one of the few people who hadn't snubbed him—Deckard's World *was* a “racist planet” and she regularly had to struggle with her disappointment when someone she otherwise admired suddenly displayed their own bigotry

—and they had become friends. Toward the end of that year, he'd asked teachers to call him "David," anglicizing his name, and told the handful of friends he'd made to call him "Dave."

That had, of course, made it pretty obvious to Audrey that his family wouldn't be staying much longer, that within the next year or two his father would find a way to transfer back offworld to somewhere less poisonous to their sense of identity. Still, she'd been *drawn* to him.

Maybe because, since the rumors about her had mostly quieted down before he'd arrived, he was one of the few kids in her school who didn't view her as a mystery or a puzzle that ought to be solved. Maybe because he was a polyglot with a scholarly streak that reminded her of the Mezianes. Or maybe just because sometimes he seemed even lonelier than her... and that was definitely saying something.

They had begun to go out, sometimes, when they were juniors. Audrey had been careful to keep the dates light and casual, mindful that although everybody believed she was already sixteen—the age of consent on Deckard's World—she wouldn't *really* be until early December, mid-spring in Settlement Point, and the *spirit* of the law needed observing.

Junior Prom—a huge deal for most of the kids in her classes—was scheduled for the weekend after Todd disappeared and was declared a fugitive from the law, something that had left the entire school in an uproar. She'd already had a ticket, planning on "going stag" and people-watching, at the very least. When Dave asked her to go as his date, almost last-minute but—according to a mutual friend—after three weeks of trying to nerve himself up to it, it had felt like the most *normal* thing that had happened in days, and she'd said yes. Other girls from the theater program had invited her to their "after-prom" party, one of several being held in the same fancy hotel that the dance itself was taking place in. Dave's friends had invited him to one, too.

It had been a fun night. She'd overheard some of her theater friends calling it "magical," and she supposed it was, in its way. Her mother had gotten misty about it all and had taken her dress shopping. First-Aid, ever the prosaic skeptic, had injected her with a 72-hour dose of Nano-Nalo, just in case someone spiked one of her drinks with anything, especially something stronger than hooch. Half an hour into the after-parties, she was probably the only sober person in the place. And then she and Dave had "somehow" ended up in a bedroom in one of the suites reserved for the night...

Sixteen at that point, she'd suspected it was going to happen, and she'd planned for it, maybe a little *too* well. She was attracted to him, after all, and knew the attraction was mutual. It wasn't anything like the mind-cracking feelings she'd had for Riddick, Tomlin, or Ewan... but maybe that was a good thing. She'd already decided that if Dave had plans in that direction, she was in. Several girls she knew were planning on losing their virginity that weekend; she wasn't so much planning as improvising, and trying to be prepared for anything.

Dave had asked her if he was her first, and she'd truthfully told him that he was, even as a little warning flutter moved through her and, for a moment, she'd suspected she was making a mistake.

Before he even woke the next morning, she'd dressed and slipped down to the hotel lobby, where Dennis—who always knew exactly where she was, within a meter, on a Sunday morning—was waiting to drive her to the safe house. She'd warned Dave that she would

have to leave at six a.m. if they stayed over with the others, and she'd left him a little note on hotel stationery, trying not to be awkward about it.

Had to leave early, like I said.
I had a wonderful time. Thank you!
See you Monday!
xoxo
Audrey

Todd, at the safe house, had been waiting for a play-by-play of the dance and the parties, but never asked what had happened between her and Dave. He'd advised against her "plans" for the night, so she didn't try to bring up their results. That had been the day that Dennis had been brought into the "inner circle," learning not only the true nature of the girl he'd been driving and bodyguarding for two years, but that the safe house was now also sheltering Todd McKinney and why. It had been a busy, full day and if Dave never tried calling, it never occurred to her to expect him to.

She'd only discovered on Monday that he was furious with her and wouldn't speak to her... and neither would any of their mutual friends.

Because, she'd found out—after three days of navigating everyone's assumptions that she *had* to know what it was she'd done—there hadn't been any blood on the sheets.

By that time, it had crested among the hot post-prom gossip topics. Emily Hartwell had gotten high and been arrested for dancing naked in the hotel courtyard fountain while belting out "Edge of Seventeen" at three in the morning... Annabelle Richards had caught her boyfriend in bed with Missy Barnstable and had had to be restrained by her friends from throwing herself off their room's balcony... and Audrey MacNamera had *lied* to Dave Ghasemi about being a *virgin*.

When Dave had finally calmed down and *graciously* unbent enough to try to speak with her, Audrey didn't have a shred of patience left for his shit. Not after having to listen to the rampant speculation of where, when, and how she'd lost her virginity several different times in the girls' bathrooms. She walked off whenever she saw him trying to approach, and cut school that Friday afternoon rather than sit in the same room with him.

A part of her had even felt an echo of the impulse that had driven her offworld four years earlier, the night skies now beckoning her toward other planets where nobody knew her or felt compelled to make up stories about her...

She'd talked it out, as best she could, with the AIs... with the *Apeiros*... with Todd, who'd told her he'd been afraid something like that might happen... and even with her mom...

"Why'd he think you weren't a virgin?" her mother had asked her, setting a cup of hot cocoa in front of her.

"Because I took care of it back in December," Audrey grumbled.

"Took care of it?" Her mother had raised an eyebrow at her and waited for her to elaborate.

"Yeah. I didn't want my first time with a guy to be a bloody, painful mess. I wanted to actually be able to *enjoy* it. So I went to a store in the mall that has dildoes in its 'gag gifts' section, bought one, and *took care of it*."

It had hurt like a motherfucker, too, not just the first time but each time thereafter for almost a *week*, and she knew she'd have hated every moment of her first time with Dave if she'd saved the pain for then.

Her mother had stared at her for a moment, eyes widening, before she began to shake with suppressed laughter.

"*Seriously*, Mom?"

"Oh, *Audrey*..." She could barely keep the laughter out of her voice. "You can be very ingenious sometimes. I wish to hell *I'd* thought of that when *I* was sixteen."

She hadn't been sure what she'd expected her mother to say or do, but that had been kind of a relief.

"Where are you in your cycle?" her mom had asked a few sips of cocoa later.

"The Federacy medic already took care of *that*," Audrey said, careful to lie with the truth. "She's from offworld. You know that there are vaccines against every STD on Deckard's World, on the other planets? And implants you can get to keep from having to worry about where you are in your cycle? How come we don't have that stuff here?"

Her mother frowned, considering that. "I've never even heard of those. Your 'medic' really told you that?"

More than told her; Audrey *had* the shots and implants. She didn't elaborate, though; just nodded.

Rachel, however, had been the one who came up with the solution that Saturday. Even though there was still some distrust between them, the fact that Audrey had opened up to her about the mess, and asked for advice, went a long way toward healing much of it.

When Audrey went over the plan with the AIs, Todd, and Dennis, they had embraced it, and Todd had spent the rest of that Sunday coaching and rehearsing her.

The following Monday morning, several girls, all eager gossips but none of them spiteful types, had heard someone trying to conceal the sound of her sniffles in the first-floor girls' bathroom before classes. When cornered, a tearful Audrey MacNamera had told them the "real truth..." Dave had passed out drunk before they could even *have* sex, she said, and she had thought she was doing him a kindness by leaving him a note, when she had to *go off to church* the next morning while he was still passed out, thanking him for a wonderful night... but his way of thanking *her* had been to destroy her reputation...

None of them had realized it was pure theater. Several of them were *in* the theater program with Audrey and didn't believe she could *ever* be that good.

As fresh gossip went, it was *fire*, overtaking even the fistfight between the Seniors' Prom Queen and Prom Princess from that weekend.

Audrey continued to play her role all day, the part of a cowed and humiliated girl who had *tried* to save her ex-boyfriend's face until the weight of her own destroyed reputation became too much to bear. Her breathless bathroom audience had even heard which of the ensuing rumors about her had supposedly cut most deeply—selected by her, EntertAIn, and Todd both to throw as harsh a light as possible on their inherent misogyny and to shame some of the school's most vicious gossips—and how this was why it was so hard to trust *anyone* with "what had really happened" while she was gone, if people she'd believed were her friends could turn on her and spread lies about her so readily.

By the end of the day, people she barely knew were approaching her to apologize. She kept the act going, looking hesitant as each person approached, as if she expected all of them to call her a slut to her face instead of apologizing. Most of them found ways to end the conversations and beat hasty retreats when her eyes would begin to fill; only a few pulled her into hugs that required her to generate tears and sobs for them that Todd later called “Tony-worthy.”

Dave, meanwhile, had not been faring so well.

The blow to his reputation was lethal; if he’d fucked as many people as the rumor-mongers had claimed Audrey must have while on the run, it would only have improved his standing, but the suggestion that he’d failed to *perform* had annihilated it. His hurt and anger were reinterpreted as cruelty; the whirlwind of gossip he’d unleashed on her was no longer righteous but vicious. It was a good thing, Audrey had reflected, that there was only one more week of school left.

Unfortunately for him, that week was full of Final Exams.

When word had reached Audrey that Dave had failed two exams, she didn’t have to *pretend* to be sad for him. She *missed* her friend, and as much as his behavior had infuriated and disgusted her, and *had* wounded her deeply, she hadn’t wanted to do him any lasting harm as much as show him how easily gossip could turn against someone. If not for Rachel’s suggestion, she might have confronted him instead, *genuinely* tearful, to ask him why he couldn’t have talked *to* her before talking *about* her. Or she might have held the tears in and tried to cut him to pieces with her words—“I’ve still never had sex with a *man*” had come to mind—instead. Whether or not either of those approaches would have yielded better results was a moot point.

But she’d wished she’d never tried to get so close to him. She wished neither of them had been hurt by the results.

That Sunday was when she had “met” Michael.

He’d been behind the driver’s seat, where Dennis normally sat, when she got into the car for the ride to the safe house. While Dennis had looked like a Secret Service agent, this new man looked like the old Hollywood leading role *version* of one. Medium brown hair, arresting grey eyes, sculpted features... Audrey had had to pretend, *hard*, at nonchalance.

He was in his thirties. Probably married with kids. The last thing he needed, she scolded herself, was a teenage WitSec ward crushing on him.

“Where’s Dennis?” she’d asked as they began driving.

“He’s being reassigned to ‘Hook’s’ permanent detail,” the man told her. There was something strangely familiar about the way he spoke, but she couldn’t quite place it.

“Do you have a number, or a name?” she asked him. A lot of the Federacy agents she’d encountered in the last two-plus years just came with numbers.

“Michael,” he’d said, a tiny hint of a smile ghosting the corners of his lips.

He’d dropped her off at the safe house and driven off. She’d gone inside, spilled her guts about her feelings of guilt and regret to Todd, Dennis, and the AIs, and then retreated to SensAI’s dojo to stretch and change for her combat instruction.

One hour of each Sunday was spent in intensive instruction with a man whose face she’d still never once seen. While she’d no longer had to mask herself against most visitors to the building—Todd had to, of course, because most Federacy agents in Settlement Point were

actively searching for him—her instructor had never taken his mask off. She'd never heard his actual voice, either; it was digitally altered, the way her mask had altered hers. She knew nothing about him except that he was six inches taller than her, probably a hundred pounds heavier, and insisted that she never hold back in their sparring even though she knew that he always did.

Holding back hadn't stopped him from teaching her hard lessons if she let him slip her guards, though; his touch when he "struck" was no more than a caress, but their suits were designed to set every pain nerve it made contact with on *fire* for a full minute. He could switch that off, and frequently did in the aftermath of combat contact when he had to hold her until the agony he'd just inflicted abated. Theirs was a strange relationship. She wasn't afraid of him no matter how frequently he hurt her, trusting him not to actually *harm* her, and to help her through the worst when it was too much to keep fighting through.

His mind was, curiously, opaque to her, enough that sometimes she'd wondered if he was an AI-controlled 'bot even though she could see him breathing.

"You're *letting* me through your guard," he'd said three minutes into their match, stepping back and waiting while her twitching arm dangled uselessly at her side.

"I'm not," she told him, suddenly aware that he was right.

"You are. Why?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She forced her arm back up into combat position and stepped after him. *Fight through, keep fighting through...*

"Your balance is off. And your breathing. You came into this match upset about something."

"So?" she asked, her fist *almost* managing to make contact with him. His blocks never inflicted pain; only his successful strikes. "We can't always choose when we end up in 'battle,' right?"

"True. But it's affecting your fighting."

"Are you saying I'm doing a shit job today?" Feeling a little insulted, she'd buckled down and tried out a combination she'd been working on with SensAI for weeks.

"No," he told her as he blocked her new moves and then struck, his palm gently touching her abdomen. "I'm saying you're letting me through your guard."

Fire ignited in her belly and she collapsed to the ground. "Fuck!"

He knelt beside her, his now-safe hands on her side and back as she curled up around the pain. "Breathe, Audrey. Deep breaths. That's it..."

"You know my name?" He'd never called her Audrey before.

"Of course. Should we talk about why you're letting me hurt you today?"

"I'm *not*," she told him again, this time aware that she was lying even before she said it.

"Are you lying to me, or to yourself?"

"What are you, a fucking interrogator?"

"If I have to be. What's going on?"

It had all come out again. Everything. The decision to escalate her relationship with Dave if he was interested... the preparations she'd made so that her "first time" wouldn't be painful... Dave's perverse anger that she hadn't bled—and hadn't been in too much pain to enjoy the experience—when he'd realized... how his reason for shunning her had spread across her school's campus in a matter of days and turned her back into the butt of everyone's

gossip and judgment after almost two years of relative peace... the retaliation her cousin had suggested, and which she and Todd had elaborated upon... how much destruction it had wreaked upon Dave's reputation and equilibrium in return...

"He thought he was telling the truth," her instructor said, "and you knew you were telling a lie, and that's why you believe you deserve pain now, to match what you think you inflicted on him."

She'd shrugged. "He's been humiliated."

"Weren't you?"

The rumors she'd heard—Missy claiming that a cousin of hers had seen Audrey working the streets of New Lubbock; Joanie, who worked as a nurse's office aide, claiming that her nonexistent school medical records showed she'd had several STDs—had been put to bed by her actions, but not before a lot of people had entertained themselves at her expense.

"Doesn't matter what shit they make up about what I did while I was gone," she'd sighed. "They'll never come up with anything worse than the truth."

"You still hold yourself responsible for the people Makarov killed?" he'd asked.

"You know about that?" How much did her instructor know about her, exactly?

"I've been briefed, in considerable detail."

She'd stared at him in astonishment. "*Michael?*"

He'd reached up and drawn off the mask and head covering that he'd always worn, revealing the face of her new driver. "Very good. How did you know?"

"You're the only person I've ever heard pronounce it '*detail*' on Deckard's world. Everybody else says '*detail*.'"

He'd smiled. "Impressive. You're astute at spotting other people's patterns."

"Just *other* people's?" she asked, feeling a little miffed.

"Audrey, you just tried to use our sparring session to get me to torture you, so you could do penance for hurting a boy who tried to destroy you for not bleeding on cue. Do you see a pattern *there?*"

When he'd put it that way, it had been a disturbing pattern indeed.

That summer, especially once Todd and Dennis had left the safe house, Michael had been ubiquitous. He'd become the only agent who drove her places, whether between the safe house and home or to and from her infrequent "assignments" from General Toal, and the only one with an office in the building. The decision to shelter Todd, it seemed, had resulted in all the agents who *weren't* trusted with knowledge of his presence being cut loose for other programs.

And, as a result, it had been Michael who had dealt with the fallout from her disastrous summer fling with a guy—Lars—who'd reminded her a little of Riddick until his violently possessive jealous streak had emerged... and Michael who had thrown Lars through a storefront picture window for trying to backhand her during their breakup. Half a dozen classmates out clubbing had witnessed the fight, and she'd known that she'd start her senior year with a lot of gossip swirling around her. Again.

She still felt far guiltier about Dave, though.

He was no longer a student at Eisenhower High when their senior year had begun. The few of their mutual friends she could still stand told her that his family had moved offworld over

the summer. And Audrey had settled into keeping everyone at arm's length again. Even Michael. *Especially* Michael.

She still couldn't read him, at all, and had no idea why or if she dared ask... but her crush on him had only intensified to almost painful levels. He was more than twice her age, though, and either a colleague or possibly her *boss*—she still wasn't entirely sure where he ranked in the hierarchy, but it seemed to be higher up than driving her around and bodyguarding her might imply—and somehow all of that had made her more aware than ever of just how lonely and disconnected she was.

There was no one she dared talk to about her feelings where he was concerned. No one she could safely ask whether there was something *twisted* about having sexual fantasies featuring a man who inflicted pain upon her on a regular basis, even if he never once hurt her in the fantasies. No one who could commiserate with her confusion or help her find her way through it. Even her customary confidants were unsafe for *that* conversation, making her desperately wish she knew where Kyra was. Kyra would have understood her confusion and worry. Kyra would have known what to tell her.

Instead, she felt more profoundly alone than ever, even when she was surrounded by people... even ones who liked her... even ones who loved her. Which, she reflected, was why she'd sent out ten University applications, but only one of them to a school on Deckard's World.

Audrey had sworn to never leave the world of her birth again, but sometimes she felt like it was slowly killing her.

She heard the front door open and close, and Michael's distinctive footsteps. *Speak of the handsome devil...*

He entered the Security Room frowning.

Uh oh.

"What'd I do now?" she asked before she could stop herself.

"Took the blame for something you didn't do," he quipped, but his smile was perfunctory and there was an uneasy undertone in his voice. He switched on one of the screens, setting it to a news feed.

"...*still not sure what we're looking at...*" an announcer said.

Almost complete darkness filled the screen, aside from a time code at the bottom that read 2520.09.26 22:14:36.07 FST and counted upward. Bright lights were rising up into the darkness, arcing toward something that looked like a meteor falling downward. As Audrey watched, the meteor struck the ground like a massive dagger, blinding light filling the screen and illuminating tall buildings as they shattered, and then static followed.

"*It appears that something impacted on the surface...*" the announcer continued.

"What is that?" Audrey asked. "*Where* is that?"

"Nova São Paulo. The capital city of Carvão," Michael said, his voice hushed and tense. "A week ago, by the time code."

"Carvão? Isn't that—?"

"In the Coalsack nebula, yes," he murmured. "Almost three years since you heard Irena and Colin Kirshbaum talking about how *something* was three years away from happening there..."

"Oh fuck..." Audrey's hands went over her mouth.

“It’s gone. Completely gone.” He turned to look at her, his expression deadly serious. “Carvão, Charbon, Uhlia, Waro, and Seogtan... all of the Coalsack planets. Gone. And it would appear that the Helion System is a year away from sharing its fate.”

72.

The Planet-Killer's Hit List

"We understand that you have a report for us, Audrey."

She nodded, studying the faces—the few she could see—on the screen. General Toal, Todd, and Dennis were visible; most of the other participants had their faces hidden and their names reduced to first letters. Apparently, she wasn't cleared to know who they were. Most of the others couldn't see *her* face, either, though.

She also, apparently, wasn't cleared to know how they'd stolen Quintessa's proprietary tech for making instantaneous calls across the light years... but she had her suspicions about that. She'd already been warned not to ask.

"I've identified the pattern in almost all of the planetary destruction cases on record," she told them. "And, based on that pattern, we can predict which planets are next, for roughly the next fourteen years."

"When will Helion Prime fall?" Toal asked before she could continue.

"Sometime in October 2521, so probably less than eleven Standard months from now." *Merry Christmas*, she didn't add, although she was tempted. That was four days away and it felt like it was going to be her worst since the one on Helion Prime itself. "In between now and then, around May, we should expect to see the Aquilan system fall. I'm guessing the Quintessa people didn't talk about it in their call because it's not a shipping or travel hub. It's almost as much of a backwater as the planet *I'm* on."

"Audrey," Michael murmured behind her.

She made herself let it go. For now. She was going to try to plead her case to General Toal again at the end of the call.

"What is the driver behind the pattern?" one of the concealed speakers asked, their voice digitally altered.

Yeah, let's just cut to the chase, why don't we? "Level Five Incidents."

"Officially, such incidents don't exist. How have you managed to track them?"

Because I have nothing else to do with my time... "I started with a database of all incidents in which a Star Jumper was reported damaged or destroyed. I then excluded any case where the Jumper was later put back into service. That doesn't happen with real Level Fives. Next, I excluded cases where any of the passengers and crew survived and their whereabouts could be traced and confirmed. Real Level Fives have no known survivors. Something inevitably 'happens' to everybody who was on board."

With one exception, that she couldn't help feeling a little proud of. Officially, all of *them* were dead, too.

"What did this give you?"

"A list of forty-seven incidents in which a Star Jumper was irreparably damaged, or was destroyed, or vanished in transit," she told them, "from the three earliest missing ships, the

Isli, the *Nick Fury*, and the *Tenth Crusade*, to the ‘implosions’ of the *Scarlet Matador* and the *Lucy Ricardo* in May of 2517. I built a timeline of the incidents, along with their locations where known. Next, I built a database of what the Federacy calls ‘Black Planet Incidents.’ Every time a colony planet failed, for any reason, and the planet was declared uninhabitable in the aftermath. Narrowing those down took longer.”

“But you did narrow them down,” General Toal prompted.

“Yeah. Thirty-two cases, one of which is still questionable. And thirteen future targets, based on the pattern that emerged. The first attack occurred in the Ilanga system, one hundred thirty years ago. Fifty million settlers vanished in under a week. The *Ibhubesi*, one of the early colony ships in the second generation of Star Jumpers, experienced a catastrophic failure when it arrived in 2144. It disintegrated during its descent through Ilanga Prime’s atmosphere. I know that doesn’t necessarily sound like a Level Five Incident, but it’s all about what might exist on the other side of the threshold it was straddling. If, for example, the atmosphere of the other ‘verse’s Ilanga Prime was highly corrosive, that would explain the recordings we have of its destruction.”

“So the fourth hypothetical Level Five Incident, which took place 376 years ago, led to an attack 246 years later?”

“Yeah.” Audrey activated her chart on the main screen so that all of the viewers could see it. “In each case that followed since then, the attacks on colony worlds that reduced them to ‘black planets,’ or ‘black rocks,’ have happened in order, corresponding to probable Level Five Incidents that occurred in-system. The only exception is the attack on Furya twenty-nine years ago. I can’t find a corresponding Level Five Incident.”

“Why are you including it in your timeline, then? If it isn’t part of the attack pattern—”

“It is,” Michael said from behind her. “I was there. It’s absolutely part of the attack pattern.”

Audrey switched the main screen over to a collage of video images, many of them similar to the one that she and Michael had watched a little over two months earlier. “This is surviving footage of the attacks from a dozen of the identified worlds. The top right footage comes from Furya.”

“Furya is also the only world in the pattern that hasn’t been reduced to ‘black rock’ status, and is still marginally habitable, even recovering,” one of the hidden speakers commented. “It’s a break in the pattern, yes, in more ways than one. Perhaps there’s a different kind of incident that triggered its inclusion, and somewhat different treatment.”

“The exception that proves the rule, maybe?” another hidden speaker suggested.

“Could be,” General Toal agreed. “As for the rest of the pattern... the data is quite telling. And the attacks, as our intel previously indicated, have been slowly accelerating. There was a decade between the attack on the Ilanga system and the next, on the Sorj system, then nine years until the attack on the Tjindu system. Six Indigenous Australian populations were rendered ‘extinct’ by that probable genocide. The quiet period between attacks has been steadily shrinking, and now the timeline is indicating the likelihood of three strikes in slightly over a year.”

“And yet you predict that the remaining eleven attacks, after the Aquilan and Helion systems, will take place over a thirteen-year period,” another hidden speaker noted. “Why?”

“The Coalsack nebula, the Aquilan system, and the Helion system are near neighbors,” Audrey explained. “They *used* to share a trade route, but it was discontinued after three Star Jumpers experienced Level Five Incidents along it within a year of each other. One ‘died’ in the Coalsack nebula. It ruptured shortly after transitioning back into U1 within the nebula itself. Officially, it was holed by a massive asteroid, but there wasn’t one recorded as passing through that space in U1 itself, and some of the other surviving readings from the ship are really weird. The next seemed fine when it docked at the space station above Aquila Prime, but all of the cargo and passengers that got shuttled down to the surface burned up during entry. The shuttles carrying them were unharmed, aside from fire damage on their *insides*.”

Tomlin, she suspected, had been thinking of that very incident when he had ordered the *Scarlet Matador* to bypass Tangiers Station B and land on the planet’s surface instead.

“And the incident in the Helion system?”

“You know how an unidentified group of terrorists supposedly blew up the *Mary Prince* during its entry above New Mecca, sixty years ago?”

“Bloody hell,” one of Toal’s unseen colleagues muttered.

“A week after that explosion,” Audrey added, “the Quintessa Corporation announced four new routes to replace the route that the ships in those three Incidents had all used. I know, there’s a *lot* of supposition and inference getting drawn into all of this, but all of you know just how spotty and heavily redacted the records we’re working with are.”

“So you believe that the shorter timing of the next attacks is due to the close proximity of the three systems, and that we should expect intervals of roughly a year after that,” Toal prompted.

“Yeah. And there are possibilities of unforeseen pauses.” She highlighted five different spots on the chart. “I don’t have any guess why, but there are five times in the last hundred-twenty years when the attack pattern got pushed back by a few years each time. Maybe we’ll get lucky and there’ll be another pause soon, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

“So you are predicting the fall of the Aquilan, Helion, Melpomene, Tulsa, Trafalgar, Clovis, Oahu, Maneki Neko, Catalan, Cascadian, Dubai, Nineveh, and Tangiers systems over the next fourteen years?” another unseen participant asked.

“If the current patterns hold, yeah.”

“That’s a lot to *accept*,” yet another participant said.

“Even if you don’t want to believe Audrey’s analysis,” Michael said from behind her, “which I think is solid, you only have to look at the intel coming from our spies in the Quintessa Corporation. The Corporation is predicting the same thing and has already begun moving its assets off the worlds in question. A week ago, the resupply route to Furya got shifted back to Tangiers Prime, and two other minor routes that relied on a stop in the Helion system got moved away a month ago. They can’t shut down the major routes yet without revealing more than they seem to want to, but there are six new test routes in the Sirius Shipping dockets that bypass the Helion and Melpomene systems. Oslo Shipping has eight upcoming test routes, one of which also bypasses the Tulsa system. And no new ships are under construction in any of those systems’ shipyards. Their schedules have shifted over to repairs only.”

As he spoke, Audrey called up the data he was referring to on the main screen.

“Rats deserting a sinking ship,” one of the unseen participants muttered. “They won’t even try to warn the populations?”

“If Level Five Incidents are, indeed, the trigger for these attacks,” General Toal observed, “a warning would require them to admit that those Incidents are real and that the Corporation bears culpability for them and their consequences. How long *they* have known the connection between the two is uncertain, but even if the Coalsack planets were the first they were sure of, they have demonstrated a willingness to let millions die rather than admit their involvement.”

“So what do *we* do? Is there a warning we can get out to these worlds? Without exposing ourselves?”

That, Audrey reflected, was the crux of the matter. Although technically almost everyone on the call was a Federacy officer or asset of some kind, they were all involved in *subverting* Federacy policy. That policy included at least one form of government-sanctioned slavery and a *whole* lot of subservience to a corporation that held a monopoly over Faster-Than-Light travel, as well as some other forms of human rights and alien rights abuses. She and Todd were far from the first espers that General Toal had hidden away from the Federacy, she’d learned. If his actions were ever uncovered, he would probably be executed for treason. And most of them, if caught, would meet fates *worse* than death.

Which made it nearly impossible for them to openly blow the whistle on the abuses they uncovered.

“We’ve learned some things about the armada behind the attacks, in the last few years,” General Toal said. “Including its name. Necromongers.”

“‘Death-Dealers?’” One person snorted. “How *imaginative*.”

“Oh... fuck.” Audrey muttered before she could stop herself.

“What is it, Audrey?” General Toal asked.

“I... I don’t know for sure, but...”

“Go on.”

“The *Moribund*. What he said to me. ‘Death to the things that killed us. Death to the makers of the cages. Death to the ’verse that trapped us. A trillion deaths for every one you took from us. We come. We come to take it all back. All the worlds your filth has stolen from us will burn.’”

“‘Moribund’ means ‘Deathbound,’” the person who had snorted added. “Who is this ‘Moribund?’”

“Not human,” General Toal told the group. “But that may explain the rumors that these ‘Necromongers’ are ‘part human and part something else.’ And it would explain several other puzzles we have been working on... when was the last time you spoke to him, Audrey?”

“Not in years. After New Casablanca, he hasn’t tried to communicate with me.”

“Did he ever say anything else that might be connected to the attacks on these systems?”

She thought for a moment. “Something about not needing outside help to rise... ‘we will break the ’verse itself.’ The last time I heard him say anything, he wasn’t even talking to me directly, but I think he was talking about me. He said, ‘let it tear down *all* of the cages and break the darkness, and we will agree it is not filth,’ and then he said, ‘you know what will appease us. In due time, we will make it happen.’ He says ‘we’ but I don’t think he has any allies among the other *Apeiros* themselves. Maybe he means this armada?”

“Audrey is the child who is in communication with the alien species?” One of the others asked.

Fucking hell. Seventeen and still “the child...”

“Yes,” Toal replied. “The ‘Moribund’ seems to be set apart from the rest of the species we call the ‘Apeiros.’ He evidently has his own agenda, one they neither agree with nor approve of, but are unable to prevent. If there *is* a connection between him and the Necromongers, they will not stop attacking worlds once they have wiped out all the systems where Level Five Incidents occurred. Those attacks might potentially be practice runs for all-out genocide.”

The meeting continued for a while, as others on the call discussed potential strategies for leaking information about the “Necromongers” into public awareness, particularly on the Aquilan and Helion systems, and what might be done to bolster planetary defenses on target worlds without signaling just how much they knew to those Federacy agents influenced or controlled by the Quintessa Corporation. Audrey listened quietly, not really able to come up with suggestions of her own about any of that. Her whole focus, for the last two months—aside from keeping up in school and dealing with the fallout from the college acceptance letters she had begun receiving—had been assembling the timelines and connections between Level Five Incidents and Black Planet Incidents. Thinking about what to do next about these “Necromongers” was something she could barely fathom. The scale of it all was overwhelming.

*If there’s ever a Level Five Incident in this system, she thought with a shudder, I’m gonna spend every waking second convincing Mom and Alvin to take Elodie and go **anywhere else...***

Or, she reflected, she could shift them to *Elsewhere*, to play pioneers in its redwood forest

That was an idea she needed to discuss with General Toal. A possible escape portal already existed on Tangiers Prime, and now on Deckard’s World. Could similar ones be created on all of the other target worlds?

The meeting was concluding. As everyone said their goodbyes, she asked General Toal if she could speak to him privately for a few minutes. Once everyone else was gone, she took a deep breath.

“I know what you’re going to ask, Audrey, and I’m sorry. The answer is still ‘no.’”

“But—”

“I *am* aware of the value of the full scholarship and mentorship offer of the caliber you received. It *can* be postponed for up to two years to accommodate interplanetary travel issues, and I am happy to help you make the arrangements to do so. But you may not return to Tangiers Prime and begin attending Khair Eddine until you are biologically eighteen years old. That’s still almost a full Standard year away. You will have to spend a minimum of five months in cryo to travel to Tangiers Prime, which I will only permit once you *are eighteen*. You need to plan accordingly.”

“But... what do I do in the meantime?”

“We can keep you busy, I’m sure.”

It was a struggle not to burst into tears. *Busy* wasn’t the problem.

“That’s not going to help her, Sir,” Michael said. “She needs more social contact with peers. And she especially needs a peer group that isn’t constantly prying into her past.”

She felt his hand on her shoulder and leaned back, resting the back of her head against his chest. In the last two months, it had grown easier and easier to think of Michael as a kind of father figure, although her crush on him still periodically reared up. Her way of dealing with *that*—finding someone who reminded her of one of her *other* crushes and having a fling with him—had only worsened her disconnect from the rest of Eisenhower High’s Class of ’21. While most of them accepted that she *had* been a virgin at the time of the “Junior Prom Incident,” her flings in the aftermath had, in their minds, moved her firmly into “slut” territory. They seemed particularly vindictive about it because none of their own number had gotten a taste, and especially judgmental about it because almost none of the guys who *had* were what they considered “white.”

Stuck on a fucking racist, sexist planet...

Graduation was less than two months away, and a relief, but the question of what she was going to do afterward was getting messier and messier.

Eight of the ten schools she had applied to had accepted her. Five were disallowed completely thanks to her own research; General Toal had vetoed going to any schools that were on the Necromongers’ “hit list,” except the Tangiers System itself. He would have vetoed that system as well if it wouldn’t have led to her all-out mutiny. But he wouldn’t allow her to *start* traveling to either Khair Eddine *or* New Casablanca University until after December 4, 2521. That meant that enrollment in the Class of ’25 was impossible. Enrollment in the Class of ’26 *might* be feasible, but figuring out what to do in the meantime, to keep from getting crushed by her growing isolation...

“I do have a suggestion about that,” Michael said after a moment, when neither she nor General Toal spoke. “I want to relocate the safe house to Wyndham Landing at the end of the southern hemisphere summer.”

“Huh?” Audrey glanced up at him in confusion. On the screen, General Toal looked baffled as well.

“Deckard Tech is on a quarterly arrangement rather than a semesterly one. They’ve accepted Audrey and have offered her a full scholarship, too. She can attend there until she’s *able* to transfer to Khair Eddine. The spring quarter up north starts in May, the summer quarter in August, and the autumn quarter in November. Then, instead of starting the winter quarter in February, she can board a Star Jumper going to Tangiers Prime and get there between five and ten months later, with a full academic year of credits under her belt to help catch up with the year she missed.” Michael outlined it the way he might have outlined a military campaign. She wondered if that was how he thought of it.

As she’d slowly gotten to know him better, she’d realized that he didn’t *have* much of a civilian mindset to draw on. And, of course, that the reason she couldn’t read him was that he was an esper, like her, with the *tightest* mental shield she’d ever encountered.

He had been twelve years old, he’d told her, when Furya burned, and his parents bundled him and his little sister onto an escape ship. He’d been fourteen, a year of cryo and two years of foster homes later, when the Federacy had begun to figure out that Furryan refugees were paranormal *goldmines* and he’d taken his sister with him to hide in the woods of Catalonia Prime. He’d been sixteen when General Toal—then a Colonel—had found them and helped

them escape offworld. Of the ensuing twenty-four years, he'd spent roughly a third of the time in cryo, traveling from world to world, training to be the best soldier he could become, and helping Toal locate and hide other refugees from Furya and, in the last few years, fathom and manage the "Quintessa Problem." His focus on his mission was needle-sharp and there was room for little else in his life.

And yet he understood that she needed more than that... and was starting to *starve*.

Then again, given that she seemed to be at the dead-center of his current mission, it made sense that he would understand her better than she could understand herself. And that, where she had become stuck and thwarted, he would have found a path through.

"This could work," General Toal said. "As it happens, one of the *Undine* class ships is scheduled to depart Plymouth Station A in mid-February 2522. I *had* already investigated that angle. That would get her to her destination in time for all of the customary orientation activities scheduled for the start of the next school year on Tangiers Prime... and she can visit with the Meziane family while she waits for the dorms to open, since her mentorship offer *is* from Dr. Meziane. Who, by the way, absolutely cannot know who you really are until you arrive there, Audrey. We will come up with a plausible reason for the delay. Is *that* acceptable, child?"

"I... yeah, I think that could work." She understood what Michael's *real* goal with it was: to get her connected to a group of students her own age, ones who hopefully hadn't heard wild rumors about her and wouldn't try to delve into her past... to give her access to the companionship she craved and was currently deprived of. "General Toal? One more thing?"

"Yes, Audrey?"

"What if there's another way to evacuate some of these worlds? What if we could find another 'verse we have access to, like Elsewhere, to pull people into if an attack is inevitable?"

"It's a possibility," he said after a long, thoughtful moment. "You are currently the only human being we know of who has access to more than two other universes..."

With his permission, after all, she'd "infected" Todd, Dennis, and Michael with Threshold Syndrome, giving them access to Elsewhere and Wonderland, but those were the only ones of her 'verses she could pull someone into without killing them. The *Apeiros* had promptly congratulated her on producing a "new brood," but had said they were unable to speak with them directly, even though all three men were espers. Dennis had apparently been amused when she'd campaigned to get him admitted to the safe house's "inner circle," given that he and Michael had been its two *human* managers—in charge of everything AIs were legally prohibited to control—the whole time, and it was Michael who had green-lit Todd's rescue. She'd only been cleared to find *that* out after the fall of the Coalsack planets.

"...and there's no way to get you, or any of the ones with access to 'Elsewhere' or 'Wonderland,' onsite in the Aquilan system in time," Toal continued, "even assuming one of those 'verses is habitable there. Dennis and Todd have, unfortunately, already confirmed that neither 'Elsewhere' nor 'Wonderland' are habitable on Helion Prime, and the time it would take to get you here, to see if any of your other universes would be viable, would cut things far too close. It is a possibility to explore for the future, though."

He'd already thought of it. She'd wasted her time, and his, bringing it up.

"It *is* a good idea, Audrey," he told her, his voice gentling, "and one we will continue to pursue."

Michael drove her home not long after. Spring was fully upon Settlement Point, and she could hear the distant rumbles of a thunderstorm. The air was warm, soft, and carried the scents of blossoms and rain. Life was burgeoning all around... and yet the cold, terrible touch of that call had left a sense that, just beneath the surface, something eldritch and implacable waited to devour it all. Even the twinkling Christmas lights on every house couldn't drive that feeling back.

Her mother, definitely not *eldritch*, was waiting for her when she walked through the door. "So, did you talk to your handlers about college?"

Of course that was what was on her mind.

She'd spent the last two weeks, since the acceptance letters began arriving, trying to talk Audrey into turning down all of the offworld offers and going somewhere local, with increasing desperation, even though she knew that none of the truly local schools had the programs her daughter wanted. She'd even tried to sweeten the pot by saying that she could probably get Audrey a "legacy" scholarship to her own alma mater, where she could study law.

Audrey did *not* want to be a lawyer.

"Yeah, they're going to be making arrangements to transfer the safe house to Wyndham Landing, so I can attend Deckard Tech," she said, wondering how upset her mother was going to get about *that*. It was the only school she'd applied to that wasn't offworld, but it was still a hemisphere away.

"*Really?*" her mother asked. "That's wonderful!"

Now Audrey was confused.

"Alvin? Audrey's going to Deckard Tech! Now tell her *your* news!"

Alvin, carrying Elodie, entered the room smiling. "It's brand-new news, too, and we were waiting to hear what your plans were before we made a decision about it. I've been offered the position of District Attorney. In *Wyndham Landing*. I'll start in June if I take it."

"Take it!" her mother said, laughing. "It's perfect timing. Elodie won't miss any school. She'll start Kindergarten a few months after the move! And we can stay close to you."

Audrey felt completely off-kilter. The one thing she'd been dreading about the new arrangement, the separation she'd thought was inevitable no matter where she went, had just fallen away. At least, for another year, she would have her family and her little sister close...

Her comm chimed. She glanced down at the screen.

It wasn't easy, but we'll always have your back.

Merry Christmas, Kid.

M,M,F,E,C&S

They hadn't given a *thing* away. She loved her handlers.

For one brief moment, at least, Audrey's frustration and dread of the future fell away.

73.

Hiding the Mermaid

Tizzy?

The voice was distant, hard to hear, but so familiar...

Tizzy!

She frowned in her sleep.

Jack! Help me!

Audrey bolted up in bed, gasping. "Kyra?"

"Mmmmm?" In the darkness, her roommate turned over and pulled her covers over her head.

That had been *Kyra*. *Kyra... screaming...* in her mind.

She closed her eyes and focused on the sound of that voice.

Kyra?

Nothing.

Kyra, it's me... where are you?

Silence.

She willed herself into the starfield.

"I think *Kyra's* in trouble!" she called out to the *Apeiros*. "Can any of you hear her?"

We hear nothing, they said after a moment. *She has gone silent. There is... something... blocking her.*

"Please find her."

We do not have permission to speak with her.

"I rescind that! You have permission! Please, *please* find her. She's in trouble! She needs help!"

We will search. We will tell you when we find her. Rest now, Audrey.

She couldn't rest. She was too frightened for her sister.

Little one, sweet one, you need to sleep.

"I can't... I can't... I'm afraid I'll miss her call again."

We are listening. Come, we will help you sleep... One...

A glowing line formed in front of her, stretching forward and back into infinity. A singular path...

Two...

The line spread outward, forming a plane. Infinite lines, infinite paths, the possibility of intersection, reversal, veering through complex geometries, a bounded set of infinities...

Three...

The plane expanded, forming a boundless-yet-bounded cube of light. Infinite lines, infinite planes, even more possibilities of intersection and motion, shapes within the cube, delimited by their edges and yet, within, infinite paths from point to point, edge to edge...

Four...

And the cube came alive, able to travel forward and back upon its own tumbling motion, infinite lines, infinite planes, infinite cubes, motion and intention on an entirely new level, time moving forward and back like waves in a tub, cause becoming effect, a vase unshattering and rising into a little girl's hand...

Five...

The octachoron split and danced in new directions that hadn't existed before, time moving sideways, the myriad could-have-beens transforming into realities of their own, streams of causality moving in directions that hadn't been possible before, effects rippling front to back, side to side... diagonal... loops...

Six...

Causality reared upward in a wave and the decateron splashed its way into new and almost inconceivable places, the could-have-beens joined by could-not-have-beens and new intersections forming, shapes that were both tiny and gargantuan populating spaces too small to hold singularities and yet too vast to navigate without eternities...

Seven...

The dodecapeton opened into something unfathomable, verging on madness, yet so beautiful that she couldn't look away... she never looked away now. In time she would begin to understand how to navigate the tetradecaaxon as well, but she could feel its peace... infinite peace...

Eyes bloomed in the darkness, an impossible being appearing before her, her nameless sister in Her full, glorious *n*-shape.

Come, little sister, sleep now and dream of your hatching. We will find your sister for you. The deeper 'verses will wait until you are ready...

The sun had risen when she woke again, minutes before her alarm was set to go off.

It was a Thursday, not a Sunday, but she decided to skip breakfast and her morning class to head for the safe house, which was only two blocks from the edge of campus. She had to cross almost the entire campus to get to it; her dorm was on the far side away from its location. Still, by the time deep winter came and that could become a problem, she would be on her way to Tangiers Prime.

"Kyra called me," she said as the door closed and locked behind her, before any of the AIs could ask her what she was doing there. "She's in trouble. I need your help to find her."

"Called you how?" MilitAIre asked. "I show no comms activity."

"Telepathically, I'm guessing," Michael said, emerging from a back room. "What did she say?"

"She was calling my names. Tizzy, and then Jack, and then she said, 'help me.'"

Michael sat down at one of the consoles in the Security Room, inputting search parameters.

"Nothing new yet from the beacons... no traceable activity on either the Kyra Wittier-Collins front or the Kali Montgomery front..." He frowned. "I wish we knew what identity she might have created in the wake of Meisner's fuckup. Did she seem close by?"

"Pretty far away, I think. The *Apeiros* said something was blocking her from calling out again. I gave them permission to talk to her if they get a chance to."

“Good.” Michael glanced at the calendar, frowning. “We’re into the red zone for Helion Prime. Not enough people have bugged out for my liking. I’d hate to think she’d gone back there.”

Audrey had helped him and the others, as the months marched closer, to create as many enticing offers as they could to lure people into taking out-system vacations during the danger period, trying to get them out of harm’s way by any subtle means they could. Rumors about the Necromongers had been planted and circulated, too, with as much information as they could verify and get away with revealing. She had even considered contacting Imam to warn him, but had been ordered not to. Too much effort had gone into breaking the connection between Jack B. Badd and Audrey MacNamera for her to draw attention to it; General Toal told her that it appeared he already knew about the threat, anyway, and took it seriously.

She hoped he was taking his wife and daughter offworld. Just to be sure, she had another set of highly discounted trip offers—*Last-minute bookings! Save 90%!—*sent to Lajjun, featuring excursions to places she knew would be alluring to her erstwhile foster mother.

C’mon, take the offer and run...

October, the dead of winter back in Settlement Point, was the height of summer in Wyndham Landing. The Summer Quarter was nearing its close. Audrey had signed up for her Autumn Quarter classes and had a booking reserved on the *Chrysolite Undine*, sister ship to the one whose track she’d pioneered, for its February 19 departure to Tangiers Prime. Michael and the AIs would accompany her, but she hadn’t yet told her family. She was struggling to figure out *how* to tell them, how to make it painless... or, anyway, not excruciating. At least, she thought, they wouldn’t be unhappy about having followed her to a new hemisphere only to be left behind...

They *loved* the northern hemisphere. It had, they’d discovered, considerably more to offer than Settlement Point, despite being more rustic and less populated. Geared toward catering to visitors from other worlds, it provided amenities that no one in the southern hemisphere seemed to know or care about, including more advanced reproductive care and childcare services that had resulted in her mother being able to begin practicing law again even before Elodie could start Kindergarten. Alvin, meanwhile, had been delighted to discover that he could go hunting and fishing with his colleagues much more easily, at any of a variety of lodges in easy driving distance. And Elodie had turned into a little wood sprite, with a whole neighborhood of children her own age to play with. While the three of them might miss *her*, they wouldn’t resent being stranded in a new city when she departed it, and the last several months had also accustomed them to seeing very little of her.

That much, at least, was a relief. She’d managed to do a bit of lasting good for them, no matter what else. It might help them be more okay with her need to return to Tangiers Prime, although they couldn’t know it was a return. From Alvin’s and her mother’s perspective, it was a headlong flight into the unknown that neither of them could fathom wishing to take.

She wished she could explain it to them, in a way that wouldn’t overturn everything. She was a lot less lonely in the northern hemisphere, too. She had friends, confidants even, who neither knew nor cared that there were parts of her life that stayed off-limits. They also didn’t decide she was too debauched to talk to if she couldn’t resist the allure of an offworld man who reminded her of Riddick or Ewan. While she had decided that all men except short-term

visitors from offworld were off-limits, where sex was concerned, and so far it had kept the drama to a minimum, she nonetheless felt more and more strongly that *she* belonged on another world. She'd left too much of her heart on Tangiers Prime. And while she still couldn't bring herself to ask her handlers whether Ewan had married during her time away, she also couldn't bring herself to look for a romantic entanglement that might actually get in the way of returning to him.

Her feelings about Michael had, meanwhile, become completely familial. Whether she thought of him as a father, brother, or uncle, she wasn't entirely sure, but she no longer fantasized about him... which was probably good, given that while she couldn't read his mind *at all*, he could apparently read hers easily. If she'd made him at all uncomfortable with her crush and fantasies, though, he'd shown no sign.

"Since you're here for breakfast, Audrey," CommissAIry said, "I've made your favorite." One of his robotic trays rolled up, presenting her with a collection of her favorite New Marrakesh breakfast foods. Had he somehow read her mind and known she had been thinking about Tangiers Prime?

"Thank you!" She'd just started to get hungry, her stress levels finally lowering, but was aware that her dining hall had just closed and her class had begun. It was the first class she'd skipped since she'd started at Deckard Tech, but her mind was still too unsettled to try to focus on calculus. Later. Hopefully once she had heard something from the *Apeiros* about Kyra.

She *did* attend her Intro to Sociology class later in the day, as well as Principles of Linguistics, mostly because Michael had threatened to make her watch Tommy Wiseau movies if she didn't stop fretting loudly while he worked. But by evening, her worry for Kyra had made her antsy and a little fractious, and she returned to the safe house for a no-holds-barred sparring session with him that left her sore and exhausted, but much calmer. Afterward, they checked the beacons one last time before she would need to leave to make curfew on campus—

"Fuck," Michael groaned as new images appeared on the screens. "It's starting."

"What?" Audrey had been about to gather her things and go back to the dorm. "What is?"

He moved the image he was looking at onto the main screen. In the sky above Helion Prime, easily recognized by the distinctive light pillars rising up from the bottom of the screen, a comet floated, showing telltale signs of already splintering into multiple pieces. In another day, two at most, those pieces would fall like spears.

"How old is this image?" she asked.

"A week and a half old," he murmured. "By now, the attack has begun. Maybe even ended."

"A week and a *half*? Why'd it take so long to reach us?"

Michael frowned, calling up a dozen reports and sifting through them at lightning speed. In moments like this, when he didn't bother concealing his abilities, he reminded her a great deal of Riddick. "It looks like three of the beacons that messages would normally pass through, on their way into and out of the Helion system, have been disabled. That's new."

"Yeah, it only took us five days to find out about the Aquilan system, not ten." They had managed, however, to get almost a third of the human population to go traveling to other parts of the galaxy before disaster could strike. Audrey tried not to think about all the pets,

livestock, and wildlife that had been left behind to die along with the rest of the human population.

No matter what, though, she always felt like she should have found a way to do more. Found a way to save them *all*.

“I can *hear* you,” Michael said. “Stop tearing yourself up over there.”

She sat down next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder. “It just... hurts to think about...”

“Try not to, then. These deaths aren’t at *your* feet.”

“Feels like they are, sometimes.”

“Seeing the future and being able to control it are completely different things,” he said.

“You ever notice how most of the stories about prophecies are about how people’s attempts to prevent them are what make them happen at all?”

“Oedipus?” she asked. It was the first one that came to mind.

“Not even the most famous example,” Michael said, shutting down the feeds. “But look. Four years ago, we had no idea any of this was even happening, or that there was any kind of predictable pattern behind most of the ‘Black Planet Incidents’ until a year ago. Until *you* brought us the intel. You found the pattern, put all the pieces together... and every life we’ve managed to save since then is because of that. So stop beating yourself up...”

He smirked, reaching over and ruffling her hair.

“...or at least do it a little more quietly.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Are you ever gonna teach me how to shield the way you do?”

“I’ve *tried*. What do you think your ‘quiet mode’ is? You can hold it for maybe an hour before you start freaking out. You, girl, can’t *handle* being disconnected from other minds, not for long, and you avoid practicing it enough to separate your shielding for incoming and outgoing thoughts.”

“Wait, so when MilitAIre was coaching me after we landed...?”

“He was relaying my instructions, yeah. General Toal still wasn’t sure of how good you were at keeping secrets back then. You had some impulse control issues, remember?”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. Nobody had ever let her live down her attempt to grab the *apeirochoron*. Obviously *someone* had swiped some since then, though. “What changed that? I mean, when you unmasked and all that.”

“Todd. That was when we put together the final pieces about you and knew it’d be safe to give you higher clearance. You’d sacrifice yourself for others in a heartbeat—and it’s part of my job, by the way, to keep you from *doing* that—but you won’t sacrifice others to save yourself.”

“I have, though...” she sighed.

“Fuck, Audrey, you did *not* sacrifice Paris Ogilvie. Are you dragging out *all* of your regrets tonight?”

“Sorry.”

“C’mon...” he groaned. “Let’s go get some of that mint tea you love so much from CommissAIry. The doctor is in.”

They talked until after midnight, until she was finally tired enough, and her demons had been put to rest enough, that she could get to sleep... which she did, in the bedroom they

kept for her for occasions just like that one. More than half the time, when her roommate believed she was off with some hot guy, that guy was Michael... who was sleeping across the hall and who, she knew, would view ever touching her in *that* way as incestuous, as she had slowly come to view it herself. But only most of the time...

Her roommate was sometimes right. Especially if new offworlders happened to be passing through town. But, thankfully, Janice never judged her. Wanted all the juicy details, but never judged.

Soon after she drifted off, she found herself floating in the spangled darkness of the *Apeiros* starfield.

Kyra is safe, Audrey. We have her. She dreams of a world with three suns. We will keep her safe until she can wake again.

There was something odd about what they told her, she thought. It made her think of something else that she'd once heard, but she couldn't remember where. "*Donna Noble has left the library...?*"

What did *that* even mean?

"Where was she? What happened to her?"

She was in a place of darkness and pain. But now she is safe with us.

"Can I talk to her?"

In time. Right now, she dreams—

Thieving wretches! You have taken what is mine!

Audrey found herself shrinking back from the rage of the Moribund. It filled the ether around her, making the stars themselves quake.

Nothing here is yours, the *Apeiros* replied, and Audrey felt them massing around her as if to shield her.

You would rob me? Deprive me of what's mine? I fight this battle for your sakes and this is my reward? Return what you have taken!

There is nothing of yours here to return.

I will not ask again!

There is nothing for you to ask.

Something dark and terrible suddenly loomed above her, surrounded her...

...and hideous cold poured into her, filling her every vein, every cell, choking her...

I do not ask. Deny me and I will take what I wish!

She could hear the *Apeiros* screaming. She thought she could hear herself screaming, but she was strangling on her last breath.

Release her! She is ours, not yours! You may not have her!

I can have whatever I will! I will have her!

Long, black arms tipped with claws flashed out, raking at the stygian darkness surrounding her and then grasping her in their embrace. *Audrey is mine! Release her! Release my little sister!*

How dare you call this filth your sister?

*How dare you touch her? You are **nothing** to me! Nothing to **us**! We disown you! You are not of us!*

You are not of us, infinite voices echoed. *You are dead to us.*

Then fall. All of you. And watch her fall, too.

She could feel her body dying, every cell corroding away...

"Audrey! *Audrey!*"

Through the darkness she could see him above her, Michael, shirtless, his hair tousled from sleep.

"Give me your hand, Audrey!" He looked to the side of her. "Will this hurt you?"

I am out of range. Help her, Lightbearer. Help her! We consent even if she cannot!

Michael grabbed her hand and pressed it to his chest, to the handprint suddenly glowing on his bare skin. It seared her frozen palm even as white light blazed from Michael's eyes and she realized that they weren't really grey, those were *contacts* he wore by day hiding his real

A blast of energy crashed through her, lighting up every nerve. It flowed through every cell and synapse, scouring away the Moribund's darkness. She screamed against the hand covering her mouth, not with pain, but with the release *from* pain, the return of breath, the return of life, the return of *sanity*.

You will regret this! I will destroy all that you love... all that he loves...

"Oh shit, oh fuck, he's going to come after me..." she whimpered against Michael's hand.

He pulled her into his arms, holding her close. Her cheek was pressed to the still-glowing handprint on his chest, its touch on her skin a balm. "We won't let him find you. I swear it."

"He threatened to destroy everything I love... Oh *fuck*..." Elodie... what if he found Elodie?

We will not permit it. He will never know where to look. It was the voice of her sister, the one without a name, the one veiled from her...

"He'll find me in my dreams. He'll find me and track me back..."

No. He won't.

The darkness in the corner of her bedroom moved, the shape that wasn't a shape coming almost into her vision but staying at the periphery. Hints of cohesion—eyes? A leg?—appeared and then vanished into shadow. Her sister's skin contained the shine of galaxies, but it was impossible to look right at Her with three-dimensional eyes.

"What do we do?" Michael asked, not looking directly at her sister either.

She must not remember. For a time. Until his attention has shifted away again. He will forget this madness. She is not the true target of his vengeance, and once he remembers that, he will cease to care about how we thwarted him this day. But in the meantime, she must not remember.

"More holes in my memory?" Audrey gasped. "*Why?* How much *more* are you going to take?"

You will not know about us. You will not know about your five-shape. You will believe yourself ordinary, a normal human. You will present to the world as one, and you will live within a shield. Michael will help you put it on. And when we are done, you will wear it with no pain and no awareness that anything is missing.

How did She know Michael's name?

"You told me you couldn't hear them," she wailed, looking up at Michael in confusion.

"I lied," he told her. "They've been talking to me since the hypnosis session you don't remember. It's my responsibility to know the things that they can't tell you."

"*Why?*"

"You have no idea how crucial your part in all of this is going to be," he murmured, stroking her hair. "But if you knew what it was all for, you wouldn't be able to wait for the right moment. You'd sacrifice yourself to save who and what you can *now*. Instead of becoming as strong as we need you to be, to help us save *everything*."

"Please..." She didn't know what she was asking for, even. *Please make this stop, please don't let me do all of this alone... please let me be just a girl...*

"You're not gonna do any of this alone," Michael whispered. "You will *never* be alone. But, for the next year or so, you *are* gonna be 'just a girl.' Don't be afraid. We'll be protecting you the whole time. You won't see us, and you won't know or remember what we're protecting you from, but you *will* be safe."

"My flight to Tangiers Prime..."

"It's going to have to wait. Not forever, though, I swear."

"Oh no... please, please, please..."

Don't be afraid, little sister. I will give back everything I take from you now. You will be safe. You will be happy.

"I'll be a lie..."

"You'll be Audrey MacNamera," Michael told her, holding her still as her sister crawled closer. "College girl, sociology major, older sister to Elodie. Happy and normal. And protected. Always protected." He bent his head and kissed her forehead, his eyes catching the light from the hall as he drew back. "It's gonna be okay."

"I can't be alone again, *please*..."

"You never will be."

We are always with you.

One delicate tarsus touched her forehead.

In the darkness of her bedroom in the al-Walid house, while she drowsed, still not completely free of the cryo drugs that were working their way out of her system, neither awake nor asleep, the door opened and a familiar silhouette slipped through. For a moment, he stood over her, his eyes catching faint glints of light like a pair of tarnished coins...

He bent down, his lips brushing against her forehead. "Sorry, kid..."

He was gone before she could wake up enough to respond...

When her alarm went off, Audrey rolled over and slapped the snooze button, groaning. Usually she woke up before it, but last night...

"You must've gotten in really late," her roommate, Janice, said. "I'm amazed you beat curfew. Hot night with a guy?"

She groaned again and sat up. "Hot night with a pile of books. I was in the library until closing."

Audrey MacNamera has left the library... She shook her head, frowning, and the weird fragment of thought vanished.

"You know, 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.'"

Audrey almost flinched, until Janice said *boy* instead of *girl*. Nobody knew she'd once masqueraded as a boy named Jack, not here. And anyway, those days were long behind her.

"How come you missed calc yesterday?" Janice asked as she dressed.

"Something I ate disagreed with me," she grumbled, climbing out of bed.

"That's what you get for eating all those weird spicy foods you like."

"Yeah, maybe." Audrey switched on her tablet and opened up her news feed. "You got any fun plans for the weekend?"

"There's a music festival," Janice told her. "One of those types modeled after Woodstock back on old Earth. I'm thinking I'll go, get high, get laid by some patchouli-smelling dude who hasn't showered in six weeks—"

"You will not!" Audrey laughed.

"Fine, fine, ruin my dreams..."

"That sounds more like a total nightmare," she told Janice. "But if you want, we can go to the Winston Lodge tonight. Listen to bad country music, get tipsy, and get laid by some guy who takes showers regularly and has enough sense to wash his ass-crack?"

Her roommate had encountered a guy who didn't, a guy who'd believed properly washing his ass would make him *gay*, and neither one of them had yet gotten over the grossness of it all.

"That almost sounds like fun. Switch 'tipsy' for 'sloshed' and you're on."

"Okay, you'll get sloshed and I'll be your bodyguard."

"Just don't guard my body *too* closely, m'kay?"

"Okay..." Audrey frowned down at the tablet. The feed had moved to interplanetary news, and—

Helion System Under Attack?

Thousands of Distress Calls Received by Federacy Beacons

That didn't sound good. She wondered if the al-Walids still lived there. They'd sucked as foster parents, but still. She hoped they were okay.

Not that anybody knew she'd ever been offworld. That was her little secret.

"Whatcha staring at?" Janice asked, and she switched off the tablet.

"Nothing, just the usual bad news out in the big bad 'verse. You hungry?"

"Starved. Let's go pillage the dining hall."

They walked out into the bright summer day a few moments later.

It was, Audrey thought, a beautiful day. The kind of day when nobody could possibly have a worry or care in the world.

"What are *you* doing this weekend?" Janice asked.

"Gonna visit with my little sister," she said, grinning. "Maybe take her to the lake for a swim."

"And then do your Sunday thing?"

"Always," Audrey laughed. "My 'Sunday thing' makes my whole week."

And if she had no idea what it was that she did on Sundays, it didn't occur to her to find that odd.

74.

Run, Audrey, Run

The fall of Helion Prime, to something apparently known as the Necromonger Armada, soon became *the* hot topic of discussion among Deckard Tech's Sociology majors and stayed that way for the next year. Someone had smuggled video recordings offworld, shot during the worst of the fighting, and everyone at the college spent months dissecting them, arguing about the meaning of the massive structure they came to call the "three-faced tower" and the reason behind the attack at all. Even summer break only *postponed* the debates; they picked up again in the fall semester.

Audrey, who had been left with profound curiosity about Helion Prime after her short and confined five-month stay on the planet, was able to counter a lot of the myths and prejudices her classmates and other students at the university floated. She still didn't tell anyone that she'd *been* to the world, instead citing sources that were even harder for her classmates to refute than personal experience might have been. The northern hemisphere of Deckard's World wasn't *as* xenophobic—its tourism industry depended on offworld visitors—but it still had its bigotries.

"No," she told a small group that was discussing the subject in one of the student lounges, "Islam was *not* the 'official religion' of the planet. There *was* a large population of Muslims there, but the original colonization charter was given to the Parliament of the Hellenes in 2103. Have you even *taken* History of the Federacy? It was a *Greek* colony. Almost half of the population was Eastern Orthodox, but it had developed one of the most diverse demographics in the Federacy."

"So why was New Mecca there?" one of the group demanded.

Audrey rolled her eyes. "There are seven other 'New Meccas' throughout the Federacy. Twelve pieces of the Black Stone from old Mecca's Kaaba Shrine left Earth before the Great Asian War started and the rest was lost. Almost all of the oldest colonies have one."

Four pieces, eerily, had gone to worlds that inexplicably failed and were classified as Black Planets, as every formerly habitable world in the Helion system now was... she'd read all about that somewhere, but couldn't remember where.

"Still," one of the other students said after a moment, "It *could've* been the New Taliban, couldn't it? Attacking Helion Prime to *make* the rest of the population be Muslim?"

"By killing everybody? Anyway, the three-faced tower is pretty much conclusive proof that it *wasn't* the New Taliban," she told him, trying *not* to roll her eyes again. "They have *super* strict rules about graven images."

He rolled his eyes and scoffed.

"Look," she said, pulling out her tablet and opening it up to one of the images a lot of people had seen, of a ship with a relief of a man holding a sword like a staff on its top, reminiscent of a carved medieval coffin lid. She turned it so everyone could see. "Does that

look Muslim to you? No. It looks like one of the statues or reliefs of a crusade knight. Eleventh to fourteenth century *Christians* used this kind of iconography. It's not Muslim."

"Fiiiine..." The other student, part of what Audrey privately called the *Cs Get Degrees Squad*, grimaced and shrugged. "They're not Muslims. Still a bunch of offworld crazies killing each other. What's it matter?"

Screw it; there was no talking to someone like him. Except *one* way. "Maybe, if we never want *our* skies looking like that, it'd be a good idea to know who did it and why?"

Two of his friends chuckled.

"She's got a point, Joe," one of the others, a guy named Frank who periodically tried to ask her out, said.

Joe scoffed again. "Never gonna happen here. Dunno why we even need to know that stuff. We're *engineering* majors."

Frank snickered. "You know what they say. 'Those who fail to learn from history...'"

"Are doomed to repeat it in summer school!" the group chorused.

Laughing and shaking her head—most of the guys were pretty decent sorts—Audrey kept walking. Most of them were from the northern hemisphere; Joe, Frank, and one or two others were from the southern hemisphere and were *trying* to let go of their ingrained prejudices; they just had more work to do. Fortunately, they weren't from Settlement Point, let alone Eisenhower High, or they might not have been willing to listen to her at all. There was only one other student on campus who knew anything about her "sordid" back-story, and Emily Hartwell had no interest in gossiping about her. In this environment, her reputation was completely within her control: a hard-working student pulling down straight As, who *knew her shit*. Crass as they sometimes were, the guys back there respected her and more than one had come to her for help when tests were looming.

The autumn quarter of her sophomore year had *just* begun, and she was still trying to wheedle her advisor into approving one more class for her course load. He knew she could handle it, but getting all of the requisite signatures involved him talking to a professor in the linguistics department that he particularly disliked, so she was going to have to stop by his office after breakfast to badger him again.

As she walked into the dining hall, the back of her neck prickled and she had the weird feeling that she was being watched. She glanced around, frowning. On several occasions, she had spotted a dark-haired man watching her; when she'd finally gone over to confront him, he'd told her his name was Michael and he was affiliated with campus security, and he had turned out to be quite lovely. She'd been tempted to ask him to join her for tea, but she had strict rules about only dating offworld tourists who couldn't try to attach strings to their time together.

But Michael wasn't around. A car was parked nearby, its windows reflecting sunlight back into her eyes and making it impossible to tell if someone was inside.

Whatever. She was probably imagining it, and breakfast wasn't going to eat itself...

"There she is!" Janice called out a few minutes later, waving her over to a table. "Audrey MacNamera, who eats engineering students *before breakfast!*"

"Gonna ruin your appetite if you keep doing that," Amanda, their floor's R.A., laughed.

Damn, word had traveled fast. She joined the group, setting her tray down and taking a small shaker out of her bag.

“What *is* that stuff?” one of the newcomers to campus asked as she sprinkled its contents over her eggs.

“Cumin. All fried eggs should have cumin on them,” she said. She’d done her best to assemble a “traditional Moroccan breakfast” from the dining hall’s offerings, but she always had to bring her own cumin and olives. And her own bags of Maghrebi mint tea.

“You are *super* weird,” Janice chuckled.

“Hey, if I end up transferring to Khair Eddine, I’ll eat like this all the time,” she said, grinning. In truth, she doubted the transfer would ever happen, but the offer they had sent over the summer *was* tempting, and it was nice to know that big-name offworld schools were still actively trying to court her. Maybe for graduate work...

She’d stayed on Tangiers Prime briefly during her run. A family had taken her in for a while, and she’d had the most desperate crush on their son, Ewan, who had been training to be a military pilot and gave some of the *best* hugs...

She wished, sometimes, that there had been a way to stay in touch with them, but since she didn’t want anyone knowing she’d been offworld—or that she was, thanks to cryo time, nine months younger than her records claimed she was—she couldn’t risk it.

But she’d never lost her taste for Moroccan food. She’d eat it all the time if she could. And moving to Tangiers Prime was a frequent fantasy of hers, along with some racier fantasies about Ewan Zdan Tomlin Meziane—

Get real. You’re staying right here, on Deckard’s World, and you’re gonna help reform things so women on this planet have access to the same reproductive healthcare and job opportunities as offworld women, and so the socioeconomic segregation of ethnic minorities stops already. It’s good work, important work, a life’s work... and it’ll keep you close to Elodie.

It was an early autumn day, still warm enough to feel almost summery but cool enough in the mornings that she’d put on a sweatshirt. By noon, she thought as she stepped out into the sunlight and fragrant breezes, she’d probably be able to take it off and wear something lighter

—
“Well, if it ain’t Little Miss Jack B. Badd herself,” a familiar voice rasped behind her and to her left.

Her steps almost hitched, but she made herself keep walking in an unbroken stride even as she felt her heart plunge. She knew that voice. She knew that *name*.

“I’m talkin’ to you, blondie. Yeah, you in the Deckard Tech U sweatshirt.”

She looked over to see a face that she’d tried hard to forget, and only ever saw anymore in nightmares she banished from her mind upon waking.

Alexander Toombs.

Well, shit.

She frowned, feigning puzzlement and hoping that he hadn’t caught her moment of recognition. “Sorry, do I know you?”

“Not personally, no. Don’t think we’ve ever met.” His smile was unpleasant, but she was relieved to realize that he still had no idea how close she had come to him on two occasions. “We have a mutual friend in common.”

“Really? Who’s that?” Director Flint was about the only one who had willingly associated with both of them, in his way. Audrey hadn’t thought about him in ages. He’d earned his

comeuppance years before, and was now probably among Helion Prime's dead.

"Richard B. Riddick." His ugly smile widened. He would be a decent looking man, she thought suddenly, if his smile weren't so purely evil. At least he took better care of his teeth than some mercs.

She gave him an incredulous laugh. "Riddick? The criminal?"

His grin didn't waver. He was too assured in his knowledge. "Riddick. The criminal."

Before she could come up with a way to laugh off his claim, he had moved up beside her and she felt something hard pressed against the small of her back.

"Now, you can walk quietly to my car and we can go for a nice drive, or we can make a scene out of this and then everybody here finds out that Little Miss Goody-Goody Scholarship Girl is really a felon with a price on her head."

Audrey went cold to her core. "Try it," she grated out. "I know a lot more about the law than I did back then. You've been claiming for six years that Riddick killed Antonia Chillingsworth."

"So I 'find' footage that proves otherwise," Toombs snickered. "Who knew?"

"Who are you planning on showing it to?" she asked. "My stepfather the District Attorney?"

"You got a point," Toombs admitted. "Okay, how's this? You're gonna help me flush out and capture Riddick... *Jack*... but if you don't want to cooperate with me, I guess I could find someone else to use as bait. He likes kids. Elodie's pretty cute, looks a little like you did with those great big eyes—"

Audrey wheeled around to face him squarely. "You stay away from her!"

The hard object that had been against her back was now against her belly. She glanced down, her breath hitching as she realized it was a gun. Part of her wanted to panic—part of her *was* panicking—but a calm, almost cold voice spoke up from deep within her.

"If you shoot me here, you'll end up on the wrong side of the Merc Network's bounty list."

"Nah," Toombs said, putting away the gun. "I ain't gonna shoot ya. Or arrest ya. But you are gonna come take a nice ride with me in my car. Or one day soon you'll be broad-waving a message to your old friend begging him to help you find your little sister."

He'd do it. She could see it in his eyes. She couldn't let him hurt Elodie. Not for anything.

"Those fucking mutton chops make you look like a macaque," she said with impotent fury. He just grinned his wicked grin at her as if she'd paid him the ultimate compliment.

He led her over to the car she'd noticed earlier, cuffing her as he made her get into its back seat, hands—mercifully—in front.

For a few minutes, they drove in silence. Audrey tried to recall what she had once learned from Riddick about popping the locks of cuffs like these. She'd never been good enough at it. Sick dread was pooling in her stomach.

"So where are you taking me?" she made herself ask.

"You and me, girl, we're gonna go meet up with your good buddy. And then you're gonna help me capture him." Toombs turned his car onto the highway entrance, heading westward. Toward the city center. Toward the spaceport beyond it.

There was something ugly in his voice on those last words. Resentment and fury, only now emerging because he probably felt safe to drop his guard a little on this drive.

"You really think you can find him?" she asked.

“Won’t be the first time I’ve found him,” he grumbled, maneuvering through the thick morning commuter traffic.

Oh. *Oh*.

“He fooled you, didn’t he?” Audrey asked. “Made you think you caught him, then turned the trap around on you.”

Toombs didn’t answer, but the way his lips pressed together told her everything. He’d finally met Richard B. Riddick again, and it had gone badly for him.

“So why come after me?” she asked. “You actually think you can use me as bait?”

“Got a feeling he’ll be interested in your fate, yeah.” His eyes, in the rear-view mirror, crinkled; he was smiling at the thought.

“I really doubt it,” she told him. “It’s been six years. I doubt he even remembers me.”

“You’d be surprised what he remembers,” Toombs told her. “Gotta say, finding you was harder than I expected. When’d you leave Shakti Four?”

“You tell me. You’re the mighty hunter of people. Where’s your friend, anyway?”

He frowned. “What friend?”

“That lady merc. The one who was after my roommate.”

The smile had left his eyes. “Ain’t none of your business.” He tapped the horn. “Hey! Asshole! My grandma drives faster’n you an’ she’s been dead twenty years! Fuckin’ car-nostalgic planet... Who the fuck brings back traffic jams? I’m *askin’* ya.”

“What’s the big hurry?” She thought she remembered the trick to popping the cuffs, lowering her hands between her knees, hopefully out of his line of sight, as she started to twist them. They were on the highway now, and Toombs would hopefully be too busy dealing with rush hour traffic to notice.

“I’m owed a payday an’ I’m gonna claim it. You could’a earned a cut if you’d been more cooperative.”

“Oh please.”

“Merc’s honor.”

To their right, out of the corner of her eye, Audrey saw a speeder on a motorcycle overtaking them. If only that were someone coming to rescue her. “Merc’s *honor*? Like your friend Pritchard?”

Toombs’s eyes cut sharply to meet hers in the rear-view mirror “Ain’t no friend of mine, girl, an’ what makes you think I even—”

“*Look out!*” Audrey shrieked, unable to stop the words from exploding out.

Everything after that felt, to her, as if it played out in extreme slow motion. The motorcycle, cutting to the side as Toombs began inattentively swerving toward it, put on a burst of speed and zoomed ahead of them. Its rider miscalculated as he tried to weave around the car in front of them, which had begun changing lanes without signaling, and plowed into its side. The bike fragmented, the rider flipping over the hood of the car and flying back toward Toombs’ rental.

“Fuck!” he shouted, yanking the wheel hard to the left and slamming his foot down on the brake. The car began to spin out. Something—someone, Audrey realized with sick horror—thumped across its roof.

Thrown to the side, Audrey felt a strange, terrible detachment as she watched herself falling head-first toward the locked passenger door. She was going to hit her head, hard

enough to knock her out, hard enough to concuss, possibly hard enough to kill—

—*I'm not here I'm there I'm not here I'm there I'm not here I'm there*—

She hit soft turf, rolling. She was in a meadow, full of fresh greenery and flowers that, although she somehow *knew* no one on Deckard's World besides her had ever seen their like, were inexplicably as familiar to her as her stepfather's garden. A large insect, almost like a butterfly, bumped into her arm twice and made a weird, soft, chirping sound before fluttering drunkenly past her. Around her, barely visible, phantom shapes of cars spun and crashed into each other. She could only just hear the chain reaction of accidents as if from miles away.

She was in *Elsewhere*...

Oh... fuck...

Her hands were still cuffed. She rose to her feet, looking around. The shape of the land was very similar to “her” Deckard's World, but appeared untouched by any human other than her. The air was clean and sweet, entirely scents of nature with none of the odors of a human city. No asphalt. No exhaust. No smell of Toombs' body odor barely disguised by too much cheap cologne. In the distance, past a hillside that she knew led toward the college in her world, she could see a primordial forest, its leaves just verging from green to gold. And, near its edge, an incongruous comm tower.

She knew this place, knew it intimately... and yet she didn't.

She reached into her pocket, pulled out her comm, and punched in a code automatically. Confusion and terror filled her. *It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Not like this...*

“Yes, Audrey?” MilitAire answered before even one ring. How...? She hadn't heard his voice since the *Nephrite Undine* had docked at Plymouth Station A.

“I've been made,” she said, her voice almost monotone. She didn't know or understand what she was saying until she said it. “Toombs found me.”

“Why are you in Elsewhere?”

“I was almost in a car accident,” she told him, still in that lifeless *debriefing* monotone, still with no idea what she was going to say until she heard herself speak. “He had me in his car. He threatened to take Elodie if I didn't go with him to be bait for Riddick.”

“Audrey. Listen carefully. The mermaid must raise a tsunami.”

She dropped to her knees, overwhelmed, memories pouring back into her head in a towering, chaotic flood. “Oh fuck...”

*“Michael will go to Elodie and keep her safe. You need to **run**, Audrey. Lead Toombs offworld. Leave a trail he can follow to another system. We'll arrange for someone to be waiting for you on the other end to help you.”*

“Okay...” She hung up, forcing herself to rise to her feet again. In U1, the careening vehicles had all stilled and people were starting to climb out and look around. Several had clustered around a still figure on the pavement. For a moment, she wanted to join them, but

Too many lives depended on her escaping Toombs. The memories rioting in her head like whitewater rapids insisted that she had to run, not stop for *any* reason.

She checked herself over. Having cuffed her, Toombs hadn't bothered to frisk her or remove her wallet, keys, or comm from her pockets. Her bag, with her tablet and textbooks, was still somewhere in his car, but she had everything she needed to make her escape. Her fall had been gentle, too; nothing was sprained or even felt bruised.

Audrey slipped her comm back into her pocket and crossed the opposite lanes of phantom traffic at a run, not stopping until she was on the far side of the highway, three lanes of still-flowing traffic between her and the accident, between her and Toombs. Turning and balancing herself carefully—she should return to level ground, but she wasn't entirely sure of that—she willed herself back, minus the handcuffs. Those could stay in the field of Elsewhere, part of *there*, not *here*.

She felt the cuffs fall away from her, and they were gone as the 'verse of her birth solidified around her once more.

Toombs had climbed out of his car and was looking around it with frantic confusion. He shook a small tracker in his hand and then smacked it.

So the cuffs had a locator in them.

Ha. Good luck ever finding that signal again, jackass.

She waited for him to look her way, staring at him. The shock and rage in his face, when he finally spotted her, would have made her laugh if the stakes weren't so damned high.

Certain that he'd seen her, even more certain that it would be hard for him to cross the three lanes of fast-moving traffic between them even if half the drivers were rubbernecking the accident, Audrey took off at a run.

First in regional cross-country, second in sprints, asshole. Try and keep up. She wondered if he'd bothered to research her much before coming after her. Maybe he even knew that about her.

No. No way. If he'd done his research, he would have known she was under Federacy protection and wouldn't have *dared* move on her. He only seemed to think of her in terms of Riddick, not as an actual *person*.

She scrambled down the ravine next to the highway and up the other side, instantly recognizing the area she emerged into. Her bank was just another two blocks away.

It was a risk. If he knew where she banked, he could try to nab her there.

He isn't doing this through official channels. He doesn't want anyone to know he's making a move. That means law enforcement isn't backing him. He doesn't have a car anymore, or a badge that will mean a damn thing to the bank tellers...

She ran for the bank, aware that she was beating her prior best speed.

*I'd have **won** that damn sprint if I'd had a merc on my tail,* she found herself thinking with a mixture of annoyance and inappropriate amusement.

The AIs had cleared a path for her; when she arrived at her bank, the human bank officer on duty already had bearer cards waiting for her. All of her existing accounts, including her funds for the school year, had been transferred to them pending her signature on a dozen forms. He then led her to her safe deposit box, where her Marianne Tepper ID and the remaining bearer cards from her last run awaited her inside the money belt General Toal had given her some five-plus years earlier.

Adding the new bearer cards and the contents of her wallet to the money belt, she slipped it on under her sweatshirt and locked it in place. It was slightly lumpy beneath her shirt with everything inside it, but it would have to do. She had it positioned in a way that no pickpocket could make a play for it.

Her fingers twitched at the memory of picking pockets, herself, knowledge and sense memories washing back in a froth.

Damn it, that part of her life was supposed to be *over*.

Audrey stopped at the bank's cash machine on the way out, engaging the terminal and then punching in one of the Ghost Codes from years earlier, before walking off as nonchalantly as possible. Behind her, she knew, the instructions associated with the code were taking effect. Any surveillance cameras that had picked up her time in the bank were now dumping the footage, under the impression that they had been served with a warrant to do so.

She was only a block further down the road, almost to the subway station with her rail pass in hand, when she heard Toombs behind her. "Jack! *Jack!* Fuckin'-A, *Audrey!* Stop right there!"

Shit, that was closer than she liked. She bolted for the station's entrance.

She raced down the steps at top speed, mussing her hair even more and pulling her shirt askew as she went.

"Officer! *Help!*" she shouted as she reached the bottom and cleared the turnstile.

The security guard leapt up, moving her way. She hurried to meet him.

"What's the trou—" he began.

"There's a man!" she sobbed at him, thanking the stars that all of her method acting training was back in her head. "He tried to mug me! Tried to pull me behind a building, oh my god, I think he was going to—"

"Easy, Miss, slow down," the guard told her, his voice reflecting both concern and a professional attempt to soothe. "This man, who—"

"Stop right there, you little bitch!" Toombs roared behind her, playing right into her hand.

"That's *him!*" she yelled and broke away from the guard, simulating a headlong panic flight into the thick of the commuter crowd.

From the commotion behind her, she could tell that the guard had intercepted Toombs as he tried to jump the turnstiles, and that at least one bystander had joined the fray. A train waited on the platform ahead of her and to the right. She dodged past people, many of whom were now watching the altercation behind her, joining the crowd lined up at the train's doors.

"Orange Line Westbound is now departing. Destination: Wyndham Landing Spaceport. Departure in one minute."

She couldn't have timed it better if she'd had a chance to plan.

The flow of bodies carried her into one of the train cars. She stayed away from the windows, concealing herself as much as she could from Toombs' direct line of sight. The congestion cleared a little and she caught a glimpse of him, held back by two security guards, yelling incoherently and pointing at the train. For a moment, their eyes met and locked.

Fuck you, asshole. This is what you deserve for threatening my little sister.

The train began to move. Toombs howled with rage and broke free from the guards. He managed to run three paces toward her before he was tackled to the ground.

That'll keep him tied up for a few minutes, at least, she thought.

He still hadn't tried to handle his pursuit of her through official channels. Whatever he was up to, it was off-book, not something that he could—or, anyway, *would*—take to authorities. That meant that he had no intention of producing the evidence that she had shot and killed Chillingsworth. He didn't want her taken into actual law enforcement custody; just his. And even if he didn't know she was in WitSec, he had to know that there was no way he could get

law enforcement to turn her over to him if they got involved. Not with the city's District Attorney married to her *mother*, fergodsake.

If he didn't have the law on his side—and he couldn't, could he?—she could make this work. As long as she got him far away from her family.

Her comm buzzed. She glanced down at it and felt the tightness in her chest loosen.

Michael has Elodie. He'll take your family to safety. Run.

M.

“And an awful lot of running to do,” she muttered, wondering just who the hell had said that and how much she still couldn't remember.

75.

Full Circle and Into the Fire

Okay. I'm safe for now. Time to take stock.

Audrey took a deep breath and tried to think as clearly as she could about her situation. As much of it as she actually *knew*. She could feel far too many holes still impeding her jumbled memory; she just had to hope none of the missing pieces were critical to *this* puzzle.

Toombs' plan to coerce her into being his accomplice by threatening her family would no longer work, not now that Michael had been alerted and had moved to protect them. But the longer the merc stayed on Deckard's World, the higher the chances were of her trail *unbreaking* in a way that might catch the Quintessa Corporation's attention and link her to an accident that wasn't supposed to have any survivors. Might even catch the attention of Federacy Operatives who would want to arrest her, not for anything she'd done as much as for what she *was*. Either result would be catastrophic. She needed to get offworld, leaving a trail that would make it look, to everybody *except* Toombs, like she'd never left the planet before. He would give chase, but she might just have enough of a head start to reach one of *Toal's* Operatives before he could try to grab her again.

She would just have to make sure that she left enough of an obvious trail that he wouldn't break off the pursuit before Deckard's World was far behind them.

Fuck. She had *sworn* she would never leave again...

...hadn't she?

Well, maybe I can find my way back to Tangiers Prime...

That would probably be a bad idea. Another place that could draw too much attention back to a trail that needed to stay broken.

Fucking Toombs... She'd really wanted to see Ewan again, too.

She frowned. Had there been plans for her to go there, at one point?

Audrey eased her way through the train's commuters, over to a small information kiosk. She had twenty minutes until they pulled into Wyndham Landing's spaceport. Boarding on one of the shuttles up to the space station would close ten minutes after that. She could reserve a seat now—

No. She needed to wait until the very last moment and pay for the seat in person, on camera. If Toombs got an alert before then that she was making the move—and he probably had alerts in place for any financial transactions she engaged in, given how he'd both located her dining hall and then almost caught up to her at her bank—he'd get in place to intercept her.

He still might. It's the obvious choice...

So she'd throw in a less obvious one.

A trans-continental hopper was taking off five minutes after the shuttle she wanted, flying to Settlement Point. She booked a seat on it under her real name.

If he had an accomplice like Eve Logan waiting to intercept her at the station, they'd stake out the trans-continental concourse instead. That might buy her enough time to get to the shuttle. When she didn't board the hopper, and the other transaction posted, he'd know where she'd really gone but would have an hour's wait, minimum, before he or his accomplice could try to follow.

Straightening her clothing and finger-combing her hair, she worked on making herself look as ordinary as possible again. Now it was time to blend in.

He's probably going to have some legal trouble to deal with, she thought. Chasing me like that means he fled the scene of a probably-fatal accident he had a role in causing. Unless he rented that car under an assumed name, that's going to come up the moment they book him. If they book him.

She'd be screwed, though, if he had someone staked out up on the station itself, and got a chance to contact them so they could ambush her as she emerged from the shuttle. She couldn't pull an "isomorph" in orbit; only vacuum waited in all but three of her other 'verses there, and lethal atmospheres prevailed in those three. Even going partway into any of them could kill her. Her only other option would be to isomorph her captor... to commit a murder.

Could she *do* that?

...Was any of what she'd just contemplated even *real*?

Just gotta hope that he doesn't get a chance to arrange an ambush, she told herself.

Twenty minutes felt like twenty years.

Audrey had never been a sloucher. Now, however, she did her best to look three or four inches shorter than her semi-intimidating height of 5'10" as she tried to melt into the center of the debarking crowd. She let the main current carry her from the train toward the entryway to the concourse for high-speed commuter trains, the ones that could reach other towns and resorts in Deckard's World's northern hemisphere in the same twenty minutes that her low-speed train had taken to reach the station, before finally separating from the flow near the public restrooms.

Ten minutes to get myself offworld, she told herself. She kept her walk smooth and unhurried as she headed for the shuttle departure deck, blending into another flow of commuters taking the escalator to the top level.

Again, she slouched as much as she could manage. If Toombs had an accomplice, they would be looking for a tall woman with dark blonde hair. She couldn't do much about the hair yet, but she could make herself as short as possible.

Audrey had one of her bearer cards, and her ID with her real name on it, at the ready by the time she reached the shuttle gates. Two other people behind her were able to buy passage before she heard the ticketing kiosk announce that the shuttle was at capacity. It was *packed*, a few of her fellow passengers still squabbling over where to put luggage and how to sit together. It took her almost until liftoff to find a free seat.

It was only her second time experiencing escape velocity in a properly padded chair.

The last time she'd left Deckard's World, she'd been in a baggage compartment and had almost been crushed by someone's hard-sided luggage set. The takeoff from the crash planet had been very nearly as rough, and she and Kyra had been forced to lie on the utility closet floor, extra hazmat suits their only cushioning, while the *Scarlet Matador* took off. Swanky chair aside, she hadn't been in any condition to appreciate how *physically* comfortable—

comparatively speaking—her launch from New Casablanca was. This one was still no picnic—she still felt like an elephant had decided to lie down on top of her—but she knew that at least *this* time, she wouldn't be wearing bruises for days, for any reason.

Small mercies. Hang onto the small mercies.

Audrey would reach Plymouth Station A three hours after she had shaken Toombs off her trail, she calculated. Then she would need to start doing some real maneuvers, and making sure he knew—just too late to stop her—what they were.

Gravity was lessening rapidly. After another moment, her hair began to float randomly around her face. She reached out to the data screen in front of her and ran a query for the space station's current departure schedule. Did anything leaving in the immediate future have space left for one more passenger?

One ship stood out: the *Santa Clara*. It had more than a dozen berths left—

Berths. No wonder. The *Santa Clara* was some kind of former cruise ship, originally meant for taking well-heeled passengers through a single system's prettiest tourist points, that had been refitted for star-jumping. But it still had bunk rooms instead of aisles of cryo-tubes. Probably there were just enough claustrophobic travelers who couldn't handle cryo-tubes, and couldn't afford their own charter Star Jumper with in-seat cryo, to keep it in business.

A ship that wouldn't force her into cryo. And it was going to New Queensland. How absolutely *perfect*, if stupid *expensive*. She'd buy a ticket on it right before it was scheduled to stop admitting passengers.

She noted its gate number and pulled up the space station schematic. There would, she estimated, be just enough time for her to stop in the shopping level—a place where almost anything could be purchased, given how many passengers mislaid their luggage coming and going—and get herself some clothing and toiletries for the month-long journey. Maybe even a replacement tablet.

The next several hours went surprisingly smoothly. No one made a scene; no one attempted to intercept her. Eve Logan apparently wasn't working with Toombs on this caper. Nor, seemingly, was anyone else. It had surprised her, for a moment, that no one fussed about her meeting all of the requirements for going offworld, but apparently she'd taken care of all that more than a *year* ago. A vague memory stirred at that point, of plans to actually attend school at Khair Eddine and, hopefully, reunite with Ewan. What had stopped her?

She couldn't remember. Yet.

Audrey even had a moment to leave a brief, apologetic message on her mother's answer-comm, knowing Bettie Paige Hawthorne-Baxter, Esq. would be unlikely to pick up a call from an unidentified comm number. She wondered if her mother and Alvin had been alerted by Michael yet, or if they were in for a surprise when they went to pick Elodie up from school and found her under armed guard.

"Mom, it's Audrey. The things I could never tell you, about the time I was away... one of them came back. I'm okay. I'll be okay. But I have to go away for a while so nobody gets hurt. I love you. I'll come back, I swear I will. Keep Elodie safe. You can trust Michael, but don't trust anybody else you don't know around her. Don't leave her unguarded for a *second*."

It was only much later, after boarding, after departure, after trying and failing to sleep and while picking out late-night snacks from the *Santa Clara*'s vending machines, that she

realized she'd probably given the accidental impression that, years ago, she might have been abducted by traffickers.

Anything that keeps Elodie safe. Anything that keeps anyone else from figuring out where I went and who I was six years ago.

She was foundering under the weight of memory, struggling to fit it back into the life she thought she knew, the person she'd believed she was for the last year. From moment to moment, she either couldn't understand how she'd managed to pull off her escape from Toombs... or couldn't understand how she'd ever *not* known how to. Some of the memories were shocking in their violence, in *her* violence, one or two making her worry that she was making a mistake by trying to eat anything. What was she? What had she *been*?

Few people were up at that hour. When she entered the starboard lounge—which must have once been quite luxurious during the ship's pleasure cruise days—she noticed that the only people in there all had their backs to the broad picture window. Outside, the stars swirled and danced past the ship as the wormhole from a new 'verse—which she'd aligned herself with, expanding her five-shape to twenty-eight 'verses wide—turned parsecs into miles. She settled onto a couch for the show, nibbling at her snacks.

I'd forgotten all about my five-shape. How could I forget my—

"You always stare at nothing like that?" someone asked to her left. She turned her head.

"Sorry?"

"You looked like you were watching something out the window," a man in his mid-thirties, self-consciously dressed in the same kinds of clothes most of the first-year guys at Deckard Tech were sporting, told her. He wasn't bad-looking, but there was something just slightly distasteful about him. A vibe she didn't like. "Like there's something there to see. Don't even know why they *have* windows in this dive."

She almost answered him, almost started telling him the history of former luxury ships like the *Santa Clara*, when the rest of what he'd said snagged her full attention.

Like there's something there to see...?

"What do *you* see out the window?" she asked, aware that the man was probably hoping to flirt with her, and that she really ought to shut him down, but suddenly too curious not to ask. Part of her was mentally filing away details about him: *five foot nine, 190 pounds, light brown hair, hazel eyes, no scars or tattoos...*

What was she?

He frowned, as if it had never occurred to him that anyone would ask such a thing. "What I always see. What everybody always sees. Nothing. You never see *anything* inside a star jump."

Audrey looked away from him, back out the window. A trio of stars whirled past, red and gold and blue, and for a moment she wondered which 'verse's version of the crash planet might just have spun by. A wormhole might loop past *anything*...

"You really don't see anything out the window?" she asked him after a pause.

"I really don't." His tone changed slightly, as he switched from cranky tourist into guy on the make. "But anyway, who needs windows when the view in here is so—"

"But surely," Audrey cut him off, "you hear the whispers, right?"

Flirtation gave way to uncertainty.

"The what?"

The ones tellin' me to go for the sweet spot, just to the left of the spine, fourth lumbar down. The abdominal aorta. It's a metallic taste, human blood...

No, that would be a little *too* dramatic. She cocked her head instead, as if listening to something, making her expression quizzical. "You really don't hear them?"

"Sorry, uh... no." Someone was no longer on the make. "But, uh... you have a good... night..."

She restrained her laughter until after he'd fled the lounge. Fifteen minutes later, she was alone in the place with her cheese chips and peanut butter cups, the only insomniac left up.

Do people really see nothing out of these windows? She could have sworn that she'd seen stars through the front viewscreen of the *Nephrite Undine*. Was she misremembering somehow? She'd had no idea that the view was supposed to be...

Dull? Nondescript? Boring? *Empty?*

Wait. She knew the answer to this. She'd figured it out on the *Undine*. Another jumbled, restored memory slid back into place for her. She, alone, could see into twenty-seven other universes where no wormhole occluded the view of the stars. Only people with Threshold Syndrome could see stars during a Jump.

My five-shape is gonna be forty-one 'verses wide when I get to New Queensland, part of her, still swimming for the surface, thought, but she was not entirely sure what she meant by that. Something was still missing, something that had to do with...

My sister? Not Elodie... not Kyra... not even Sebby—and how could she have forgotten *Sebby?*—but someone else...

Memories swirled like the stars out the window as they tried to work their way back into place. One, of living statues from *the ship that was screaming*, made her recoil in horror. She and Imam had been dragged through a room, on their way to a twisted arena, and while no one had explained anything about the statues they were passing, she had *felt* how alive and tormented each one was...

She didn't want that memory to be hers. She wanted it to be Jack's, to belong to Jack-who-was-dead. *No. I'm not going to think about that. It happened to someone else, not me. Not me.*

Not me.

She was Audrey, not Jack. Jack had done terrible things. Jack had no place in the life she'd been building for herself. A life now several dozen light years behind her as the first star jump came to an end.

Never thought I'd pass this way again...

She'd certainly never intended to.

...had she?

She'd sworn she'd never leave Deckard's World again... hadn't she?

Her memories were a massive, contradictory jumble. There was so much she needed to puzzle out. So much that still didn't make sense. She knew, with iron certainty, that she had been hiding from something far more terrible and insidious than Alexander Toombs. But what it might be, she still couldn't remember yet...

And, she realized, as a flicker of red caught her eye, she might not have any time left to figure it out.

Disengaging contact. Subject is unharmed.

Riddick came back to himself slowly. Being so thoroughly immersed in Jack's memories—Audrey MacNamera's memories—had left him a little disoriented.

The chamber of the Quasi-Dead was silent around him. His most trusted guards stood outside, unmoving. He wasn't sure how many hours had passed.

Jack hadn't been able to talk for long, tell her story for long, before her exhaustion had overcome her. He'd carried her, sleeping, to the chamber of the Quasi-Dead, and had commanded them to "read" the rest of her story to him.

Disappearing into another person's memories was an experience unlike anything he'd ever had. It was going to take him a while to sort through it all.

Her sleeping face was still and calm, her breathing slow and steady. He gathered her up as the Quasi-Dead tilted back out of sight, carrying her out of their chamber, his guards falling in around them. All would-be observers had been forbidden to attend the "reading," and the Quasi-Dead themselves had been forbidden to speak while it transpired. They had been ordered to serve only as conduits, channeling the girl's memories directly into his head.

Maybe it was because she was an esper, he reflected. Or maybe because she was eidetic. Or maybe because he was both of those things, too... and maybe because she'd been unconscious and unable to resist. But everything had flowed into his mind with cinematic clarity and detail, every sense engaged. He felt like he'd *experienced* her life. Her highs, lows, terrors, joys... everything.

Everything.

He understood why she'd been so frightened, now. As her memories had come flooding back into her head, they'd brought a confused awareness that she was hiding from someone or something much more dangerous than Toombs. Discovering that *he* had been looking for her, and from *here* of all possible places...

She thought I was what she was hiding from... being hidden from. Not exactly an unreasonable conclusion.

"Stay outside," he told the guards as they opened the door to his chambers. He carried the girl back into his bedroom and lowered her onto the bed, wondering how much longer she would remain unconscious.

Until I wake her; a voice behind him whispered.

"I wondered if you were here," he murmured, not bothering to turn around. There was no point. Human eyes couldn't see Her, except in tiny fragments. Human brains—even Furyan brains—couldn't process what She was.

Where else would I be but with my little sister in her time of peril?

"About a million other places, all at once, if I'm right about what you are," he told Her.

You see clearly, Lightbringer.

"Ain't no Lightbringer," he grumbled.

*You bear **Her** mark upon your chest. **Her** seed flourishes within you. And you are here, with my little sister. Just as we have chosen Audrey, **She** has chosen you. You are of **Her** brood. First and foremost among the Children of Light.*

"You gonna spout some prophecy nonsense at me now?"

We do not do prophecies. Cause and effect flow in multiple directions. One stream's future is another's past, and its future is the first stream's past. Free will is why there are endless

streams. But the Demons of the Dark have left only one pathway through, for all of us. Will you walk it?

"I got any kind of choice in the matter?"

None of us do now, because of them.

"Then I guess I'm walkin' it." He stared down at the sleeping girl on his bed. She looked so fragile, so vulnerable. But he knew what she was capable of, even better than she did maybe. "Gonna need her for it."

That is why she's here.

"You ain't gonna clue me in on what happens next, are you?" He found himself smirking. This shit, he thought, always went the same way. Gods, monsters, or something else altogether, they never could just lay it out. Had to be fuckin' mysterious.

Would it help if I did?

He remembered what Michael had said to Jack about prophecies, about how knowing what was coming and struggling against it somehow made it more inevitable than if people stopped fighting the future and just let it all play out. Did what came naturally and saw the result...

"Nah. Why take away the mystery?"

We will meet again soon, Lightbringer.

He really wished She wouldn't call him that. The darkness was his home; why didn't They get that? "One more thing. In case there's any doubt. She's mine now. Jack is mine."

You might want to see if Audrey agrees with you. There was a hint of amusement in Her voice. In the periphery of his vision, darkness swirled within the gloom and dissipated.

He suspected She hadn't gone far.

"John MacNamera's daughter," he murmured after a moment, stripping out of his armor and boots before joining Jack on the bed, lying down beside her on top of the sheets. "How interesting."

He'd encountered the name on multiple occasions, usually when he was trying to figure out how to defeat a particularly impregnable security system. How strange to find out that an opponent he'd never actually met, but had enormous respect for, felt much the same way about him.

What might he have done, he wondered, if he'd known six years ago that the man's little girl was in his grasp?

"No wonder you were so secretive," he told the sleeping girl beside him. He'd underestimated her tremendously.

Everything she'd done and said, during their brief time together, had more layers of complexity to it than he'd given her credit for. She'd been running a game, playing the roles she needed to play to try to reach her father, even fooling *him* in the process. If she'd told him what she was trying to do, where she was trying to go and *who* she was trying to reach... would he have helped her, or started running a game of his own?

Can't take it personally that she didn't want to tell me, he thought. *It's not like she told Shazza, either. Or Fry. Or fuckin' Paris.*

Paris was another who'd had them all—well, almost all of them—fooled, his meek, effete professorial mask and his extreme materialism disguising skills that were *much* more

interesting. *He'd* missed it, but Jack had *caught* it. Then again, he hadn't been the esper wandering around unshielded... and actively seeking mentorship in larceny.

If he'd known that she had the backdoor codes to half the impregnable security systems he'd struggled to beat, stored in her head, would he have been *able* to let her go her way?

Not to mention, this girl can plan out a heist like nobody's business...

And yet, after he'd left her, making the Holy Man promise to keep her safe, the hoodoo had kept her trapped instead. She hadn't been able to heist *herself* out of the al-Walid home until she'd given up and put a razor to her wrists.

If he'd known how close she would come to destroying herself in the Imam's house, and how little true caring the Holy Man would actually show her, would he have been *able* to leave her behind?

"Fuck." He'd expected a lot better out of the man, after seeing him rescue her from strangling to death in the *Kublai Khan's* arena.

He'd probably have taken her with him, instead. And that would *not* have ended well. For either of them. Even if he'd just asked her where she wanted to go and sent her on her way there, she'd have been Quantified and enslaved before she could reach her father. And if he'd kept her with him... she'd have ended up, one way or another, destroyed. By him.

He lifted one of her arms, pushing her sleeve back and tracing the scar on her inner arm. *I wonder when she stopped hiding them...* That was somewhere in the memory stream he'd imbibed, he was sure.

Why the fuck did this have to be the best path for her? God was still a fucker. But she *had* survived, and had even managed to *thrive*. That was something.

One thing he still didn't understand was why the Holy Man had thought it was *Jack* in Crematoria and not *Kyra*. He got, now, why *Kyra* would know so much about Jack's run with him, how she was able to get so many details right even as she got key ones wrong and unknowingly gave her game away, why she wouldn't have had enough wariness of mercs in spite of sharing a piece of Jack's history with them. He even had a sense, now, of why she'd *believed* she was Jack, and why *her* infatuation with him had run even deeper than that of the girl sleeping next to him. But what had she said or done to make the Holy Man believe that she was the girl *he'd* failed, and not a stranger?

Because the Holy Man *had* failed Jack, multiple times over, and then had apparently failed *Kyra* too...

And I let it happen.

"What are you pitching, Riddick?" Kyra had demanded of him. "That you cutting out was a good thing? That you had my ass covered from halfway across the universe?"

What would his answer to *Jack* have been, if she'd asked that? The mercs on his tail, he admitted to himself, had been an *excuse*, and as much as he had been willing to admit to someone other than Jack herself. The existential threat *he'd* posed to the girl's mind, body, and soul if they stayed together... was that something he could have admitted to her, if she'd been the one standing there?

But Jack, he knew now, had never *expected* him to stay with her. She'd expected the two of them to part ways, and she'd accepted it. She just hadn't counted on getting trapped in the al-Walid house the way she had. And she'd needed him to "say goodnight" before he left.

While she was awake to hear it and say goodnight back, to know he cared, to know he hadn't become disgusted with her for taking a life.

Fuck me... That, right there, had been his biggest mistake.

He'd been so focused on the tearful please-don't-gos that he'd thought he'd face with her, if he did a real good-bye, it had never occurred to him that she might smile, give him a hug and kiss him on the cheek, tell him to "be careful out there," and then get back to the business of conniving her way onto a ship to Furya.

"Thought I had you pegged, kid," he told her as she slept. "But fuck, you're a slippery one."

She didn't react. She was *deeply* asleep. She'd probably stay that way for hours.

Of course she will, he realized, and suddenly knew exactly what She was waiting for him to do before She allowed her little sister to wake up.

He'd have to figure out Kyra's deal later. First...

First it was time for *him* to get some sleep; real sleep, not just meditating while he dream-lived her life. Then, when he woke, it would be time to talk to the Holy Fuckin' Half-Dead itself. Make this ship safe for Jack to wake up on.

"Nobody enters or leaves these rooms while I'm gone," he told his guards as he left his quarters several hours later, feeling better rested than he had in a year. In, if he was being truthful, *years*.

There were corridors, deep in the Basilica, that no one walked. No one dared. He'd only been in them once, himself, when his rage had sent him there looking for a way to annihilate the ship. He retraced the route from memory now. The last time, he'd turned away and considered it a smart move to do so. Good survival instincts.

Now, though, he had *business* to conduct.

Old, worn signs, utilitarian rather than the ornate monstrosities created by later generations of Necromongers, greeted him and pointed the way.

There. That was the sign he was looking for, so much more meaningful now that he'd lived in *Jack's* head.

Tenth Crusade

Built at Oslo Shipping Spacedock 1

Authorized May 18, 2099

Keel Laid June 14, 2100

Launched August 27, 2101

Commissioned . . December 27, 2101

"Disappeared July 18, 2102," Riddick murmured, touching the plaque. The girl's knowledge about this ship's early days was encyclopedic.

He followed the signs leading to the original engine room. Last time he'd been down here, he'd stopped at the plaque, unwilling to venture further. Now he understood exactly what awaited him.

The room was a shambles, torn to pieces. An explosion had taken down massive parts of its structure centuries earlier. Wreckage, shielding elements, and fractured bits of stone were scattered throughout. And...

“There you are,” he murmured, catching a glimpse—just a glimpse—of his quarry. “We need to talk.”

It didn’t answer him, vanishing into the shadows.

“We’re gonna talk. Now.” He smiled and played his trump card. “Moribund...”

76.

Wholly Half-Dead

Riddick felt the moment when the creature in the dark tried to go on the attack, the cold pull as it reached for him, and the burn on his chest as *Her* handprint flared to life in answer. The unseen eldritch presence surrounding him snapped back as if he'd stung it. He could still feel its lurking rage around him. This thing knew how to hate.

I do not answer to you, filth.

"You might want to reconsider that," Riddick said, smiling in the direction where he'd last caught a glimpse of the Moribund. "I know what you are, and I know what it'd take to end you. Don't think you want to end yet... do you?"

I will not die alone.

"Plannin' on takin' the whole 'Legion Vast' with you? All that pompous bullshit they spout, that ain't you. Is it?"

What do I care what they say, as long as they serve my will?

They'd built a whole religion around its dominance of their bodies, minds, and souls, and it didn't give a fuck. Nice. Almost like an actual god.

"So let's make a deal so they can go *on* serving your will," Riddick said, leaning against a scorched panel. "And you can get what you *really* want."

You know nothing about what I really want.

"You want the 'Demons of the Dark' on their knees, begging *you* for mercy. You want to make 'em suffer. You want to break their power and give 'em *your* pain. How'm I doing so far?"

I will listen.

It was a creature of few words. He liked that about it.

"Then here's the deal. I'm the new Lord Marshal, and you stop throwing your replacement candidates at me to try to take me down. I ain't converting, ain't getting 'purified,' but I'll lead your armada and drive it right down the throat of your *real* enemies."

Acceptable. So far.

"I'm taking back a handful of your converts, too. Un-purifying them. They'll be mine. You have plenty; you can spare a few."

If you think they will live parted from my influence.

"Oh, I know they will."

Then take whichever you wish, with the exception of the "Quasi-Dead."

"Which brings me to my next condition. Jack. Audrey. The 'Little Larva' you like to call 'filth.' She's mine. You don't touch her, you don't influence her, you don't 'purify' her, and you *absolutely* never try to kill her again. Understood?"

Silence.

Riddick knelt down and picked up a long, sharp sliver of stone from the floor, turning it over in his hand. He knew exactly what it really was. What it could do. And so, he knew, did the Moribund. He balanced it, twirled it, gave it a spin. “Understood?”

I will accept this.

“That includes never sending any of your people against her. What any of ‘your’ Necromongers do, that’s *you* doing it. Ain’t it?”

I will prohibit it. I do not much care what they do with their time when they are not needed to fulfill my will.

“I figured. You don’t pay much attention to what they’re doing, either. Did you know that they’ve been keeping people from you? *Not* converting everybody they capture?”

He felt the Moribund’s sudden fury.

“Didn’t think you knew. I’m sure you won’t have any objections if I put a *stop* to that.”

Why do you care?

“Because out of death, conversion, or what they’re doing... either death or conversion would be better.” The *breeder* bullshit would finally end. “When I make my move, you’re gonna back me.”

You are the Lord Marshal.

He figured that was as close as the Moribund would get to acquiescing. It was enough.

“Last thing. You’ve been collecting apeirochorons lately. I want ’em. All of ’em.”

I care nothing for what happens to them.

Well, maybe I care, Riddick thought, careful to keep his thoughts thoroughly shielded from his “chess partner.” He shrugged and smiled instead.

Do what you will with them.

“This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” he told the shadowy creature in the darkness, setting the sliver of kirshbaumium back down on the floor.

We shall see, Lord Marshal.

He could see the change immediately, the new level of deference that the Necromongers in the hallways displayed as he passed. He’d completed his first step. Soon it would be safe for Jack to wake up, hopefully with her mind and memories intact and in order. Soon, they’d be able to talk again, and maybe she’d know enough—remember enough—to be less afraid of him.

Maybe she’ll try to take me out, he thought with amusement. She *was* one of General Toal’s trained Operatives, after all, and she’d been trained by a Furyan.

He doubted it, though. That wasn’t Jack. She’d killed, three times, but she wasn’t a *killer*.

Which was why he needed to do a few more things to ensure that she would be safe on board this flying viper pit.

He walked into the chamber of the Quasi-Dead, drawing them forth.

Yes, Lord Marshal?

That was the first time any of them had called him by the title. Yeah, things were changing.

“I’m gonna visualize a series of people. If they’re converts, I want ’em found and brought to me.” One by one, he conjured faces that he’d seen in Jack’s memories. People she’d known, albeit briefly, while on Helion Prime, and who shone warmly in her thoughts.

He couldn’t give her any of the four she’d known best, though.

It burned at him, even a year later. He should've grabbed Lajjun and Ziza and put them on board the ship he'd taken from Toombs. Not just left the Holy Man's necklace hanging on their doorway while he boarded the Basilica. In the hour that followed, while he searched the ship for signs of Kyra and then moved into position to take the fight to the Lord Marshal himself, he'd had no idea that, moments after the ship's bulkheads had closed behind him and the Basilica rose from the ground, that undead fucker had *detonated* something that had wiped out all life on the surface of the planet.

Including Lajjun. Including Ziza. Including thousands of the motherfucker's own troops who hadn't made it back on board their ships in time, and who the fuck knew how many thousands, or even millions, of other civilians huddled in the still-smoking ruins.

There wasn't much about that day that Riddick *didn't* regret.

He didn't *mean* to call up Kyra's face—

That one is lost to us. We have only her memories.

"You have what, now?"

The memories of the one called Kyra. We have them.

"Good. I'll be back later to see them. How many of the others have you found?"

All but the one called Carmouche. His face is unknown to any of the Armada. He may have left Helion Prime before we arrived.

Probably on one of the all-expense-paid travel adventures Jack and her friends had dreamed up, to entice out-system as many people as they could before the invasion. More power to him if he'd gone.

"Have the others sent to me as soon as you get all of them on board this ship."

Yes, Lord Marshal.

"Now, I don't wanna be sent either of these next two. I know they're *not* converts. I just wanna know what's happened to 'em." He conjured up two more faces in his mind.

The first died eight months ago. The second lives in the "Greensleeves Stew."

"I'll be back." He turned and walked out of the room.

Do you need direction to her?

"I know the way."

It was a corridor he'd never planned on entering again, but now he had enough muscle on his side—the Moribund itself was on board for this—that he could do what he wished he'd been able to do a year ago. Part of it, anyway. The most important part.

He'd *tried* to get to know the people he'd apparently conquered, especially once he was sure that he couldn't just *step down* as their leader; no new leader could rise in his place without vanquishing him first, so unless he wanted to *die*, he had to find a way to rule these fuckers. Their women were eager to "show him the way," and a lot of them were damn beautiful. He'd thought that part, at least, would be fun.

He had been so fucking wrong about that.

The whole lot of them *really were* half-dead. And necrophilia just *wasn't his kink*.

Damn near had made him puke his guts out, if he was being honest.

Just try phrasing that in a way that doesn't give offense to anybody, though...

The Great Lords of the Court had figured it out anyway, and most of them had seemed unsurprised. Lord Vaako had shrugged, telling him that he would find it easier once he converted, himself. Lord Toal, who seemed to have no Lady or Dame by his side—and

Riddick was pretty sure he knew why now—had shrugged as well and said that the life of a warrior need not require such distractions. And one of the other Lords had smiled and said that he knew exactly what Riddick needed.

Several of the Lords—Riddick soon noticed that Vaako, Toal, and Scales had all excused themselves from the group—had led him deep into the under-levels of the Basilica, beneath the Necropolis... to a *brothel*.

At first, it had seemed normal enough. The ladies within, he immediately realized, weren't converts. No marks on their necks. No sickly pallor to their skin. They lined up, smiling, posing for him in their negligée, all of them beautiful. Most of them didn't make eye contact, but there was one woman, with flaxen blonde hair and crystal-blue eyes, who kept looking right at him.

"Her," he'd said, pointing at the woman. "I'll take her."

It went wrong almost immediately.

"Riddick," she'd gasped, putting her arms around him. "I knew you'd come for me!"

He pulled back, staring at her in confusion. For a moment, the way she was acting, he thought somehow he had found another strange *fragment* of Jack, as if the girl had been shattered and her pieces divided among countless strange women he'd never met before. The woman before him—maybe a little over twenty years old, with eyes that were far too old for the rest of her—smiled at him. There was something off about the smile. Not quite sane.

"It's *me*, Riddick! Stacey! It's *me*!" And she tried to press her lips to his.

There was *something* familiar about her, but he couldn't place her. He unshielded his mind a little, brushing against hers—

—and recoiled, his gorge rising and his mental shields *slamming* back up against both her and the whole establishment around him.

This ain't a brothel. It's a fuckin' rape room.

And this woman he'd picked was in on it all.

"I know what you'll like," she told him, her eyes lit up with strange fervor. "See that girl over there? I've known her for *years*. I can show you what makes her cry..."

"Get the fuck off me," he managed, pushing her away and retreating toward the door.

"Riddick!" She tried to follow him, but one of the attendants held her back. "Don't leave me! You're supposed to *rescue* me!"

He turned toward one of the Lords, most of whom were still in the process of selecting their own companions—*victims*—for the evening. "You brought me to a *fuckin' rape room*!"

He had felt it *all* in the moment he'd made the mistake of unshielding: the unrelenting horror that the women endured every day and night, praying that the walking corpses who visited would just want a quick fuck and nothing more from them; the sick delight that the Lords took in the soft, warm, living bodies beneath them; the dark games that Stacey liked to play, and had encouraged the Lords to play with her for the last two weeks since she'd been captured, orchestrating especially perverse hells upon her fellow "breeders" even more for her own gratification than the Lords'...

The man frowned. "Don't be ridiculous. They're not of us. They're just breeders. We can do whatever we wish to mere *breeders*."

Seconds later, his head rolled across the floor, stopping at the feet of one of the captive "breeder" women and making her scream in terror.

“Choose carefully, Riddick,” Lord Navok said, rising from the seat he had taken and drawing his blades. Throughout the lounge, the rest of the Lords had drawn theirs. “We know you’re deadly, but there are twenty of us. Can you kill us all before one of us kills you? And how will you fight your way out of the Basilica if you do? This is part of the Necromonger Way. Do you really think *you* can change *us*? Will you die trying?”

He had to get the fuck out of there, he realized, and fast, before he got himself killed over something he couldn’t stop, couldn’t change... and it all went on anyway. He wasn’t the self-sacrificing type. As much as he wanted to ghost every man in that room, and one woman in it...

Now ain’t the time.

He turned and walked toward the exit.

“Riddick!” Stacey called after him, her voice pleading and sounding, for an instant, like Jack’s. Jack, begging him not to leave her behind...

Keep walking. Keep walking...

“Riddick!” she called again, and then cried out in pain.

“Be silent, breeder! Know your place!” one of the Lords shouted.

*Fuck! Fuck... keep walking... Do **not** look back...*

He’d left the “brothel” and stormed deeper into the bowels of the Basilica, seeking out the engine rooms, possessed of a sudden desire to send them into meltdown and ditch the ship before it exploded. But there had been something down there, dark and eldritch and malicious and *waiting for him*, that he’d found himself equally unwilling to sacrifice himself to. What he now knew was the Moribund.

That night was the first time he’d awakened, his heart pounding, from a nightmare in which he found not Stacey but Jack, herself, trapped in a Necromonger “brothel.”

He’d found all of them, on each and every ship in the fleet, making their keepers show him every woman they had, but Jack had never been among them. He’d shown her face to the Quasi-Dead and demanded they search their memory stores for any sign that any Necromonger had seen or touched her, any sign that she was among the Armada’s converts. There had been a small handful of women who looked *almost* like her, but none had been her. The nightmares hadn’t stopped until he’d put out an edict, making the Quasi-Dead share images of Jack’s face with the masses, instructing the entire Armada that any girl or woman who resembled her had to be brought before him immediately upon discovery, before anything else was done to her.

And Alexander Motherfuckin’ Toombs drove her right into the teeth of my raiders...

He had her now. That was what was important. But the rape rooms had gone unchecked for a *whole fucking year* and the woman, Stacey, had died during that time. That last part wouldn’t have bothered him before, but he now recognized her, although he still couldn’t figure out how she’d known *him*.

She had been the vicious girl who ran the Killer’s Club from the shadows, when Jack had been locked in the Aceso Psychiatric Hospital. The girl with the violent porn collection, with his picture on her wall—

Not just his picture, he realized. Pictures of other “criminals,” too, or what Jack had believed were criminals. He stopped in the hallway, closing his eyes and visualizing that wall again.

He knew all those faces. He knew all the men Stacey had enshrined on her wall and idolized. Criminals, yes, but something else as well, and he knew exactly where she had to have met them, and *him*... and when.

"They call us the Suicide Squad, boy, after some bad twenty-first century movies about a bunch of sons-o'-bitches who had to do what we do, only they got to do it with powers..."

He'd been seventeen, and although nobody else in the group had known it about him, he *had* powers. He'd been pulled off the streets and Quantified at fifteen, chipped, subjected to two agonizing years of conditioning, and this was his test-run, paired up with a group of Service Crims who had been too high up in the clearance chain for a dishonorable discharge and whose skills were too valuable to just let them rot in cells. Most of them were twice his age. They were being sent after a crime kingpin, who was staying at his favorite casino-cum-brothel on Helion Prime and, while *he* was supposed to be taken out, they had strict instructions that the facility itself was expected to come through undamaged.

In they'd gone, stealthy as could be, quartering the place in the dead of night.

They'd found the cop first, a woman, stripped naked and chained to a bed with her own cuffs. Didn't look like anybody had touched her yet. None of them did, either. They'd kept moving. It grated at him. Why the fuck wasn't freeing her part of their mission?

"Stay on task," one of his companions had muttered when he'd paused, looking back at the room. "Ain't no room for improvising in this gig if you want your head to stay on your neck."

They all, he'd realized, had explosive trackers. Apparently another thing they had in common with the sorry fuckers in the old movies.

The kids were next.

There was a whole suite full of them, and the main room almost looked like a daycare except he could *see* terrible knowledge in their eyes and in the way they posed flirtatiously for the team.

Fuck, he'd thought as they moved on again. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

What good was anything he did if it didn't involve saving those kids? What good was the Federacy if it didn't give two shits about ending that kind of monstrosity, and just wanted to take out one in a *long line* of people who perpetuated it?

He had no problem with taking out their target. The man owned that shithole. He was culpable in everything that was being done in all those rooms. Riddick was fine with completing the hit. But leaving the kids behind... leaving a lady cop chained up, naked, for mauling... letting the place *stay standing*...

It was almost impossible to use his abilities without specific orders. Excruciatingly painful. But he opened his mind to the other soldiers...

They were thinking the same things. Some of them were fantasizing about fucking the cop, true, but *none* of them were happy about the kids.

There was something he could do, and he wasn't even sure how he did it but he knew he could... It was going to hurt like a sonofabitch but it'd be worth it...

When they hit a blind junction, no cameras, he called it up inside him and let it blast out, frying all of the comms. Pain exploded in his head as his conditioning kicked in, but he took a deep breath and pressed forward against the agony and the nausea. There was a beautiful,

glowing woman he could catch a glimpse of sometimes, whose hand on his chest felt almost orgasmic, and the thought of her helped push the pain back down.

“What the *fuck*?!” Corman, their point man, shouted.

Riddick pulled out his knife and went digging. It was hard not to scream, but a moment later he had the explosive tracker out of his neck. His trainers had fucked up by inflicting so many *worse* torments on him. Still, he very nearly puked. He wiped his blood off with his shirt and put the tracker in his pocket, approaching one of his colleagues. Demme. A guy who’d ended up in the glue for refusing to bomb a refugee camp and turning his missile on his commanders instead. He *liked* Demme.

“We got about two more minutes until they get a signal lock on us again. Who wants out of this shit?” he asked.

Demme tilted his head, nodding.

“Hold on, man, this ain’t gonna be subtle.” He cut into Demme’s neck, unerringly going for the tracker while his friend groaned and struggled to stay still.

“The fuck are you *doing*, Riddick?” Corman yelled.

“Gonna rescue those kids and that cop,” he said. “You wanna stay on mission, go ahead. It’ll give us cover. Any of you who want out of this psycho-fuckery, though, this is your one and only chance.”

“Gonna get all our heads blown off,” Nicholson muttered.

In the end, two thirds of the squad had decided to go forward and stay on mission. The rest joined Riddick in strategically placing the explosive parts of their trackers inside the confines of an armory by the junction and carrying the locator parts with them for disposal later. None of the ones who had stayed with him, thankfully, had been imagining fucking the cop. He wouldn’t have to kill one of his crew.

They doubled back to the “daycare.”

“Get the kids dressed in whatever they have that’s closest to street clothes, and get ’em ready to evac,” he told his brothers. “I’ll be back in five.”

Then he went and got the cop.

By the time he had her put together, and ready to lead the kids out of the building, all hell was starting to break loose. He and his comrades had undoubtedly been threatened repeatedly to get back on mission via their fried comms, and then the armory exploded. He’d promptly smashed his tracker, as they’d planned; let HQ think they’d actually died for a little while.

“Kids,” he said, bringing the cop into the ersatz daycare, “this is Officer Lola. She’s gonna take you out of here to someplace safe.”

Until that moment, he was pretty sure the cop had been expecting him to do something nasty to her and was trying to figure out a way to turn the tables on him. She stared at the kids, and then at him, her mouth dropping open when he handed her back both of her confiscated sidearms, fully loaded.

“You get ’em out of here. Take ’em out of this room and turn right, down the long corridor to a T-junction. Turn left, go all the way to the end and out the door. Its security is disabled. Just push it open and go on through. You’ll be in what looks like an impound lot. Get the hell out of there through the hole in the chain link fence and keep going until you hit a main road. You won’t be safe until then. Got that?”

She nodded, all fear of him gone. “What about you?”

“You don’t worry about us. Take care of the kids and we’ll clear you a path. You ain’t never seen none of us. You heard a racket while you were getting loose from your cuffs, found the kids, and got ’em the hell out of here, and you don’t know what else went down. Understood?” He looked around at all of the kids, directing his words at them, too. “*You never saw us.* That’s for *your* safety more than ours. Now go.”

The kids went quietly with her, all of them docile and accustomed to obedience. Riddick and his crew shadowed them, efficiently dealing with a small handful of goons who might have tried to stop them. A few of the kids had whispered thankyou’s to him and the others as they slipped through the fence. One, a little girl, maybe eight years old, with flaxen blonde hair and crystal blue eyes that were way too old and cold for her young face, had turned to look at him and his brothers, her expression adoring...

Stacey. That, he realized, was when and how he’d met Stacey.

His crew had scattered that night, once the kids were gone, and the only one he’d ever seen again was Demme. He’d done a run through the building to see if there were any other innocents who needed freeing, but hadn’t found anyone. Then he’d rejoined the main group, just long enough to make sure the brothers he’d abandoned didn’t get mowed down as a result of the team being cut down in size, and had taken off after it was clear that their mission would be a success. Two days later, his face had jumped to the top of Federacy “Wanted” posters, along with the brothers-in-arms he’d freed, with a dozen completely fabricated crimes attributed to him. It would take less than a year until they began to have real crimes to list in place of their lies.

He’d wondered what Officer Lola had made of that.

Wonder if she’s a convert...

He’d check with the Quasi-Dead when he was done here.

In the meantime, he pounded on the door to the brothel.

“Yes...? Lord Marshal!” The host gave an obsequious smile and bow. “Have you come for...”

“New edict. Courtesy of the Holy Fuckin’ Half-Dead itself. Nobody goes unconverted. You get all those women to the conversion chambers right. The fuck. Now.”

The man began to protest... and then stopped. He could *feel* the power behind Riddick’s demand. The force that both animated and depleted the Necromongers... was *paying attention*.

Your god is watching and is it ever pissed...

The women were soon marching out of the room and toward the upper levels. Celia Wyndham was the third out the door.

Funny. Her last name’s the same as the name of that city Jack was livin’ in... Small galaxy...

He’d let her be converted. She’d probably *enjoy* the experience, if she was still like Jack remembered, and if her masochism had helped her survive the “brothel” for as long as she apparently had. He wouldn’t add her to the coterie he was creating for Jack. They didn’t like each other... but he had a feeling that Jack would still be glad to know that Celia was... comparatively... safe.

The Lords had massed behind the brothel doorway, some confused, some angry, verging on demanding an explanation, none quite ready to draw on him. They could feel it, too... the

wrath of their “god” coalescing around them.

“Every one of ’em’s about to become a Lady of the Armada,” he told the men. “This ‘breeder’ bullshit is over. Don’t you fuckin’ ever forget it again.” *And be fuckin’ grateful I’m letting you keep your worthless heads.*

The edict went out to the entire Armada. No one, outside of the Lord Marshal’s personal entourage, could be unconverted. And anyone who tried to enslave a “breeder” in the future would die “before their due time.”

Not even three hours in, not bad...

Soon “Officer Lola” had been located and was being summoned to him, along with the others. He returned to his quarters...

...in time to see Dame Fuckin’ Vaako slip out of the doors and scurry away.

*What the **fuck**?*

77.

Sleeping Beauty, Sleeper Agent

“Tell me about the girl,” Dame Vaako said as she carefully unwound her hair.

Lord Vaako, busy removing his armor, glanced over at her with a frown. “We found her on a ship with a few dozen other passengers and crew. She almost escaped and fought better than any of the others tried to. There’s little else to tell. We converted most of the others on the way back, but she remained untouched in every way for delivery to the Lord Marshal.”

“Untouched in *every* way?” Dame Vaako raised an eyebrow. She was almost certain her husband never visited the Breeder Pits, but after the way that other girl, Kyra, had hung on him when they’d returned from Crematoria...

Vaako sneered. “Untouched, Chantesa. In every way. My soldiers know discipline. As do I.”

True. Even those marked as “breeders” arrived at the Basilica in decent enough shape if her husband’s ship brought them back.

In the last year, even though many of the Lords and Dames had begun to dream of making an assault on the Melpomene System, and some had even begun devising strategies to propose for such an attack, they had been held in check. Only a few ships had been allowed to launch raids on the Sol Tracks as “practice.” Chantesa had heard that there had been similar lulls in the purification of worlds, after each transition from one Lord Marshal to the next, and that it might take another year or two before their new leader either committed to the Way... or was deposed.

In the meantime, raiding parties were grudgingly allowed to go out so that the fleet could still know battle. Most of the “breeders” brought back by the other Lords after such raids had already seen hard use, some even on the verge of death. Never the ones her husband brought back. When he’d presented the girl to Riddick, she undoubtedly *had* been untouched.

Of course, everyone remembered what had happened the time one raiding party had brought back another girl, who closely resembled Riddick’s quarry and who had endured some hard use before being turned over to him. It had taken the raiding party more than a week to die. Chantesa still shuddered when she recalled it; they had been placed so no one in the Basilica could avoid hearing their screams, although no one could see what was being done to them. Somehow, the Riddick had found a way to make *Necromongers*, who were supposed to be *above* pain, scream... and only he, himself, had seemed immune to the horror of their suffering.

Later, she heard whispers that he had compelled the Quasi-Dead to extract all of the memories of that girl’s tortured days of captivity from her mind... and make the entire raiding party relive them from her perspective, on an infinite loop, until their own minds finally shattered. The girl herself, physically healed, converted, and with no memory of being

abused, was now the wife of a Purifier on another of the Armada's ships, and the Riddick apparently had never seen or spoken to her since.

It had been effective, though; no other raiding party since had dared take even a taste when they found a doppelgänger for the girl he'd sought. He always insisted, she'd noticed, that his "rejects" undergo immediate conversion.

It fascinated her that the actual girl, the one the Riddick had been searching for the whole time, seemed to fear him. She hoped to learn more. If the girl was here against her will and had no love for their Lord Marshal... perhaps they could help each other.

Not long after, as they were preparing to sleep, news came that the Riddick had taken the girl into the chamber of the Quasi-Dead and had compelled all would-be observers to leave. They were still in the chamber when she and her husband rose in the morning. She managed to slip close to the grilles for a moment before one of the Riddick's guards ushered her away.

The girl lay on the dais, posed much like the "Sleeping Beauty" character that Chantesa remembered from her childhood and surrounded by the Quasi-dead, while the Riddick, legs folded and head bowed as if meditating, sat behind her head, his hands on her temples.

"What do you think he's doing to her?" she whispered to her husband as she was handed back to him.

"I know not, nor do I care."

Oh, damn you. Grow a little imagination... Faithful and biddable—and formidable in battle—as Lord Niels Vaako might be, he could also be stultifyingly *dull*.

It was almost a full Standard day before the Riddick emerged from the chamber, the still-unconscious girl in his arms, and carried her away from the Necropolis. Gossip had run wild in that time, growing increasingly imaginative and ridiculous. The girl was far too old to be his daughter, and she seemed far too young to be a wife... of an age with, or slightly younger than, the girl Kyra whom he'd attempted to rescue and then avenge.

Dame Vaako loved a good mystery.

"I think I'll find out what the witch knows," she told her husband when they rose the next morning.

Aereon of the Elementals had been given a suite—Irgun's old suite, in fact—after the Riddick had taken over. Interestingly, he hadn't released the witch and had insisted that she continue to wear the strange stone chains that the late Lord Marshal Zhylaw had called—for some reason that had seemed to amuse him and him alone—the "cherry bombs." She spent most of her time in the chambers, only occasionally emerging to walk the battlements and listen in on Court business.

"Please come in," she said, when her guards announced Dame Vaako's arrival.

Chantesa was surprised to see that the woman had left Irgun's rooms almost completely unchanged. Perhaps she was in denial about the length of her stay, and refused to do anything to make the rooms more her own because that would mean accepting her standing as a long-term prisoner of the Armada... fascinating.

"We don't see much of you," she commented, running her finger along the edge of Irgun's desk. Someone, at least, was keeping the place clean.

"I very much doubt most Necromongers wish to see any of me," Aereon replied. It *was* difficult to look at her at times. Parts of her seemed to disappear in the air currents. But there

were moments when Chantesa could almost swear that she saw something else, in the thinned places... something worse than emptiness.

"And why is that?" she asked. "Your people are neutral in our conflict, yes? Why shouldn't we be... closer?"

"That," Aereon said, her words slow and precise as if talking to a child, "is the *nature* of neutrality."

"And yet you were on Helion Prime warning them about us."

"I was not the source of any warnings. I was there for another reason."

"The Riddick?" Chantesa asked. "Were you there looking for him? Because if you were looking for the prophesied Furyan Warrior who would take down our leader, that hardly seems neutral either."

"The prophesied Furyan Warrior who would *become* your leader."

Good parry. And possibly even a valid point. Except that rumors kept swirling about how the Riddick was seeking to break the Way. Funny how those rumors seemed to always come out of the night he'd killed one of the other Lords in a Breeder Pit...

Sumptuous brothels or not, Chantesa preferred to call them by that name. It better fit the lives that the unbelievers trapped inside them actually lived. *There but for the grace of conversion...*

"Did the prophecies ever mention a girl?" she asked.

"You mean Kyra? No." Aereon shook her head. "It seems that the whole purpose of her existence was to bring him here, nothing more."

"There's another girl. The one he's been looking for."

"He has asked me several times about his Jack, yes."

Chantesa frowned. "I thought *Kyra* was his 'Jack.'"

"Apparently not." Aereon smiled. "He's asked again and again for answers about who she really was. But I doubt he can find them. Not if he won't embrace your faith, and it's clear that he won't."

Fascinating. The witch seemed *pleased* that the Riddick would be denied answers. She wondered if that was why the chains remained on. There was something duplicitous about Aereon that delighted her. Especially if the witch and the Riddick were not actually friends.

"Maybe the other girl will know."

Aereon's breath hitched, almost inaudibly, but she caught it. "This other girl... is here?"

"Captured a week ago and given to the Riddick almost two days ago, yes. You must not have attended that Court session."

"Tell me about her." The witch's voice was mild, only hinting at the slightest bit of curiosity, but Chantesa could feel some deeper avidity behind it.

"Young. Tall. Slender. Pretty in her own way. She matches the description he sent out. And she seems to fear him."

"How curious. I would have thought his quest after her to be impossible."

"Who *is* she?" Chantesa asked.

"No one that I know of. Which is odd. Except... yes, of course. I should have realized sooner."

Oh, now *this* was intriguing! "Realized what?"

“When I learned the identity of the Furyan Warrior I was seeking,” Aereon said after a pause, “I hired a mercenary to locate him and bring him back to Helion Prime. In fact, I hired several mercenaries, but this one was a particularly crass and difficult man. He had a story to tell—and he insisted upon telling it—of how Riddick had swooped into a high security psychiatric hospital, under everyone’s noses, had extracted two teenage girls from custody, and had taken them offworld with him.”

Aereon rose from her seat and began to pace as she talked. The air currents she stirred up made parts of her vanish in a disconcerting and almost nauseating way. No wonder, Dame Vaako thought, she had so few visitors and even fewer invitations to come out of her chambers.

“The girls were a Jane Doe who apparently went by ‘Jack’ and had a prior history with Riddick, which *he* had hoped to use to lay a trap,” Aereon continued, “and Kyra Wittier-Collins, a rare *female* serial killer known to many as the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain. The mercenary believed that both of these girls were Riddick’s lovers, but the world he believed Riddick had spirited them away to was not the one where he was ultimately found, so I suspect Toombs was wrong. And based on Riddick’s questions to me...”

“The Riddick went to Crematoria seeking this ‘Jack’ but found Kyra there instead,” Dame Vaako breathed, delighted, “but had never met her before?”

“It appears so.” Aereon turned the smile of an approving schoolteacher on her. “And yet it also appears that he came to care about *her* a great deal in a very short time. Odd, given his reputation for aloof detachment and antisocial tendencies. It would seem that he has, in fact, formed genuine bonds with other people, such as they are, at least twice.”

“And now he has his ‘Jack.’ Why would she be afraid of him?” The possibilities were endless, and rather delicious. Had part of the mercenary’s tale been true? Perhaps he had spirited her away and made her a child-bride, only for her to escape his control. Had she possibly even used the other girl to lay a false trail away from herself? Would she, maybe, wish assistance to escape again, for a reasonable price?

“Perhaps you should ask her,” Aereon suggested, a hint of a smile touching her lips.

Perhaps I should.

“She’s adorable.”

Audrey and Kyra stood side by side, watching Elodie splash in the creek behind the house that Audrey’s mother, and Alvin, had bought in the small town where Deckard Tech was located, just outside Wyndham Landing. Audrey turned and smiled at Kyra.

“She is, isn’t she? She was born a little over six months after I took off.”

“Yeah,” Kyra said, nodding and smiling back. “I thought so.”

The backyard melted away and they were in the woods on the slope of Canaan Mountain. This space was Kyra’s rather than Audrey’s, shaped by her visions and memories.

“You did?” Audrey followed Kyra into the forest as they talked.

“Yeah. When you told me and the Mezianes about the brother you never had, that’s when it all made sense.” Kyra grinned apologetically at her. “I didn’t say anything because you’d have been pissed off at yourself if you knew. So, did Alvin turn out to be an asshole when you got back?”

“No, he turned out to be surprisingly not-dickish,” Audrey laughed. “And yeah, I was pretty upset to realize I ran away from the thing I’d always wanted most.”

“Family,” Kyra said, nodding. “Yeah. I miss that, too, sometimes. The way it was when I was little, anyway. Your cosmic family is nice, not as scary as I used to think, but... Tizzy, do you know how much longer I’ll be stuck out here? My memory isn’t good enough to just live in it.”

Kyra’s forests, Audrey had noticed, tended to be a little “blurry,” missing most of the details that would truly make them feel real. Maybe that was why she preferred to spend her time in—

As if on cue, a much more detailed and precise landscape opened to them: the bonefield from the crash planet, beneath its blue sun. The memories that Audrey—as Jack—had once shared with Kyra were almost as vivid as life, not to mention missing almost all of the actual traumatic moments. No wonder Kyra spent so much time replaying them and exploring their confines.

“I’ll ask the *Apeiros*. They don’t make a whole lot of sense when I ask them about you, but I’ll try again—”

Wake, little sister. Wake...

“Do I *have* to? I wanna stay with Kyra...” But the vision was shredding and the crash planet, and Kyra, had already vanished. It wasn’t a *dream* any more than the starfield of the *Apeiros* was a dream, but she was all too aware of its lack of normal physicality. That had to be especially hard on Kyra.

Not now, Audrey. You must wake. You will see her again soon.

Audrey opened her eyes. The strange carvings and draperies of Riddick’s bedroom greeted her.

Fuck.

Your species makes very little sense. The act of reproduction as a malediction. Why? Her sister was lurking somewhere in the shadows directly above her, mostly hidden by the high, vaulted ceiling. Audrey thought she could make out the glitter of eyes.

“We got five hours to unpack it all?”

We do not. One of the Necromonger court is on its way to speak with you. I still struggle to tell human sexes apart, especially with these creatures, but I believe it is female.

“Fun, fun, *fun*.” Audrey sat up, noticing that Riddick must have slept beside her on the bed, neither of them beneath its covers. “Where’s Riddick?”

In another part of the ship, making arrangements to ensure your safety. The Moribund no longer threatens you.

“I figured that’s why all my memories are back,” she said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. “Well, *almost* all of them... What the hell did he do with my shoes?”

On the other side of the bed.

She put them on and laced them up. They weren’t exactly combat boots, but they were still better than sock feet until she knew the lay of the land. “So how come you have a hard time telling Necromonger sexes apart?”

They have no reproductive capability.

“Huh. Did we know this about them?”

No.

“You let Michael know yet? Could be important.”

I will.

She needed a moment to regroup. “Okay. I’m smack-dab in the center of the Necromonger Armada. Its new leader is my old friend Richard B. Riddick, who apparently killed the *old* leader and took over right after they turned Helion Prime into a ‘Black Planet.’ Just what the hell was Toombs thinking he was gonna *do* with me here? You know what, never mind. That guy would use ‘boobs’ for a password if a system would accept it. Long as he’s nowhere near Elodie, fuck him. Do I have marching orders from the General? Is there a *plan* here?”

In truth, the place was *still* scary as *fuck*, but at least her brain was in better order now. She’d flowed with the replay that the *Apeiros* had allowed to be fed through the “Quasi-Dead,” her memories falling back into place as they spooled past. Everything made sense again. Some things made *too* much sense.

She wasn’t entirely delighted by the person she’d turned into, with most of her salient memories gone, over the last year. That version of Audrey MacNamera had lost almost all of the *good* therapy she’d received for her traumas, via Ewan, MilitAIre, First-AId, and Michael, and had simply buried them and refused to look, turning more than a little *neurotic* again in the process. And she’d developed this weird sheltered, privileged-girl righteous sense that she was personally going to right all the major wrongs on her home planet...

*Great, and now instead, I’m back in a situation where a whole bunch of people are expecting me to be instrumental in saving a **universe**...*

More than just one, her sister told her from somewhere on the ceiling.

“So no pressure or anything... *does* General Toal have a plan for this?”

His plan has been to nurture you until you are ready to hatch into your six-shape. Then we can show you everything.

“And... this current situation is, what? A setback? An opportunity? A major clusterfuck?”

We do not know yet. It appears to be connected, but tangentially, to our goals.

“Then my current directive is... gather intel and wait?”

Essentially.

“Okay, I can do that.”

The one who wishes to speak to you is at the door. The guards will not admit it.

“Should I—” Audrey laughed. “Why the hell not? I’m here to gather intel, right?”

Before she’d regained herself, she thought, she’d been genuinely terrified. She could start with that and see where it took her. As she walked over to the doors, she slipped into the necessary role. *And introducing Audrey MacNamera as the Petrified Captive...*

She opened one door up a crack. “Who...who’s there?”

“Go back inside, girl,” one of the guards on the doors said. “No one in or out. Lord Marshal’s orders.”

“B...but...” She let her eyes dart between the players in the hallway as she pulled the door open further. Two guards, posted on either side of the ornate doors in overwrought armor, and an elegant, beautiful woman, dressed in a form-fitting gown, hair severely coiffed, heavy makeup and her natural darker skin tone both helping to conceal the deathly pallor of most Necromongers.

Female, she told her sister. *Our guest is definitely female. See the kind of ornamentation she’s wearing? It’s culturally coded as feminine. Especially in **this** kind of culture.*

“Surely the Lord Marshal would have no objection to a friendly visit?” the woman cajoled in a sultry voice. One of the guards seemed to be struggling against its pull. “If his young guest were to invite me in?”

The two guards shared nervous glances.

It'll be fine, Audrey pushed at them. Hopefully they weren't shielded.

They glanced at each other again, shrugging.

“C-can she come in?” she asked, still stammering. “Please?”

After a moment's hesitation, the guards let the woman pass.

Audrey twisted her hands together, watching her guest prowl into the suite. There was something in her walk, in the way she looked at everything, that suggested she already owned *all* of it and was just deciding when to take possession. Arrogance, confidence, absolute belief in herself.

Audrey had just the foil for that.

In comparison, she would be stammering, gauche, frightened, desperately in need of guidance and protection... easily manipulated, easily controlled... or so her guest would believe.

“W...what's your name?” she asked as the woman continued to survey the room, oblivious to Audrey's shadowy sister watching her in fascination from the vaulted ceiling.

“You may call me Dame Vaako,” the woman said. *Chantesa*, her mind volunteered silently.

Pretty name, she thought. “I'm, uh, Audrey.”

“Not ‘Jack?’” Dame Vaako asked.

Audrey flinched, blinked, and gave a jerky shake of her head. “N-not Jack.”

*I mean, it **was** the only name I ever told him...* She couldn't exactly blame Riddick for wanting to use it, and for maybe needing the *nostalgia* of it. She'd had enough names now, and played enough roles, that she wasn't sure she could truly reject, or even claim, any of them. And if the semi-amnesiac Audrey MacNamera of the prior year *was* her actual authentic self, she had a whole lot of work left to *do* on herself.

Jack wasn't the name, among all the names she'd worn, that she would pick first... but it would do just fine.

But this Dame Vaako didn't need to know any of that.

“Pity,” the Dame said, running her finger over a shelf edge and then rubbing off the dust she'd collected on her fingertip with her thumb, “he's been trying so hard to find a girl named Jack.” The woman's eyes moved to the bedroom beyond the sitting room, taking in the rumpled bed. Although her expression was deadpan, Audrey could feel the way her mind was awirl with calculations.

Okay. First choice. Should she play *really* dumb and ask “who,” or make a logical leap?

She wouldn't play *that* dumb. The Dame would figure out Audrey was running a game a whole lot sooner if she got caught in *that* kind of lie.

“Why?” she asked instead, a tremor in her voice. “I don't... I don't...”

“Yes, child? Don't what?” Dame Vaako walked over to her. She had to be wearing some *killer* heels; she seemed only an inch or two shorter than Audrey, but the proportions of her body suggested she would be at least half a foot shorter if they were both barefoot. Maybe

that was why her dress was so tight around her legs, to keep her from taking too-long steps in her shoes and overbalancing.

"I don't understand why I'm here," Audrey whimpered, breaking her voice twice and letting her eyes grow large and fill with unshed tears. This was the moment when a lot of people would become uncomfortable and find an excuse to retreat, and when especially empathetic types would try to comfort her... what would someone like this Dame Vaako do?

The hand that Dame Vaako brought up to her cheek was chilly. It was a good thing that it was in character for Audrey to flinch, because there was no avoiding it.

Dame Vaako was straddling two 'verses. She could *feel* it.

Not the way Irena and Colin Kirshbaum had been, though. Or at least, she didn't think so. It was easier to tell when *she* was observing from another 'verse herself, but...

Almost *all* of Dame Vaako was in U1... but something else, something not of this 'verse, was piggybacking on her. There was a strange energy exchange happening...

"Don't be afraid, child, I won't hurt you," the Dame said.

"Your hand's so *cold*," she stammered, shifting her vision so that she could see what filled Dame Vaako's space in her other 'verses.

Empty interstellar space surrounded her in twenty-seven other 'verses. And yet—

Ohhhhhhhh, would you look at that. This whole ship's crossing a threshold...

She wondered if she could tap into its string vibrations and connect to that 'verse. Crossing over and adding it to her five-shape should be safe to do from inside the ship.

Experiment time after I get rid of our guest, she told her sister, and felt Her amusement above her.

"It's the Necromonger Way," Dame Vaako was telling her. "We give up the frailties of human life for something far more glorious. The Underverse."

"W...what's that?" At least they hadn't named *their* alternate reality Elsewhere, too. That *Under* plucked at memory.

Beneath, below, under... you weren't talking about the Necromongers' Underverse, were you? she asked her sister, and instantly felt Her derision.

"Oh child, there is no way to tell you about that. The only way to see it is to be Purified—" The Dame staggered back, wincing. "No... not allowed... what...?"

That was unexpected. "Are you okay?"

Dame Vaako looked like she'd just developed a nasty headache. "I'm fine..." She shook her head as if trying to clear it.

"Do you need to sit down?" She let her voice fill with worry, as if her sudden concern had temporarily overwhelmed her fear.

"I should go." The Dame was trying to sound imperious, but a note of odd desperation had crept into *her* tone. She moved unsteadily for the doors, and for a moment Audrey worried that she'd lose the battle with her heels and dress and totter over. "We can talk again soon... I look forward to learning more about you..."

Whatever had just happened, it had completely cut through the woman's equilibrium.

Dame Vaako slipped out of the doors, trying and failing to look nonchalant as she went.

"Well. *That* was weird," Audrey said.

My brother struck at her.

"Your who?"

For all that we have disowned and repudiated him, the Moribund is still my brother.

She hadn't been sure until now about the relationship, but that did confirm a suspicion of hers. She had to come at so much of this sideways... "He doesn't have to be my brother, does he?"

Her sister's silent laughter filled the ether. *No, little sister, he doesn't wish to be tied to you that way, any more than you wish to be related to him. But he no longer wishes you harm.*

"That's something, at least—"

"Who... the *fuck*... gave you permission to let that bitch into my rooms?" Riddick demanded of the guards outside.

Hooboy.

She couldn't tell him from here. His mental shields were as impenetrable as Michael's.

Walking over to the doors, she cracked one open again. Riddick, outside, was glaring at two very cowed-looking guards. "M-me..." she stammered, more for the guards' benefit than his. "It was me... I asked if she could..."

"For fuck's sake," Riddick muttered.

Furyans use reproduction as a malediction too? Audrey's sister asked, forcing her to stifle a laugh. It was a good thing musical comedy was one of her fortes and she could keep a straight face through almost any skit.

He pushed past his guards and into the room, compelling her to back up. She scrambled back, keeping up the fearful act while the guards closed the doors and Riddick loomed before her.

He leaned close, breathing in through his nose. "You don't smell even a *little* scared, Jack." He drew back and pulled off his goggles, silver eyes locking with hers, a hint of a smile on his lips. "So what are you playing at?"