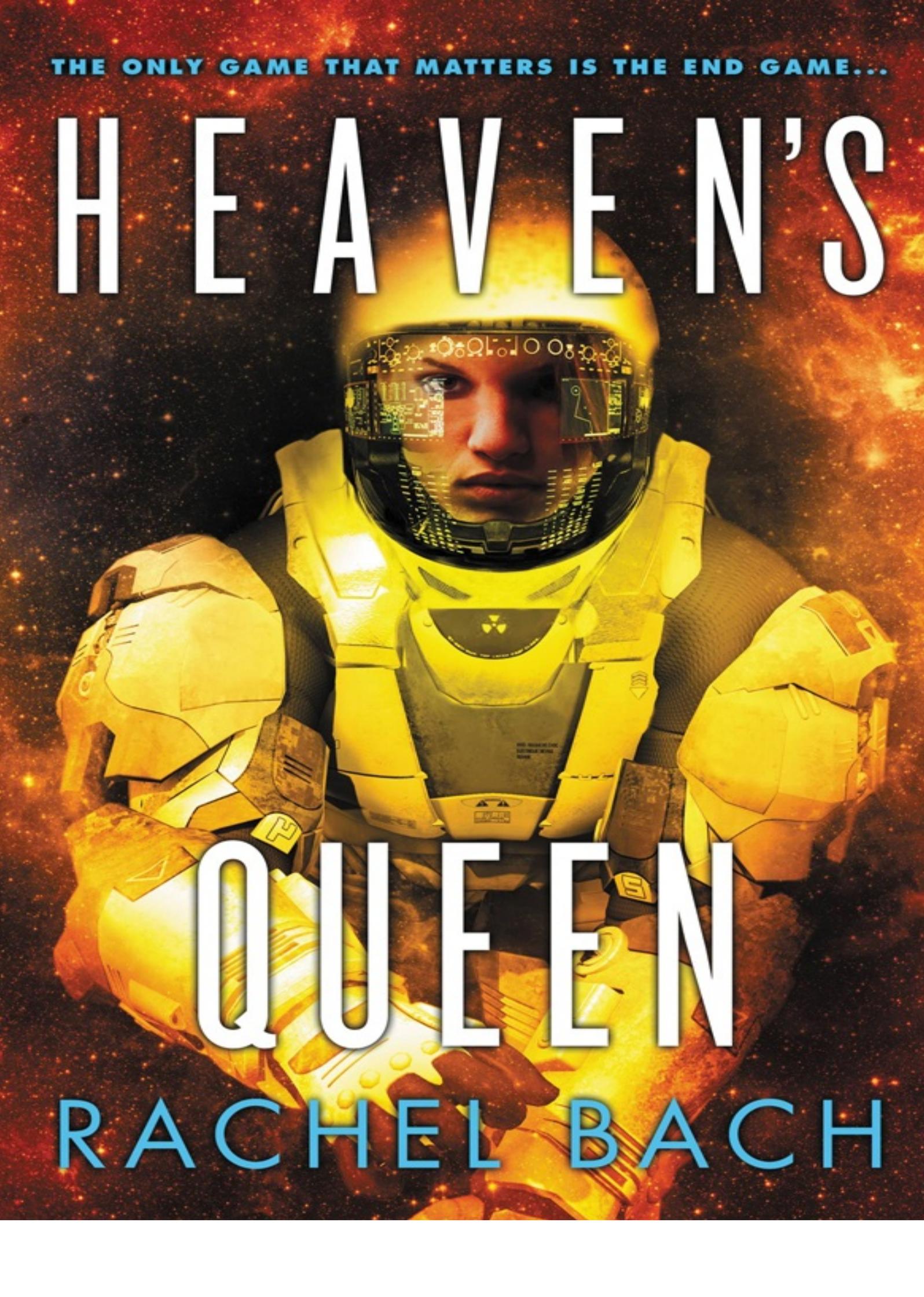


THE ONLY GAME THAT MATTERS IS THE END GAME...

# HEAVEN'S

A character in a yellow and black futuristic suit with a glowing visor, set against a starry space background. The visor displays various data points and symbols. The character's hands are visible at the bottom, holding a glowing yellow object.

# QUEEN

RACHEL BACH

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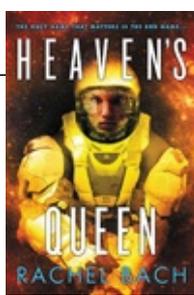
# HEAVEN'S QUEEN

**Paradox Series**  
**Book 3**

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**RACHEL BACH**

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[\*\*Begin Reading\*\*](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[\*A Preview of Ancillary Justice\*](#)

[Orbit Newsletter](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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*For my readers, the wonderful people whose support allows me to work the best job in the world. All my books are for you, but this one especially. Thank you.*

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## PROLOGUE

Commander Brian Caldwell, head of the little-known and terribly named Joint Investigatory Spatial Anomaly Task Force, stood on the bridge of the Republic battle cruiser he'd requisitioned from fleet command an hour ago, staring through the huge observation window at the void beyond, a void that should have been a thriving planet of sixteen billion people, and wondering how everything could have gone so wrong so quickly.

Seven years now they'd been fighting the phantoms. Seven years of working constantly, of never seeing his wife, of missing his daughter grow up. But in those seven years, they'd never failed. They never missed an alarm or arrived too late to save whatever colony planet the phantoms had chosen to nest on. Even these last eighteen months, when the phantom attacks had grown so frequent it didn't seem possible to catch them all in time, Caldwell's team had always pulled it off. Always, that was until yesterday.

"It's pointless to feel guilty."

Caldwell kept himself from jumping just in time, sliding his eyes over to look at his partner. Job Brenton was right beside him, his arm almost brushing Caldwell's shoulder, and Caldwell hadn't heard a thing. *Damn creepy symbiont*, he thought with an angry breath. Dr. Strauss wanted to put one of those things in him, too, but that wasn't happening. Caldwell had spent the first fifteen years of his career running slave-freeing missions against those damn lizards—like hell was he going to let the doctor shove one into his brain.

"Even if we'd left the second the gravity alarms went off, the planet would still have been completely destabilized by the time we'd finished the jump," Brenton went on, staring down at the small knot of refugee ships that huddled in the battleship's shadow, the ten thousand people who were all that remained of the Republic core world of Svenya. "The only thing we can do now is make sure it never happens again."

"And how do you suggest we do that?" Caldwell said quietly, glancing over his shoulder.

Behind him, Maat lay on the floor, curled up in a ball under Brenton's coat. Dr. Strauss, the universally renowned plasmex doctor who'd been assigned as Maat's caretaker, was on his knees beside her. He was talking to her in a soft voice, trying to cajole her into getting up, but Maat didn't even seem to hear him. She just lay there, her dark eyes glassy and empty but still afraid. The sight made Caldwell want to pull his hair out, because it meant they were probably going to have to drug her again.

As a powerful plasmex user rescued from the pits of a xith'cal lab, Maat had always been unstable

but they'd never had to drug her until this year. With the added workload from the increase in phantom attacks, though, her fits were rapidly getting out of control. They'd had to drug her near unconscious just two days ago, and Caldwell never would have ordered it again so soon, but the moment they'd arrived at Svenya she'd gone into hysterics, nearly killing their entire crew before Brenton managed to get her with the syringe.

She'd screamed herself into unconsciousness, babbling about a god, a monster that spanned the sky. At the time, Caldwell had dismissed it as more of Maat's raving, but that was before he'd heard the phantom they'd come here to hunt had reduced an earth-class planet to rubble in less than a galactic standard day. Now he wasn't so sure she was wrong.

"She's strong," Brenton said earnestly. "She'll snap herself out of this."

"And what if she can't?" Caldwell asked. "What if this thing really is as huge as she claims? Our biggest phantom was, what, fifty feet?"

"Forty-five," Brenton said. "But she handled it."

"And she went to pieces at the sight of this one," Caldwell said, nodding like Brenton had just made his point for him. "Did you see the ships it destroyed? Huge freighters crushed like tin can. Damn thing must be miles long, and it's *still* out there."

With Maat out of commission, Caldwell had been forced to track the phantom by sending scout ships to fly until they hit the phantom's aura and blacked out. As spotting methods went, it was only slightly less dangerous than randomly shooting the cannons until they scored a hit, but Caldwell had to know if the thing moved. Svenya had been the largest colony in this system by far, but the other planets still had populations in the millions. If the monster made a move toward one of them, Caldwell needed to know. Not that he knew what he'd do if that happened. "Maybe we should try nuking it again?"

Brenton scoffed. "The nukes don't work on the little ones. A phantom this size wouldn't even feel it." He shook his head. "Maat's power is the only thing that can touch them."

"You tell me, then," Caldwell snapped. "There's a monster out there capable of destroying a planet in a day that we can't see, can't track, and can't shoot. Just seeing it was enough to scare our only viable weapon into a coma, and I'm supposed to be sending a message to fleet command right now to report that we've got this under control. So you tell me, John, what do we do?"

"Tell the truth," Brenton said. "Tell them we don't have it under control because something like this *can't* be controlled. Our best bet is to evacuate all the remaining colonies and close off the system. It's never been proven that phantoms can travel faster than light. If we give it enough space, we might never see it again in our lifetime."

"There's also no proof that they *can't* travel faster than light," Caldwell replied. "Seven years ago we still don't know jack shit about how they move. We don't even know if this monster is the only one of its kind. The phantom population has been increasing exponentially all year, and we can't even say why or where they're coming from. For all we know, this is the new normal."

*The end of humanity*, Caldwell thought with a cold clench. He'd always thought the xith'cal were the worst threat to mankind, but the lizards were nothing on this enemy, the monster they couldn't see coming. "We have to do something," he said, turning back to the empty window. "Find some way to wall it in or—"

He cut off as a deep groan rattled through the ship. The noise was more pressure than sound, squeezing his mind in a way Caldwell recognized too well. It was the phantom's scream, but he'd never heard one this deep or this huge. The ship lights flickered in answer before Maat's power neutralized the phantom's aura, and Caldwell let out a long breath.

“It’s getting closer,” he said as the scream faded, looking back at Maat and her doctor. “Ben! How soon can you wake her up?”

Dr. Strauss looked up at his name and began to shake his head wildly, sending his wispy white blond hair flying around his paper-pale face. “It would be unwise in the extreme to disrupt her harmony. Her mind is still in trauma from being put under and from whatever she saw. If you bring her up now, the risk of a full-scale psychotic breakdown increases exponentially.”

The lights flickered again as he spoke. This time, though, only the low-energy emergency runnels came back on, and Caldwell swore under his breath. “Do it,” he ordered. “We’ll deal with the consequences later.”

“We don’t even know if she’ll be able to do anything,” Brenton said, grabbing Caldwell’s arm. “Are you really willing to risk damaging her? Our only weapon?”

“If that thing catches us while she’s asleep, we’re all dead for sure,” Caldwell said, plopping himself into the gunnery control seat. Phantoms couldn’t be killed by physical objects or energy attacks, but they didn’t like them. If he could land a big enough hit, maybe he could buy them some—

The battleship lurched beneath him as something crashed into the port side. Something enormous. Even at low power, the thrusters righted them immediately, but Caldwell had had enough.

“Wake her up!” he shouted, punching the button to authorize live fire on all guns. Before he could shoot, though, a new scream ripped through the bridge, sending a stab of pain right through his head. His first thought was that another phantom had joined the attack, a much smaller one, but then he saw Maat lurch to her feet, her mouth open as she screamed again.

“*They’re coming!*”

As always, Brenton got to her first. “Easy,” he whispered, pulling her into his arms. “Who’s coming?”

Maat buried her face in Brenton’s chest, and Caldwell felt a twinge of guilt. She was nearly twenty now, but when she did that, she looked just like the little girl they’d rescued so long ago. The little girl they should have been protecting, not using like this.

“Who?” Brenton asked again.

Maat’s whole body shook with a sob. “The ones who speak in the dark.”

Brenton glanced at Caldwell, but the commander just shrugged. Maat said cryptic shit all the time. But before he could try and guess what this particular riddle was about, a flash outside put everything else out of his mind.

Light bloomed in the empty space that had been the colony of Svenya, pushing through the darkness like all of reality was just oil floating on water. Caldwell had never seen anything like it, though he knew enough to guess it must be some kind of hyperspace exit. As for the ships that came through, though, he couldn’t guess at all.

They looked like deep-sea fish, their flat bodies marked with gorgeous blues, greens, and purples that glowed with their own light. They dwarfed the battleship Caldwell had requisitioned, but they moved with a grace that belied their hugeness, an effortless, natural motion that he had never seen in any machine. If it wasn’t for the fact that he could see obvious doors in their sides and prows, he would have sworn the giant vessels were *alive*. Whatever they were, though, they were beautiful. So beautiful Caldwell could have stared at them forever, but he couldn’t, because the final shape that blossomed out of hyperspace stole his attention completely.

If the mystery ships had been huge, this thing was gigantic, as large as any of the xith’cal warships Caldwell had fought—only this, he was sure, was no ship. Unlike the others with their rainbow colors, the last thing to exit hyperspace was as black as the void behind it. Once the hyperspace flash

faded, Caldwell could catch only glimpses of its surface in the reflected light of the other ships: wide, pointed head framed by millions of tendrils; a shiny, shell-black surface; and deep, terrible pits that could have been eyes or mouths or something else he couldn't even imagine. He was still staring at it when the other ships opened fire.

Caldswell grabbed the console on instinct, because from where he was sitting, the beautiful ship seemed to be firing straight at *him*. But the brilliant beams of blue-white fire never hit the Republic battleship. Instead, they struck the invisible mass of the phantom floating between them.

For one terrifying moment, the entire sky was ablaze. For the first time ever, Caldwell saw the whole of the phantom's body as the alien's fire lit it up from within. The thing was even bigger than he'd imagined, and he'd imagined big. Miles, he'd guessed, maybe hundreds of them. Now, with the truth spelled out in fire, all he could think was that he'd been a fool. The phantom's snakelike body stretched from one end of Svenya's dust cloud to the other. It was as big as a planet, bigger even than the enormous black monster commanding the attack, and it wasn't going down quietly.

The creature burned for nearly thirty minutes, thrashing in agony, taking several of the beautiful fishlike ships out in the process. It was only by pure luck that it didn't hit Caldwell's battleship again. But the unknown aliens kept up the attack until, at last, the phantom gave one final shudder and started to disintegrate. That was all Caldwell saw before the alien's fire snuffed out and the phantom's body vanished, invisible once again, though he knew if he could somehow reach out there he would still feel it falling apart.

All through the attack, Maat hadn't moved. She just stood there clinging to Brenton, her eyes locked on the light show outside. When it finished, she collapsed into a sobbing heap.

Dr. Strauss was at her side at once, helping Brenton move her to the captain's chair. Caldwell was about to go over as well when the voice spoke in his head.

*Enemy of our enemy.*

The words weren't words exactly, not as he knew them. They were more like impressions, meanings layered together to form something richer than language. For a moment, Caldwell thought he was imagining things, but then Brenton and the doctor snapped their heads up as well, looking around like they'd heard it, too. Meanwhile, Maat began to cry harder.

Outside, the beautiful alien ships were coming toward them with the huge black shape at the center. They moved so fast, there was no chance to run even if Caldwell had wanted to. But he wanted no such thing. He ordered the helmsman to hold course before walking up to the prow of the bridge just as the aliens came to an abrupt halt in front of them, the huge fleet floating like giants over the lone Republic ship.

*Who speaks for all?*

The words brushed over Caldwell's mind like impatient fingers, demanding to know who was in command. He could see from Brenton's face that he'd felt it as well, but Caldwell was in command here, so he was the one who answered.

"I am."

Any worries that the aliens wouldn't be able to hear him vanished when he felt the presence in his mind focus, the impressions growing louder and clearer, as though the speaker had turned to face him. *Enemy of our enemy*, it said again, only now the words implied kinship and cooperation. *We offer you aid.*

"And we appreciate it," Caldwell replied. "Thank you. We never could have killed that thing on our own."

*We know this*, the alien said dismissively. *And now you know it as well. You are dead without us.*

Caldswell fought the urge to scowl. "What kind of aid are you offering?"

*Protection, the voice said, the word itself a wall. The universe has been torn open, and the corruption is seeping through. This attack was only the beginning. More are coming.*

"More" was the word Caldswell's brain supplied, but the alien's impression was infinitely larger than an endless flood. "How many more?"

*Countless, the voice answered. More than either of us can fight.*

Caldswell nodded. "So you want to work together."

Amusement trilled through his mind like a swirling feather. *We do not fight unless forced,* answered. *Violence is a risk we cannot take. We are vital; therefore, we cannot be allowed to end.*

"Is that so?" Caldswell said, folding his arms over his chest. "Then what exactly would we be getting out of this aid if you won't fight?"

*Survival, the alien replied, filling the words with the feeling of an open hand. We are Ielgis, those without end, and we offer you our knowledge and the opportunity to save your race. We will show you how to forge the weapon that can kill the ones you know as phantoms, and in return, you will hunt them until we are all safe. The voice paused, letting this sink in. And then, almost like an afterthought, it added, We also require an offering.*

"What kind of offering?" Brenton said, making Caldswell jump. He hadn't realized the other could hear this as well until Brenton spoke, but when he looked back, his partner was glaring murder at the black alien above them. "You seem to be getting the sweet end of this deal while we do all the work."

*Without us, you will die, the Ielgis said lightly. You need us, and to aid you, we require the one called Maat.*

"What?" Brenton shouted, but Caldswell put out his hand.

"Explain," he said.

*She has the potential to be like us, the Ielgis said solemnly, the words heavy with power. Give her to us, and we will forge her to be the tool that saves this universe.*

Caldswell could feel Brenton's rage building from across the room, so he made sure to speak first. "What would that entail, exactly?"

The enormous black alien moved a little closer. *She will stop the flood in our stead, it said, offering up the picture of a door closing. Without a barricade, the corruption will overwhelm us all, and this sad, dead planet will be but the first in an infinite line of tragedies. But with her, we can stop them. A single sacrifice so that all may live.*

Caldswell bit his lip, trying to think this through, to tease out what was really going on. Before he could, though, the alien spoke again. *This offer will be tendered only once, enemy of our enemy. Accept and save your species, refuse and perish.*

"Don't do it, Brian," Brenton said, suddenly beside him. "Don't even think about it. We can't trust them. We don't even know what they are."

"You saw what they killed," Caldswell said. "I'm not saying you're wrong, but without them we'd be dead right now."

"Maat is our only weapon against the phantoms," Brenton said, his voice rising. "You can't just give—"

"Maat is breaking!" Caldswell yelled. "You know that damn well. Even if she wasn't, do you really think we can keep going like we have been over the last few months? Some of us need to sleep, Brenton, and we can't guard the entire universe with one girl. Not at the rate the phantoms are multiplying. We need a better solution, and if they're offering one, we'd be idiots not to hear it out."

“So you’d just give her over?” Brenton shouted. “Sacrifice her to some alien—”

“Yes!” Caldwell shouted back, jabbing his finger at the floating rocks that had been Svenya. “If it means something like this will never happen again, I’d give them my own daughter!”

Caldwell regretted his words the moment they were out of his mouth, but it was too late. The alien voice was already crooning in his head.

*Good*, it whispered, petting him with their approval as the aliens turned their fleet around. *Follow*

“Do it,” Caldwell ordered, ignoring Brenton’s horrified look. Moments later, the battleship took off after them, following the aliens into the dark.

Once the ship was moving, Caldwell stomped over to Brenton to take Maat from him, but the symbiont wouldn’t let go. Maat was trembling in his arms, staring at Caldwell with terrified eyes. “I can see what they want,” she whispered, her voice breaking like old glass. “Don’t let them take me.” Tears appeared in her eyes. “*Please*, Brian, don’t do this.”

When he didn’t answer, she flew into a rage. As Brenton and Dr. Strauss wrestled her back into the chair for sedation, Caldwell slumped into his own seat to watch the *lelgis* fly. He knew Brenton wouldn’t stop fighting him on this. Brenton always took Maat’s side, but it didn’t matter. Caldwell had made up his mind. If the *lelgis* could give him the weapon that had burned that monster out of the sky, or any weapon that could reliably kill phantoms on the scale they needed to be killed on, then he would pay any price. He would climb up on the altar with Maat himself if they wanted, so long as they gave him the power to stop the goddamn tragedies.

After all, he thought, slumping down, what were a few more deaths compared to the billions of lives already lost? What was anything, so long as no more planets died? Nothing, he decided. Nothing at all.

Five days later, Maat was given to the *lelgis* as promised, and at the far corner of the new restricted zone that had been the Svenya System, construction began on the prison that would later be known as Dark Star Station.

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## CHAPTER

# 1

I've woken up in a lot of weird places in my life, but coming to in a xith'cal escape pod was pushing even for me.

I woke with a start, jumping so sharply I would have put a fist through something if I hadn't had the foresight to lock my suit. Fortunately I had, so all I did was bang around a little.

"Welcome back."

I glanced at my cameras to see Rupert smiling over his shoulder at me. In the normal run of things I would have counted waking up to an attractive man's smile as a plus, but my relationship with Rupert Charkov was a thorny, complicated mess at the moment, so I mumbled a hello and looked away, though not before I noticed that Rupert had shifted out of his symbiont scales and put on clothes while I was asleep.

I'll admit I was a little disappointed I'd missed that. I might have been infected with a crazy plasmex plague and generally confused about my situation, but I wasn't *dead*. At least, not yet, which was in itself nothing short of a miracle considering the events on Reaper's tribe ship and our subsequent crazy escape from the Ielgis. But though I'd had one of my best nights ever celebrating not being dead with Rupert back on Caldwell's *Glorious Fool*, a lot had changed since then, so I forced my eyes off Rupert's admittedly lovely back and settled them firmly on my surroundings.

Surprisingly, it turned out to be worth the look.

"Wow," I breathed, craning my neck back. The sky outside the ship's tiny canopy was absolutely *full* of stars all crowded together against a rainbow of color that ranged from deep blue to brilliant pink. The combined light was so bright my cameras darkened to compensate, but even my suit couldn't dim the glare of the giant, golden gas planet we were currently orbiting, its swirling cloud cover shining like a second sun in the reflected light of the twin star system behind us.

"Where are we?" I asked, covering my eyes with my hand.

"The Atlas Emission Nebula," Rupert replied. "Birthplace of stars and, as you might have guessed from the name, a licensed territory of Atlas Industrial."

I whistled. "I know you Terrans give your corporations a lot of freedom, but this is ridiculous. Why would anyone give up a place this beautiful?"

Rupert shrugged. "There are plenty who would agree with you, but at the moment the Terra Republic's policy of licensing unused space works in our favor. Every possible terraformable satellite in this sector has been turned into an Atlas cash development, which means we have our choice of places to set down, so long as we do it in the next thirty minutes."

"What happens in the next thirty minutes?"

Rupert turned back to the screen at the front of the ship. "If I'm reading this right, that's when we run out of fuel."

He said this so blithely I almost missed the doom inherent in that statement. “Hold up. You’re saying we’ve got thirty minutes to safely land a xith’cal ship on a Terran colony?” He nodded, and threw up my hands. “Why don’t we just shoot ourselves down and save them the trouble?”

Rupert must have been breathing the xith’cal’s poison air for far too long, because he actually laughed at that. “Everything will be fine,” he said, pointing at the gas giant below us. “That’s Atlas Fifty-Nine. It’s got a regular trade route and ten moons we can pick from, any one of which is bound to have communications equipment and a hyperdrive-capable ship we can requisition. We’ll be down and back up again before you know it.”

I was about to ask where the hell he thought we’d be going since Caldwell—my only guarantee that I wouldn’t be immediately tossed in a lab and ground into patties by scientists looking to extract my phantom-killing plasmex virus—was still lost in hyperspace, possibly forever. But I wasn’t ready to start up that hill just yet, so I stuck to the more immediate problems.

“Have you been here before?” I asked. “Like, do you have any contacts you could radio not to show us?”

“I haven’t been here personally, no,” Rupert said. “But we’ve got a Republic military all-access code that will guarantee us safe passage. I just need you to radio it out from your suit, because I can’t figure out how to send anything from this.” He pointed at the xith’cal ship controls.

I couldn’t help smirking at that. “Powered armor comes through again,” I said. “But why didn’t you wake me before we entered orbit? They could have shot us already.”

Rupert flashed me a smile. “You looked like you needed the sleep, and no one puts long-range missiles on a cash colony.”

It was a fair point. I pulled up my suit’s com with a thought and flipped to an open channel. Since I don’t make a habit of getting stranded in ships that don’t have communications equipment, I didn’t actually have a lot of experience with open-space frequencies. Subsequently, it took quite a bit of fiddling before I figured out how to send a message.

But while my Lady has many strengths, she’s not much of a broadcaster, and even after I put all her power into it, my signal was still pretty weak. Fortunately, the com chatter in this sector of space was almost dead silent, which meant even a weak message could get through. I just had to figure out where to send it.

“You were right about having our pick of landings,” I said, looking over the half dozen different colony identifiers my suit was picking up. “I’ve got a fix on all six Atlas Fifty-Nine moons. Any preference?”

Rupert glanced at something on the complicated screen in front of him. “Whatever’s closest would be best, I think.”

That didn’t sound good. I picked out the strongest of the signals, but as I tried to compose a Mayday that wouldn’t be taken for a xith’cal trick, something made me pause. The list of planetary identifiers on my message screen was giving me the strangest sense of déjà vu. This, in turn, was enough to seriously piss me off, because I’d thought I was done with this missing-memory bullshit. But a quick search of my contacts list proved I was overcomplicating things. The call sign looked familiar because it *was*, and my anger vanished as my face broke into a huge smile.

“Oh man,” I said, putting in the familiar code. “You are so lucky you have me.”

I expected Rupert to laugh at that, but all he said was, “I know.”

The quick response threw me off balance, and I turned back to my screens before he caught me blushing like an idiot. I wrote my message and sent it off, then crossed my fingers. When we didn’t get anything back for several minutes, I started to worry my signal was too weak even in the silence.

Before I could work myself into a panic, though, a man's gruff voice sounded in my ear.

"Unidentified xith'cal ship," he said in heavily accented Universal. "I don't usually give warnings but since you were either kind enough or stupid enough to call in on a Paradoxian ID, I'm giving you ten seconds to explain why I shouldn't shoot you out of the sky."

I'd turned on my external speakers the moment the hail came in so Rupert could hear as well, and the look on his face was priceless when, instead of answering, I pursed my lips and whistled a piercing shriek into the com. It was so loud Rupert actually jumped, but by the time I finished, the man on the other end had changed his tone completely.

"Well met, Blackbird," he said in his native King's Tongue. "How can I help? Are you a xith'cal prisoner?"

"Not hardly," I answered in kind. "Nice to hear your voice, Hicks."

There was a pause, and then the man on the other end burst out laughing. "Deviana Morris, I don't believe it. What the hell are you doing on a xith'cal ship?"

"Trying to get off it," I said, grinning. "Can you get us a safe landing spot? Preferably somewhere that doesn't involve missiles?"

"For you, baby, anything," Hicks cooed. "I'm messaging the tower right now. Give me five minutes and I'll have a beacon for you."

"Copy that," I said. "Thanks, Hicks, see you in a few."

The connection cut off with a *click*, and I looked up to see Rupert glowering at me. "Baby?" he repeated, arching an eyebrow.

I did *not* like the implication in his voice that I needed to explain myself, but since Rupert was the one who was going to be landing us, I did it anyway. "Hicks and I go way back," I said, switching to Universal again. "He was my first squad leader in the Blackbirds before he landed a cushy corp job as head of security on some nowhere colony." I'd thought he was crazy for doing it, too, but Hicks had always liked money more than glory. "Never thought I'd be visiting, though."

Rupert's scowl didn't fade. "And the whistle?"

"Well, we were Blackbirds," I reminded him.

"I never heard a bird make that awful sound."

"You've never heard about Paradoxian blackbirds?" I asked, looking at him sideways. "Black feathers, ten-foot wingspans, teeth like saw blades, hunts in packs?"

Rupert made a face as he turned back to the controls. "From that description, I'm glad I never encountered one."

"What, you didn't think we were named after those sissy Terran birds, did you?" I scoffed. "Please. Blackbirds were the reason no one lived above the snow line until the first Sacred King appeared and gave us back technology. Good-sized flock can pick a grown man down to his skeleton in fifteen seconds, and their *scream*..." I shuddered. "Turn your bones to water. My whistle ain't nothing to the real thing."

"The joys of Paradox," Rupert muttered. "Though I still don't see why we have to go through this man. I could have used my security clearance to get us landing permission."

"Well, now we get the personal touch," I said, though that was only part of it. Honestly, I felt a lot better having an inside man. Hicks was a flirt and a flake of the worst order, but he was still a Blackbird and a Paradoxian, both of which I trusted way more than Rupert's clearances. Especially on a little dirt ball corp planet where it was easy to cover things up. But as I was setting up my com to receive Hicks's landing beacon, I noticed the time stamp on his transmissions.

"Rupert?" I said weakly. "Remember when we first came out of the jump? When you said we lo

some time?”

He nodded. “How much did we lose?”

“Eight months, twelve days, five hours,” I read off, heart sinking. Eight months galactic was almost a year on Paradox. A whole year gone, just like that. Rupert didn’t seem to share my concern though.

“That’s not so bad,” he said. “I was braced for far worse, though it does make me worry about Caldwell and the others.”

That snapped me out of my self-pity. “Why?”

“The jump from Reaper’s tribe ship to here was barely five minutes, and we had the tribe ship gate to help,” he said. “The second jump they made to escape the pursuing Ielgis was far more reckless, and much, much longer.” He looked up at the star strewn sky. “Dark Star Station is nine hours from here by hyperspace, but on a jump so wild, the time dilation is almost random. They might end up coming out seconds after they went in.”

“Or they might come out a thousand years from now,” I finished for him. “That would suit Caldwell’s terrible luck.”

Rupert glanced back at me. “You know, among the Eyes, Caldwell’s actually known for his unusually *good* luck. Though the captain always says that only fools count on being lucky.”

I chuckled. “Guess that explains the name of his ship.”

Rupert’s voice went suddenly serious. “Actually, I believe Caldwell named the *Glorious Fortune* after himself. A long time ago, he told me only fools gamble what they can’t afford to lose.”

“What does that have to do with Caldwell?” I asked. “He’s not exactly a reckless gambler.”

“I believe the name is meant as a reminder of what not to be,” Rupert said quietly.

Not for the first time, I wondered what a man like Caldwell could have gambled and lost that hurt him so badly he’d name his ship after it as a warning. I was still puzzling it over when Hicks called me back with our landing.

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I’d never been to a cash planet before. The Sacred King had banned them in Paradoxian space, and Terrans didn’t bother hiring elite mercs to guard such low-margin operations. Considering what I’d heard, though, I’d always pictured them as barren wastes, hunks of rock stripped of everything valuable by their greedy corporate overlords, so you can imagine my surprise when Atlas 35 Moon turned out to be actually sort of beautiful.

It was about half the size of Paradox, a bright green and blue ball basking in the intense combined light of the double star and the reflected brilliance of Atlas 35’s golden clouds. The place had clearly been terraformed within an inch of its life; there was just no other way continents ended up perfectly square. There were only two seas, both wrapped in rings around the north and south poles, leaving the equator and everything north and south of it for thousands of miles as a huge, flat, uniform tract of arable land covered in a forest so green I had trouble looking at it directly.

As we entered the atmosphere, I realized the brilliant green that covered every inch of the planet’s surface wasn’t actually forest. Or, rather, it *was* a forest, just not of trees. The green came from rows and rows and rows of soypen. Some genetic monkeying must have been going on, because the stalks were enormous, easily ten times bigger than anything I’d seen back home. Even the smallest ones had truck-sized, neon-green leaves spread wide to catch the bright light that shone from every direction.

Thanks to its pale yellow clouds, Atlas 35’s reflected light shone down on the farming moon even brighter than the twin suns did. Even after we’d cleared the reflective upper layers of the atmosphere

the glare was almost unbearable. But when I looked up in disbelief that anywhere could be so bright, I realized I could still see the stars overhead. Even through the hazy atmosphere and the blinding light, the Atlas nebula shone clear through the deep blue sky, creating a star-spangled high noon that would have been amazingly pretty if my visor hadn't had to go almost black to let me look at it without burning my eyes. I was still trying anyway when we reached the coordinates for Hicks's beacon.

Though the planet had looked like nothing but plants and water from the air, Hicks's signal had directed us to a small city. As we got closer, though, I realized "city" was probably the wrong word. There were a lot of buildings, but I didn't see any sign of people. No houses, no shops, no civilizations, just loading zones, shuttle tracks, and huge packing machines gleaming in the harsh sunlight. No one even came out to gawk as Rupert set us down on one of the huge, open loading areas stacked high with crates of soybean flour, which seemed very odd considering we were landing a xith'cal ship smack-dab in the middle of a Terran colony.

The escape pod set down with a clunk and a shudder it would probably never recover from, but even so, I couldn't help being impressed. The little thing had put in a fine show for what was basically a lifeboat. I could shoot a lizard every day of my life and feel just lovely about it, but damn if they didn't build nice ships. Rupert had just reached up to unlock the canopy when I spotted Hicks jogging toward us across the white paved landing.

At least, I assumed it was Hicks. I couldn't see his face since his visor was blacked against the blinding sun just like mine, but I couldn't believe there'd be anyone else on this dirtball wearing Count-class suit of Paradoxian armor. I waved to him when he got close, hopping out of the pod just in time to get swept into a bear hug.

"Devi!" Hicks shouted, picking my armored body up and swinging me around without missing a beat. But then, of course, Count armor like his could lift a tank. "By the king, woman, call ahead next time. I almost hit the guns when I saw your lizard can."

"Just working with what I had," I said, wiggling free. "Thanks for guiding us down, and for not shooting. Always a pleasure not to be shot."

"Must be a change of pace for you, certainly," Hicks said, stepping back to look up at Rupert, who was pulling my armor case out of the cockpit. "Who's your friend? Another merc?"

I bit my lip. I didn't actually know how to explain Rupert. Considering he spoke perfect King's Tongue, I could try passing him off as an official from the Royal Office, which wouldn't be too far from the truth. Before I could get a word out, though, Rupert answered for himself in his usual soft accented Universal.

"I am not a mercenary," he said, handing me my case before grabbing his own bag and dropping down seven feet to land neatly beside me on the blinding white cement. "I am Devi's escort."

That stopped Hicks cold. I still couldn't see through his blacked helmet, but I could feel his questioning stare just as a private channel opened to my com. "Is this idiot for real?"

"It's a long story," I said, but before I could explain further, Rupert reached into his bag and pulled out a badge. It wasn't a Royal Warrant, but it must have been serious business, because the moment he opened it, Hicks shut up.

Rupert's smile was polite as always, but I knew him well enough now to catch the smug turn at the edge of his mouth as he closed the badge and tucked it into his jacket pocket. "Mr. Hicks, correct?"

"Captain Hicks," Hicks replied in Universal. At Rupert's raised eyebrow, he added a grudging "Sir."

Rupert nodded. "I need immediate access to your communications drones. I'm also going to need your fastest hyperdrive-capable ship ready to launch as soon as possible. The Atlas Corporation will

be compensated in full for the loss, of course.”

“You want a ship?” Hicks said, though from the tone of his voice, you’d have thought Rupert had asked for a unicorn. “Um, sir, this here is a cash colony. We don’t have hyperdrive-capable ships.”

“Are you kidding?” I asked before Rupert could.

Hicks threw out his arms. “Look around. This entire place is an automated farm. There’s like thirty of us on the whole planet. My job is to run the security drones. Hell, I only put my armor on because I thought you’d need help.”

“So you don’t have a ship?” Rupert clarified. “Nothing with a hyperdrive?”

Hicks shook his head.

“But,” I said, “how do you get off-world?”

“On the freighter,” Hicks replied, pointing at the wall of shipping containers behind us. “See those crates? Corporate sends a continent freighter around to pick them up every month.”

I blinked. “Continent freighter?”

“An industrial ship too large to enter orbit,” Rupert said. “Usually loaded by space elevator. The corps use them for planetary scale transport.”

“Basically a giant moving space station,” Hicks finished. “Only it holds cargo instead of people. The automated harvesters pick the soybeans and load it onto the trains, which ship the beans here from all over the planet. Every month, the freighter comes and picks up the harvest. At that point, if you want to get off-planet, you just go up with the produce. The freighter makes a few more stops after that and then it uses its internal gate to jump back to the Atlas distribution facility in the core worlds. Once you’re there, you can get a flight anywhere you want.”

“Hold on,” I said. “So this freighter has a gate *inside* itself?”

Hicks nodded. “Told you it was big.”

“How long until the next freighter arrives?” Rupert said.

“’Bout two weeks galactic,” Hicks said with a shrug. “Give or take a week.”

Rupert did not look happy about that. “Can’t you signal it here now?”

“I can’t,” Hicks said. “I’m just security. The freighter’s route is determined by corporate, but I could get you the contact info for Atlas Industrial Farming Division.”

Rupert turned away, and I would have sworn he cursed under his breath. Still, he was all politeness when he turned back around. “That won’t be necessary, Captain Hicks. We don’t have time to cut through corporate red tape. I’ll be putting in for our own pickup, which means I’ll still need to use your communications drone, but now I’ll also require lodging and supplies for myself and Ms. Morrison until our ship arrives.”

Hicks sighed. “Well, about that. We don’t exactly have a hotel here. I’d offer to let you stay with me, but I’m married now and I don’t think my wife would like it.”

“You got married?” I scoffed. “Woman must be nuts.”

Hicks chuckled, and then he snapped his fingers. “I know! You can stay at the colony manager’s house. It’s a nice little place, and he’s been off-world all year.”

“Fine,” Rupert said, though I could tell he was starting to get very annoyed. “And the communications drones?”

“Right over there,” Hicks said, pointing across the landing zone at something that looked more like a jury-rigged water tower than a communications facility. “Our com guy’s an antisocial bastard and prefers to run things from the southern hemisphere, but just flash your badge at the camera and he should give you full access. Meanwhile, Devi and I’ll bring the car around.”

Rupert nodded, and then, before I could even think about dodging, he leaned in and pressed a ki-

to the side of my helmet. "I won't be long."

When I turned to glower at him, Rupert was already jogging away at a brisk but still acceptable human pace across the blinding expanse of sunny cement, his bag hooked over one shoulder. Hicks watched him go, whistling softly. "God and king, Devi, you're slumming with Terrans now?"

"Shut up," I muttered, suddenly furious, both at Rupert for setting me up like that and at myself for kind of liking it. "Let's get out of the sun."

"How the mighty have fallen," Hicks said, motioning for me to follow him.

By the time we'd finished crossing the two hundred feet of blinding white cement to the garage at the landing's edge, I was good and sick of this bright, sunny place, beautiful day stars or no. Hicks, on the other hand, seemed far more at ease now that Rupert wasn't around, and he showed it by talking nonstop about the life he'd built here. By the time we got inside, I'd heard all about the crazy money he was making and how he'd married the lady who supervised the automated soypen trains.

"Honestly, if it wasn't for her, I'd have invited you to stay with me instead of sticking you out in the manager's place," Hicks said as we entered the blissful dark of the shaded garage. "But I'd rather deal with him than my wife. She worries I only married her because there are only five women on the whole planet."

"Did you?" Because that was totally something Hicks would do.

"Sort of," he admitted, taking off his helmet. My first sight of his face shocked me a bit, mostly because he looked so much older than I remembered. Apparently, the year I'd lost had been a doozy. "I also might have told her a bit about you."

I rolled my eyes. Hicks and I had slept together once or twice while we'd been out on assignment. It was good fun at the time, but he'd gotten on my nerves after a while, mostly because he did stupid shit like this. "Why would you tell your wife something like that?"

He shrugged and walked over to a truck that looked like a cross between a tank and a tractor. "She asked."

I decided it was time to change the subject. We spent the ride over to the communications tower talking about the planet's crazy sunshine. Apparently, with two suns and the bright gas giant of Atlas 35 acting like a mirror, the colony never actually got dark. The closest thing they had were two hours of dusk out of every forty.

"How the hell do you live out here?" I asked. "Nothing to do, no night, and no way off. I'd go crazy."

"You get used to it," Hicks said, slowing down as we approached the tower where Rupert was already waiting for us, standing in the sliver of shade provided by a tiny metal overhang. "Devi," Hicks said, dropping his voice to a whisper even though we were talking through our suits. "Are you *really* okay? I don't know who that Terran is, but—"

"I've got it covered," I said, cutting him off. "This is me we're talking about, remember?"

Hicks shot me a look. "That's what I'm afraid of. I mean, you don't exactly have the best record when it comes to staying out of trouble."

I couldn't help laughing at that. "Thanks for the sentiment," I said as we rolled to a stop. "But everything's fine. I just want to get to wherever you're taking us so I can get some real sleep. You would not believe the week I've had."

Hicks shot me a sideways look, but with Rupert climbing into the backseat, he didn't press. We drove in silence after that, speeding through the huge, empty streets of the loading facility. I hadn't fully appreciated just how big the place was from the air, but it took us nearly fifteen minutes to get away from the buildings and into the fields. Once we did, though, soypen was all I saw.

At first it was kind of neat to be surrounded by enormous versions of plants I was used to seeing shoulder-high rows, but soon it just got confusing. The fields were laid out for automated harvesters running on a maximum-efficiency pattern, not for human navigation. There were no signs either, and by the fifth turn, I was completely lost. Fortunately, Hicks seemed to know the way by heart, or at least his suit did, because half an hour later he slowed down and turned us off the dirt road onto a paved drive that stopped abruptly at a wide front porch.

Even though we were only a few feet off the main harvester corridor, the manager's house had the feeling of being buried deep in the forest. The cinderblock construction and boxy design should have made the two-story structure look cheap, but the little house was painted a very soothing shade of deep green that blended into the leafy shadows of the soybean stalks. The soldier in me didn't like that the fat waxy leaves pressed right up to the windows, providing excellent cover for anyone who might try to sneak up on us, but the rest of me thought the sheltered house was charming, like a bird's nest hidden in tall grass.

As soon as the car stopped, Hicks hopped out and did something to the keypad by the door that turned all the lights green. "There you go," he said, putting up his visor as he turned back around to face us. "There should be plenty of food in the deep freeze and there's a satellite uplink on the roof that'll keep you connected to the planet's com system. I live about thirty minutes down the road, so just call if you need anything."

"Thanks, Hicks," I said, lifting my own visor to give him a grin. "You're a lifesaver."

He winked at me and hopped back into his truck. He didn't salute Rupert as he left, but I don't think Rupert noticed. He was too busy opening up the house.

Stepping inside the manager's place felt a bit like breaking into someone's summer home. Pictures of a family I'd never seen smiled down at me from every wall, and a stranger's coats hung on the pegs by the door. The towering soybean kept the place nice and shady, so at least it wasn't baking after being shut up for so long, but everything was dusty from disuse.

Even though it was obvious no one had been here in months, I hesitated before going over to the corner to plug my armor case into the house's power grid. With all the stuff around us, it was too easy to imagine the manager storming down the stairs at any second, demanding to know what we were doing in his living room. Rupert, however, didn't seem discomforted in the least. He was already checking out the small kitchen, opening cabinets and peering into the chest freezer like he owned the place. In his mind, at least, we were here to stay.

I shed my suit and locked her in her case to repair and recharge. I didn't have my gun cases, so I had to hook Mia directly into the wall to charge up. I set Sasha right beside her, nesting my gun cases together with their handles out so I could grab them quickly if I needed to. But while my equipment was easily taken care of, I was another matter.

I was still dressed in the military-issue underarmor pants and tank top from the Paradoxia embassy, and though I thanked the king Rupert had had the presence of mind to grab my armor case instead of my duffel, the fact remained that I had no clothes other than the filthy set I was wearing. I needed a change and a shower in the worst way, but while I was sure this place had an autowash around somewhere, I wasn't ready to sit around naked waiting for my laundry. I was pondering what to do about it when Rupert walked back into the living room and placed his bag on the table. When he unzipped it to dig out his gun, I saw he had several spare shirts in there on top of what looked like an entire spare suit, which only made sense when you considered how he ripped through them.

"Hey," I said, walking over. "Can I borrow some clothes? I'm going to take a shower."

Rupert, who'd just sat down on the couch, looked up at me like I'd stung him. "Of course," he said.

after a short pause. "Help yourself."

~~I smiled my thanks and snagged one of his shirts, then walked upstairs to find the bathroom.~~

Like everything else in the house, the bathroom was dusty from disuse. I found soap and shampoo in the cabinet, and though the water here was so soft it was almost slimy, that didn't stop me from luxuriating in the first real, not-on-a-ship-or-in-a-military-bunker shower I'd had since the night I spent in Anthony's apartment back on Paradox. By the time the hot water started to go tepid, I was so relaxed I was nearly asleep on my feet. Considering my life over the last few days, I was pretty sure the strange calm was some kind of shock, but I was okay with that for now, especially since I hadn't seen a single phantom since I'd taken off my helmet. Mostly, though, I was just tired, like I hadn't slept in a year, and it was all I could do to keep my eyes open as I climbed out of the shower and toweled off.

When I was more or less dry, I shoved the towel and my filthy clothes into the autowash canister in the corner and put on Rupert's button-up shirt. Thanks to our height difference, the hem went almost to my knees, well long enough to be decent. The long sleeves swallowed my hands, but once I rolled them up, I got along okay.

My hair was another story. Thanks to the slimy water and harsh soap, the brown mass on my head was looking more like tree roots than anything that should grow on a human. It needed a good brushing and some real shampoo, but I didn't have either. I was too tired to care much in any case, so I just let it be, swearing for the thousandth time to cut the whole mess off the next chance I got.

It was a toothless threat. Obnoxious as it could be, my long hair was the only thing that balanced out my baby face, and even in full armor with guns drawn, no one took a woman with short fluffy hair who looked like a sixteen-year-old seriously. But the thought made me feel better all the same as I padded barefoot back down the stairs to ask Rupert what we were going to do next.

My exhaustion must have been even worse than I thought, because by the time I made it to the first floor, I felt almost dizzy. Fortunately, Rupert was still sitting on the couch where I'd left him. He had arranged all his things neatly on the table while I'd been washing, though I was pretty sure the table in his hands was a new addition.

"Where'd you get that?"

"I requisitioned it from the communications tower," Rupert said, glaring at the screen. "And it's a piece of garbage. But at least this way I can monitor the incoming transmissions."

He turned around to say something else, but the moment his face came up, his scowl fell away. Rupert was usually pretty good at hiding his expressions, but I must have caught him by surprise because he looked dumbstruck, blatantly staring at me before he seemed to remember himself.

"You look very nice," he said softly, giving me a slow, warm smile.

I looked like a drowned dock rat in a stolen shirt, but I already knew firsthand that Rupert didn't see the truth when it came to me. I also knew that I didn't have the energy to handle how happy the smile made the deep, stubborn part of me that couldn't seem to understand that Rupert was a risk I was *not* taking again. I didn't have the energy left to do anything, actually.

The exhaustion I'd felt in the shower had multiplied exponentially with every minute I'd spent upright. It was so bad now I was actually swaying on my feet. As much as I wanted to talk strategy with Rupert before passing out, my body clearly had other more pressing priorities, and so, mumbling something about bed, I turned away from Rupert and started back up the stairs. I made it about halfway before Rupert caught me.

I have to admit, I didn't protest too hard when he picked me up. If I'd felt better, I would have told him to keep his hands to himself, but I didn't feel better. I felt terrible, and I was ready to take my n

walking where I found it. I didn't even grumble when Rupert carried me into the green shaded bedroom and laid me down on a couch under the windows that smelled strongly of dust and soyphen.

I think he must have made the bed after that. I heard the sound of cloth rustling before Rupert scooped me up again only to set me down seconds later on a much softer, smoother surface that smelled of closet. The last thing I felt was the soft brush of his lips on my cheek before I passed out falling into a deep and mercifully dreamless sleep between one breath and the next.

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I woke up slowly, blinking in the soft light. It had been so long since I'd woken up to real sunlight instead of an alarm, an emergency, or ship lights coming on for day cycle that I didn't recognize it at first. I did, however, recognize the almost invisible shape floating like a dust mote in the sunbeam.

A phantom was hanging in the air not a foot from the edge of the bed. It was slightly bigger than the ones I usually saw, with a bulbous body about the size of my fist and three long feelers attached to what I could only guess was its head. The feelers were hanging limply when I opened my eyes, but then, almost like the phantom knew I'd woken up, the little tentacles started to move.

I sighed, waiting for the little glowing bug to scoot away, but it didn't. The phantom stayed right where it was, waving its three little appendages with increasing speed, almost like it was trying to get my attention. The behavior was so odd, I reached for it without thinking, stretching my fingers out to meet the glowing tendrils.

I'd barely moved my arm before the phantom bolted through the window, its frosted glass body vanishing instantly into the bright sunlight outside. I stared after it for a moment, and then reached up to rub my eyes. I was contemplating rolling over when a soft, warm, accented voice spoke right beside me.

“Good afternoon.”

I must have jumped a foot off the mattress. I landed hard a second later, flipping onto my side to see Rupert leaning over the bed with a sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

“Don't *do* that,” I snapped, collapsing back into bed. I was still trying to get my jacked-up heart rate back down to normal when I realized there was something odd about our arrangement.

The bedroom couch, the one that had been pushed up under the window, was now right beside the mattress, its green upholstery well dusted and covered in a neat spread of electronics. Apparently Rupert had set up shop. In addition to the com receiver and the ledger he'd requisitioned, he'd also laid out his gun and his stack of leather badges in a grid beside him for easy access. There was a notebook on the nightstand at his elbow, and his bag was tucked away behind his feet. He even had a mug of that bitter black stuff Terrans like to drink in his hand. Coffee, I thought it was called.

“Couldn't get a good signal downstairs?” I asked, arching an eyebrow at his setup.

Rupert shrugged and sat back, sipping his drink. “The signal was fine,” he replied a little too casually. “But I liked it better up here.”

From anyone else, I would have called bullshit on that, but Rupert did look quite content. He was sitting on the couch in his socks with his shirtsleeves rolled up and his black hair down and loose around his shoulders. It was the most casual I'd ever seen him other than the night I'd shown up at his bunk. Unfortunately, that memory combined with our present intimate arrangement sent my mind running to all kinds of places it wasn't supposed to go, and I had to look away to force it back on track. “How long was I asleep?”

“Almost eighteen hours.”

My mouth fell open. “*Eighteen hours?*”

“More or less,” he said, putting down his mug. “I was going to wake you earlier, but you looked so peaceful.”

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I swore and sat up, swinging my legs over the edge of the mattress.

“Where are you going?” he asked as I stood up with a wobble.

“Bathroom,” I replied, stumbling toward the hall.

Thankfully, the stiffness in my limbs was temporary. By the time I made it to the bathroom, I was walking more or less normally. I felt a lot better, too, which I damn well should have, considering how long I’d passed out. I finished my business and splashed some water on my face until I felt more like myself, and then looked around for my clothes.

I found them stacked on top of the autowash, cleaned and neatly folded. Rupert’s pants and shirt were also freshly washed, had been hung on the wall hook with military precision, which almost made me laugh. Not that I didn’t appreciate Rupert’s need for order, but who ever heard of a supersoldier needing a freak?

I grabbed my clothes and changed quickly, pulling on the thin, drab underarmor pants and tank top the embassy had given me. It wasn’t much, but getting back into combat wear made me feel more like myself. To be polite, I put the shirt Rupert had given me in the autowash, starting the cycle even though I was only washing one thing. Once it was going, I headed out to find Rupert, because now that we were alone and I wasn’t passing out on my feet, it was time to talk about what we did from here.

He wasn’t in the bedroom when I got back. His couch was cleared off, too, so I headed downstairs. The living room was also empty, and I was starting to get a little worried when Rupert stuck his head out of the kitchen. “You’re dressed.”

He sounded so disappointed I couldn’t help smiling. “Yeah, well, no offense to your shirt, but I prefer clothes that fit.”

“I thought it fit you very well,” Rupert said, his voice low and warm in a way that went straight through me. “Are you hungry?”

The moment he mentioned food, my stomach rumbled. He smiled at the sound and waved for me to follow him. I did, walking through the narrow door into the small kitchen to find Rupert stirring a pot of something that smelled like a cross between chicken soup and heaven.

“What’s that?” I asked, sitting down at the little table under a window that looked out into the forest of dense soybean stems behind the house.

“Something to make you feel better,” he said, ladling liquid from the pot into a heavy bowl, which he then placed in front of me. The soup looked as good as it smelled, a clear golden broth filled with white meat, bright green vegetables, and fat little dumplings resting at the bottom.

Mouth watering, I grabbed the spoon he held out for me and dug in. Unsurprisingly, considering who had cooked it, it tasted amazing. I made sure to tell him so, but Rupert just waved his hand.

“Salt and protein are good for helping plasmex users recover when they push too far,” he explained, sitting down across the table from me. “We give it to the daughters when they overexert themselves. You’re not a plasmex user, of course, but considering the events leading up to your collapse, I thought it couldn’t hurt.”

I paused, spoon halfway to my mouth. I hadn’t even considered that my weird exhaustion might have been related to the black stuff. I was, however, slightly horrified by the thought of Rupert feeding me the same thing he gave the girls he shot. “You made this for the daughters?”

“No,” Rupert said. “I gave them broth. You’re the only person I make dumplings for.”

I couldn’t decide if that was sweet or depressing. “What did I miss?” I asked as I resumed eating.

“Not much,” Rupert said, leaning back in his chair. “The pickup I put in for hasn’t replied yet, and

I don't have any word from Caldwell, though that's to be expected."

Right, since he was probably lost in hyperspace forever. "Gotta say, I'm surprised we're not up on our necks in Eyes yet. I thought you guys had instant everything."

"We do," Rupert said. "But I didn't request a retrieval from the Eyes."

I frowned. "Why not?"

Rupert's face turned suddenly serious. "Not all Eyes are as flexible as Caldwell," he explained. "I followed protocol and alerted command without him present to ensure the deal you made was upheld, you'd be in a lab by tomorrow."

That thought soured my stomach. I'd gotten so used to being hauled around like a glorified test tube I'd forgotten I'd actually been dealing with the moderate Eyes who were willing to work with me. "But if we can't go to the Eyes, who's left? What do we do?"

"For now, we lie low," Rupert said. "Considering the events on the tribe ship, headquarters most likely believes we're dead. Until Caldwell reemerges, it's better to let them keep thinking that. Once the captain comes back, we can return to the original plan of finding a safe way to extract and use your virus."

I looked down at my soup, poking the soft dumplings at the bottom with the tip of my spoon. I hadn't actually told Rupert the whole truth about the virus yet. He'd seen me use it to call the lelgis of the tribe ship, but he didn't know that they found me every time I touched a phantom whether I wanted them to or not, which was kind of a deal breaker since their entire race wanted me dead. He also didn't know that the virus flared up whenever I got mad, which I probably should clue him in on since controlling my temper wasn't exactly one of my strengths. But when I opened my mouth to bring him up to speed, I ended up taking a bite of soup instead.

*Coward*, I thought as I swallowed. Whatever emotional problems I was having with Rupert, he still deserved to know the danger I was putting him in, but I couldn't get the words out. Not because I was worried he'd use the knowledge against me or anything so suitably cynical. The truth was far more petty. I didn't want to tell Rupert about the virus because I didn't want him knowing just how messed up I was.

"Devi?"

I looked up to see Rupert watching me, his eyes soft and warm. "I meant what I said before," I said quietly, reaching out to put his hand over mine. "I'm on your side now. Whatever you want to do, I'll be with you, and I won't let the Eyes do anything to you against your will. I swear it."

His concern was making me feel even worse, and I quickly changed the subject. "So," I said, taking another bite of soup. "If you didn't call the Eyes, then who are we getting a pickup from?"

I don't think I fooled him. Rupert was always annoyingly perceptive, but he accepted my deflection with a shrug and played along. "I used my general security clearance to request an evac from the Terran Republic Starfleet."

"Won't that alert the Eyes?"

Rupert flashed me a confident smile. "No. I called it in using my Republic Starfleet A-Level Anonymous Agent Special Clearance."

I stared at him blankly. "Your what?"

"It's the Terran equivalent of a Royal Warrant," he explained. "It's meant to let field agents get whatever they want anywhere in Terran space without having to risk their cover. Even if the Republic investigates, I'll just show up as one of the hundreds of classified agents they have in the field at any given time. And with so many government agencies keeping secrets from each other, it's nearly impossible to figure out who belongs to whom."

“You mean you’re hiding from the Eyes in the Terran’s own bureaucracy?”

Rupert nodded. “More or less.”

I’d always known Rupert was sly, but using the Terran’s own convoluted government structure as cover while still getting all the perks of rank was pretty damn beautiful. “So once Terran Starfleet gets their act together and comes to pick us up, where do we go? Do we just stay on the run and wait for Caldwell or what?”

“The more we move, the more likely it is the Eyes will find out we’re not dead,” Rupert said. “There’s also no way of knowing when or if Caldwell will come back, or how long your virus will remain stable, so I thought we could try another option.”

I almost choked on my soup. “There’s another option?”

Rupert nodded. “I know of a doctor. He’s a plasmex specialist. He worked with Maat in the early days, but he cut ties with us several years ago.”

“Like Brenton?”

“No, he was never an Eye,” Rupert said. “And he doesn’t attack the daughter teams. Quite the opposite—he stays as detached from us as possible. It’s a bit of a long shot. I don’t know if he’ll even agree to see you, but he’s probably the only human in the universe outside of Dark Star Station who might know what to do with your virus.”

I wasn’t a big fan of doctors, but I was open to anything at this point that didn’t end with me being dragged into a lab with a bag over my head. “Sounds worth a try,” I said. “So we’re just waiting for the evac, then?”

“That or the freighter,” Rupert said with a sigh. “Not much else we can do under present circumstances.”

I glanced around at the comfortable little kitchen. “I guess there are worse places to be stranded.”

“I’d be hard pressed to think of a better one,” he replied, smiling wide.

I swallowed. He was doing it again, looking at me like I was the only thing in the universe. Back before everything had gone wrong, I’d reveled in that look. Now I couldn’t even meet his eyes.

Fortunately, the soup made an excellent distraction. The dumplings were especially good, little folded dough balls that somehow managed to be both chewy and soft. But there was something about the flavor that bothered me. I was too distracted and hungry to put my finger on it during the first bowl, but by the time I’d worked my way to the bottom of the second, I’d slowed down enough to recognize the strange, wistful feeling tugging on my mind as nostalgia.

The delicious taste coupled with the warmth of the soup in my stomach had stirred up a deep, complex mix of homesickness and comfort, which was strange, because I was sure I’d never eaten soup like this before. But it wasn’t until I spooned the final dumpling into my mouth that I realized the truth. I couldn’t remember eating the soup before because I hadn’t. The warm nostalgia wasn’t mine; it was Rupert’s, and it came with a memory.

This one was softer than the others, floating to the top of my mind like a warm bubble rather than shoving its way to the front. In it, a large woman with steel-gray hair and deep wrinkles sat at a wooden table kneading golden dough with sharp punches from her gnarled hands. Behind her on the stove, a pot of soup was cooking, filling the whole house with that same familiar, delicious smell.

As always with Rupert’s memories, the vision vanished quickly, leaving only a strange feeling of warmth mixed with loss so strong I had to blink a few times to keep from tearing up. I finished the dregs of my second bowl in silence and then walked over to the little sink. “Thank you for the soup,” I said, keeping my voice light as I washed out my bowl. “It was your grandmother’s recipe, wasn’t it?”

I had my back to him, but it didn’t matter. I *heard* Rupert go still. It wasn’t even a sound, just

deepening of the silence, like I was suddenly alone in the room. It was so alarming, I looked over my shoulder to make sure he hadn't vanished in a poof of smoke only to find Rupert staring at me like he'd seen a ghost.

When he saw me looking, Rupert dropped his eyes. "How many of my memories did you get?"

The question caught me by surprise. I'd gotten so used to having him in my head, I'd forgotten I hadn't actually discussed this with him yet. "I'm not sure," I said with a shrug. "They're not memories, so I can't just reach for them and count. They only come up when they're triggered by something, like the taste of the soup."

I kept my voice casual, trying to show him this was no big deal, but Rupert was still deathly silent so I decided to move the conversation in a happier direction. "Tell me about your grandmother," I said, turning around to put my bowl on the rack to dry. "She looked nice, and she was obviously a good cook. Did she teach you to make anything else?"

I paused, waiting for him to answer. When he didn't, I looked over... and almost jumped out of my skin. I hadn't even heard him move, but Rupert was suddenly right next to me. "Goddammit, Rupert!" I snapped, smacking him on the arm. "Don't *do* that!"

"Sorry," he said quietly, but he didn't step back.

"Just give me some warning next time," I scolded him. "Make a noise or something."

Rupert shook his head. "No, it's..." He trailed off with a frustrated sigh. "I'm sorry for everything but the memories especially. I would have kept them from you if I could, but the daughters can't return memories without guidance, and whenever you go into someone's mind, especially someone you care about and share a history with, you can't help leaving things behind."

I sighed as well. "It's okay. I already forgave you, remember?"

"It's not okay," he said. "You shouldn't be burdened with my past. It's not a good place. You shouldn't have to see that."

His voice changed as he spoke, growing thinner and quieter just as it had when he'd told me the truth of what he'd done as an Eye. That in turn made me remember what he'd said before he'd taken my memories the first time, when he'd pulled me out from under the trauma shell to confess that he loved me even though he knew he didn't deserve to, that he wasn't worthy of my affection. Now, then, the idea made me angry, so much so that I had to take a deep breath to make sure I didn't accidentally trigger the virus. Because while I might not be able to make the call just yet on whether exactly Rupert was to me, it was still my call to make. No one decided who was worthy of me except myself.

I reached down and grabbed Rupert's hands. He jumped a little at the sudden contact, but I held on tight, glaring at him until he met my eyes. "Listen," I said when I was sure I had his attention. "If I say it's okay, it's okay. You did what you did to save my life, and I'll take bad memories over a grave any day. So stop apologizing, because there's nothing left to forgive. Understand?"

"No," Rupert said sharply. "Devi, those memories will stay with you for the rest of your life. You might not have even seen the worst yet, so you can't just forgive—"

"You can't tell me what I can and can't forgive," I snapped. "It's my forgiveness. And anyway, it's thanks to you that I have a rest of my life to be worried about, so you'll just have to put up with me not hating you."

Rupert stared at me for a long moment, and then he bowed his head, leaning down until his forehead rested against mine. "How are you like this?" he whispered. "How can you just let this go?"

I took a deep breath. Other than our foreheads and our hands, Rupert and I weren't actually touching, but it didn't seem to matter. I could feel his warmth across the few inches that separated us.

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