

CREATED BY
MICHAEL ANDERLE



**TOPGUN:
COMPLETE**

BRUTAL RESPONSE

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TOPGUN: COMPLETE

BRUTAL RESPONSE™

BOOK NINE

MICHAEL ANDERLE



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CHAPTER ONE

Mia wanted to punch a wall. She'd kept her frustration in check, doing her best not to scream at Ito, who was up to her elbows in parts and tools in the engine room. The entire experience pushed Mia to the limits of her self-control.

Ito flipped up the visor on her welding mask and frowned at Mia. "Standing around staring at me isn't going to make this happen any faster. My estimate hasn't changed since yesterday. Three or four days at the most, and we'll be ready to go."

"We weren't supposed to be here this long," Mia countered. "It's been a month. We're not in the Fringe. This place is an independent underworld station, but that doesn't mean the KCAP military can't find it, or a bounty hunter looking for his retirement money. Things look worse than last week, and we were still swapping out hull plates then."

"Complaining doesn't change physics. Cursing doesn't change physics. Crying doesn't change physics." Ito slapped her visor back down. "Bonding fatigue is a problem when there are drive calibration issues. It's a sneaky thing you won't find until you get close and check with careful attention.

"From what I see, we were lucky we didn't get ripped apart during our last slide. Getting away from Kordell meant compromising on short-term versus long-term maintenance. That's what happens when a single ship tries to take on a fleet by itself."

Her jaw clenched, Mia turned away from Ito to hide her face. There was no point yelling about repairs. A less thorough engineer wouldn't have caught the problem. Despite Debbie II's integration with many of the *Erinyes*' systems, there were limits to internal diagnostics. It always came down to a human engineer inspecting key parts to ensure they weren't flying in a metal coffin. An engineer who was thorough and found serious problems should be praised by her captain.

"It was never my plan to take on the fleet," Mia muttered.

Ito scoffed and picked up her tool. A bright white flame erupted from the front. "To make this clear, sticking on armor plates is about the easiest repair job." She ran her flame over a joint. Sparks erupted in a mesmerizing display.

"Just because I'm an engineer doesn't mean I can work miracles. You should be happy we lucked into the parts we needed for the side-space drive repairs on this heap of a station, and they haven't needed too many mods." She shrugged.

"I can rush this if you want. We'll die the next time we try to enter side-space, but it won't take as long to get going. I hope you have a plan for taking down the Protocol from the afterlife. You're stubborn enough that I wouldn't put it past you. Haunt those bastards until they commit suicide, Mia. You can do it."

"The repair timeframe is fine." Mia sighed. She scrubbed a hand down her face. "You're right. We got hit damned hard during that last battle. You're a miracle worker for getting us this far. Sorry about my outburst."

"I'm glad you understand," Ito grumbled. She nodded toward the door. "I don't need thanks. I need you to get out and stop distracting me. Get off the ship. You haven't left it in two weeks. I'm sorry I put the sim systems as the last priority on the repair list, but you agreed."

"Yes, I did, and you made the right call. I'll let you get back to it."

Mia headed toward the door. She'd done her best to help with the repair labor over the past months. Her limited repair skillset mostly focused on smaller ships. There wasn't much she could do to help Ito at this point other than stop annoying her by offering unrealistic critiques.

She strolled through the passageways of the *Erinyes* on her way to a side hatch and a ladder leading to the station docking bay holding the ship. She'd wanted the fighter bay doors closed as much as possible. Her flight's fighters and the SHKs were too famous in the KCAP after the events on Kordell and the doctored news footage that placed the blame for the terrorist attack on Mia's crew. They didn't need a greedy merc wandering by and thinking he lucked into the greatest score of his life.

There was another problem bothering Mia. Ito was wrong to tell her to leave the ship. The safety risk wasn't the issue, but a change of venue wouldn't accomplish much in dealing with the toxic combination of boredom and frustration plaguing Mia.

She stopped at a storage locker to get coveralls, a hat, and a nanospray preprogrammed by Debbie II. The spray subtly altered her facial features. It didn't last long, and it wouldn't pass a serious inspection, let alone genetic analysis, but it served as a basic disguise for a woman wanted by half the galaxy for evil terrorism. Of all people, Ryoko suggested the idea after Paul commented on somebody staring at him in a bar when they first arrived.

The team had spent a day worried and ready for an attack. None came, and Paul never saw the suspicious man again. They'd decided then they needed a strategy when leaving the ship. Everyone vetoed Mia's idea of not going out until they'd fixed everything.

The only crew members allowed to leave the ship without using a disguise were Jon Junior, his father, and Ito. Mia wasn't sure how much the conspiracy knew about her complete crew, but they'd restricted bounties to the pilots and given no official indication they recognized the full scope of Mia's team.

Charlie volunteered to stay aboard. A nanospray couldn't do much to disguise him.

Slipping into coveralls, Mia considered the implications of the news reports and bounty situation. The problem was that she might never know if the enemy knew Jon Senior and his son were aboard her ship or if they didn't want them targeted as part of a plan for recovery in service to the Protocol. Ito's support role and Fringe citizenship had kept her clear of any negative attention.

That proved Ito's loyalty to the mission. She could have walked away and called the authorities to score more than enough money to settle her old indenture contract. She'd risked her life time and again to help stop a conspiracy and protect a galaxy that had treated her as a glorified slave. Unlike Mia, hers wasn't a personal crusade for revenge.

Mia scrubbed her face before sighing and applying nanospray all over her neck and face. She'd apologize again later for harassing the engineer. She pulled a datapad out of her pocket and set it in the locker. She didn't want Debbie II tagging along. Sometimes a woman needed to be alone with her anger and not have an AI telling her to calm down.

She left the ship in a haze, the opposite of her hyper-focus. Mia had maintained scheduled recovery comas since her arrival at the station. However, she had refused to invoke her ability, concerned that she'd be down for days again and the team would be ambushed during that time.

The hallways and junctions of the station passed in a blur. Everything was poorly lit, as if the station manager was afraid bright lights inside would somehow be spotted by the KCAP Navy light years away.

The flow of people through the station wasn't much more impressive. Everyone looked dangerous and needy at the same time, with worn clothing and old equipment. The whole scene reminded Mia more of a refugee camp than an underworld base.

People wore two expressions—the blank oblivion of a defeated soul and the hard-edged scowl of a caged animal

ready to snap. Mia didn't need a mirror to know she wore the second look.

The incessant background chatter that always reached her supersoldier ears grew into a cacophony as she drew closer to one of the larger bars on the station. Besides the docks, the station held little other than bars and shady, low-rent fixers scheming and striving to figure out how to get somewhere more important to hawk their wares. Creative threats and barter helped Mia get the parts Ito needed but didn't make the station more pleasant.

A young man around her age, a technician judging by the toolbox in his hand and the stains on his coveralls, bumped her shoulder. She spun toward him with a fiery glare.

"Watch it," she growled. "You bumped into me, asshole."

"Whoa." The engineer backed away, looking around for help.

Most people continued on their way. A handful smirked and stopped to watch the entertainment unfold. No one looked like they were going to help. Fights were nothing more than free entertainment in this backwater unregistered station.

Mia could take him out within seconds. The station security wouldn't get involved in a minor incident, based on what she'd witnessed in her month there. They only cared about ensuring situations didn't spill out of control and threaten to damage property.

Visitors needed to feel safe from murder but were expected to handle their minor scuffles.

As long as she didn't kill him, it would be okay. She might even work off stress.

"Sorry," the engineer offered, along with a nervous smile. "I was lost in thought. I'm behind schedule on repairs, and my captain's riding my ass. You know how it is. I'm sure your captain is a hard-ass, too. That's why you're stressed out, right?"

The word "captain" rang in her ears. Mia stepped back, the red haze in her mind fading. She motioned behind her. "Watch

where you're going next time. You never know what scum you might run into."

"Sure." The engineer scurried away, checking over his shoulder every few steps.

Disappointed gawkers muttered before taking off.

Mia stood there, letting people flow around her and taking stock of the incident. Her entire life had been about discipline. That discipline and emotional control had allowed her to survive long enough to take her fight to the Protocol without destroying herself. She'd endured the mental and physical tortures of Ice, battles against the alien Bleakers, and the soul-flaying experience of meeting her mother only for the Protocol to assassinate her.

Getting angry was a problem. Mia had overreacted to the engineer as she had with Ito earlier. This wasn't like her. She needed to be better.

It would be too easy to dismiss them as isolated incidents. That would be a convenient fiction. Discipline came from practice and truth, not from lying to oneself.

Her father didn't train her to be like this. At the rate things were going, she'd waste the lives of the crew that had left everything behind to help her fight the Protocol.

That was worse than wrong. It was pathetic.

Mia stomped through the passageway as her heart rate kicked up. Her father didn't train her to be undisciplined and emotional. What would he think of her acting like this?

She slowed. Her father hadn't finished her training because he'd been assassinated by Reapers working for the Protocol. He didn't die in a random brawl with a technician on an unregistered station.

Her father's death swirled in her thoughts. She was close to exacting her final revenge and fulfilling the mission that had taken her from home, to investigate her father's death and punish the people responsible.

It was as if she was back at the beginning of her mission. Everything was out of her control. She couldn't make the repairs go faster, and without the *Erinyes*, any major missions against the enemy were doomed to failure. Getting herself and her crew killed wouldn't honor the memory of her father. It wouldn't save the KCAP from Protocol control.

Mia clenched her fists hard enough that she drew blood. She couldn't keep going like this, trapped on this station in the hidden recesses of KCAP territory, cowering from her enemy.

She walked into a bar and plopped onto a stool. There was nothing she could do about her situation, but there was an option when it came to her mind, the source of all her pain.

A stasis coma would be preferable, but they didn't last long, and she'd tried and failed to chain more than one together. It was time to seek an older form of comfort, one that humanity had perfected long before they'd left their ancient home world. She'd ease her pain.

Mia gestured at a bottle of dark liquor as the bartender turned to her. "I don't care what it is. Just give me the whole bottle." She squinted. "No. Give me two bottles."

Mia had avoided alcohol let alone drunkenness for most of her life. Excess drinking didn't fit with how she'd been raised and trained. Lowering one's tactical efficiency with a drug on purpose struck her as idiotic. Despite those deeply held beliefs, her understanding of the appeal of a dulled mind grew with each downed shot.

Her problems drifted away. She hadn't forgotten them, but they felt less important, almost like they were happening to someone else.

She went through the first bottle quickly. It took too long for the effects to kick in. Having never challenged her limits, she hadn't understood how resistant she was to the effects of alcohol, another blessing of being a supersoldier.

“That’s when I said, ‘I’ll throw in my son, too, but he’s not worth as much as the dog,’” a bearded smuggler shouted from a table.

“Both of them are worth three times as much as you, Adi.” Another smuggler slapped his knee.

“When you’re right, you’re right.” Adi laughed. “It’s what my wife keeps saying, too.”

The other smugglers at the table broke out in loud laughter. The smugglers had entered the bar a half-hour prior and started loudly discussing their meaningless exploits. They were all small-timers, proud of pointless, useless achievements. They trafficked petty goods for petty people.

Mia had been risking her life to take on the conspiracy, fighting men and women who’d imprisoned the galaxy under their twisted regime. They thought nothing of killing millions of innocent people to further their goals. Meanwhile the little smugglers thought they were impressive because they’d survived close calls with KCAP patrols or angry mercenaries.

Even drunk and angry, Mia took note of the motley crew’s unifying trait, their barely concealed pistols in shoulder holsters. Almost everyone in the bar was armed, although most didn’t hide their weapons.

Mia gulped down another shot. Her throat had long adjusted to the liquor’s fire. She could have been drinking water. All she cared about was trying to drown her emotions.

The alcohol quieted her mind and her enhanced senses. The din of conversation receded to easily ignored background noise with the help of her drink. Right now, the only real evidence of her genetic heritage was her ability to pound back so many shots without passing out and falling off her stool.

She couldn’t remember which bottle she was on. Third? Fourth? The bartender didn’t care as long as she had money. She wasn’t the only person at the bar drinking unsafe amounts. No one would punish him if she drank herself to death.

Adi the smuggler bayed like a hyena at another of his jokes. Mia couldn’t be bothered to concentrate enough on

what he was saying to parse it, something about asteroids, annoying wives, and Bleaker prostitutes.

That was the worst part. His jokes were terrible. He made Paul seem like a comedic genius.

Adi glanced her way with a grin. Holding up a hand to his friends, he stood. "One second, my friends." He strode over to Mia. "Like what you see?"

"Yes." Mia downed another shot without looking at him. "I like this liquor. I drink it, then I see more in the bottle, and I drink that, too."

"Come on," Adi pressed. "I know you were watching me." His gaze slid over her. "I can tell there's a nice body underneath these baggy clothes. I could give you a night you'd never forget."

"You know why people drink a lot?" Mia still didn't look at him.

"To get drunk?"

"Exactly." Mia set down her glass and turned toward him. "They drink to make their problems go away."

"One night with me, and all the problems in the entire universe will go away."

Mia squinted. She'd downed enough alcohol her blood could power a side-space slide. Even her second-gen supersoldier body couldn't keep the blurriness and swaying away.

"I've had enough disappointments in my life. The last thing I need is another painful reminder of how pathetic most people are. You're guaranteed to be a pathetic disappointment."

Adi's smile twitched into a frown. "Some men like prickly women. I'm not one of them. Come on. Don't be that way."

"Why do I give a crap about what you want, asshole?" Mia hopped off her stool and glared at the man. "You're the yapping dog who hasn't shut up since you've come in here."

All I wanted was a drink. I didn't want to listen to your shit jokes."

"More like you wanted fifty drinks from what I can see."

A tall woman with graying hair stood from the table and made her way over. "Adi, back off. You were wrong. She's not into you. Leave it alone. Let's go back to the table."

"Nah." Adi shook his head. "This isn't about that. She thinks she's better than me, Cap. I don't like the look. I've seen it before."

"She wouldn't be the first woman to think that," the captain replied.

"Listen to her and get out of my face, asshole," Mia growled.

Adi shook his head. "I can read you. I know your type. I've met your type."

He leaned closer. "Fancy company pilot, maybe even military background. You thought you were hot shit. Something happened, an accident probably. Someone got hurt, so you got kicked out.

"You fell on hard times. Next thing you know, you have to slum with the smugglers and outlaws, but you think you're better than us, even though we have no illusions about what we are."

"Leave it, Adi," his captain warned. "We don't need this."

"If she's here, she's like us," Adi insisted. "She's trying to keep her head down and away from the law. Yet, there's something there in those eyes. She thinks I'm a piece of trash? That I'm not good enough to share a bed with?"

The captain put her arm in front of Adi. "I need my second in good shape for our next run. Don't start something because you're drunk, horny, and frustrated. There are other women on this station."

This would have been the perfect moment for Mia to shut up, turn back for another drink, and endure. A few more days aboard the station meant they could take up the hunt against

the Protocol. Getting involved with smugglers offered no useful benefits, monetary gain, or intel that would aid her primary mission. There was no value in engaging him at all.

Mia chuckled. “You’re good enough to share a bed with?” She spat at Adi’s feet. “You’re not good enough to share the galaxy with, you maggot.”

The captain shook her head. “You’re not helping.”

“You’re no better than him. My crew isn’t bottom-dwelling scum. If that’s the best you can do, what does that say about you?”

The other smugglers at the table stood, exchanging harsh looks and nods. One man crackled his knuckles.

Adi stomped forward. The captain held him back.

“No,” the captain insisted. “We’re not doing this again. We have a job coming up. We can’t run a job with people healing up.”

“You’re acting like this bitch is going to hurt me,” Adi snarled.

The captain frowned at Mia. “I’m telling you this, one woman to another in a harsh part of space, you don’t want to do this. My crew has discipline, but that doesn’t mean they’ll stand by and let someone insult them. It’s a matter of honor.”

“Discipline? They have discipline?” Mia laughed. “Smuggler trash has honor? Give me a break.”

Her pulse pounded in her ears. A month’s worth of simmering frustration cried out for relief.

Other patrons turned their attention to the unfolding confrontation. Men and women whispered bets to one another. People buzzed up to the burgeoning fight like flies to a corpse.

The captain looked at Mia, her expression tight and her cheeks red. “Get out of here now. You’re drunk, and you’re by yourself. That’s not the smartest time to pick a fight. If I didn’t have a job coming up, I’d let my second do what he needs to do and teach you a lesson about when to shut your mouth.”

A tiny part of Mia admired the woman for holding back her anger. The captain was demonstrating the discipline both Mia and Adi lacked.

“Get out of here,” the captain repeated. “I won’t be responsible for what happens if you don’t.”

Mia locked eyes with the captain. “Didn’t you hear me before? Being the commander of trash just makes you trash.” She turned to Adi. “I’d sooner be tortured to death than sleep with a snail like you. As for your friends, I wouldn’t hire them to polish one of my drones.”

The captain sighed and dropped her arm. Adi charged forward and raised his fist.

“You’re going to pay for that, bitch,” he snarled.

Mia’s fist snapped out like a viper and smashed Adi’s face. He stumbled backward as blood sprayed everywhere.

“She broke my nose,” he cried. “That bitch broke my nose!”

“I told you,” the captain complained before throwing a punch.

Mia’s booze-addled reflexes slowed her response. She still sidestepped the blow with ease. The tiny part of her not overwhelmed by the booze kept her from reflexively going for lethal strikes. The captain and Adi hadn’t gone for their guns.

Mia caught the captain with a wide hook, launching the older woman onto a nearby table. Glasses, plates, and food flew everywhere.

Adi fought through his pain to charge Mia again. Her spinning kick hit him so hard he hurled over the bar and into what passed for top-shelf liquor. Bottles fell to the floor, some striking the groaning, wounded man. Loud cheers erupted from half of the bar, presumably the half that had bet on Mia.

The rest of the smugglers closed in for the main brawl. All the humor and lightness from their earlier camaraderie was gone, replaced by angry scowls.

Mia shook out her fist with a grin. The first two exchanges had left her feeling the best she had in two weeks. The captain stumbled to her feet and hissed in pain.

“Don’t kill her, boys,” the captain ordered. “She can’t learn a lesson if she’s dead, and we don’t need trouble with Kimson.”

With a roar, the smugglers charged. Mia stumbled, having underestimated how impaired she was. The nearest smuggler took that as a sign of victory and tried to tackle her. He caught her side.

Mia pounded his head with her elbow and twisted her body to avoid the air getting knocked out of her when they landed. Another smuggler came and tried to kick her in the face while she was pinned. She caught his foot and yanked his leg. The move dropped him with his head smacking against the hard floor.

Growling, Mia pounded away at the face of the man holding her down until he groaned and lessened his grip. She shoved him off and rolled away from the stomp of another smuggler. She was losing awareness of the situation and reacting to any nearby movement.

The captain tried to flank her. Mia hopped to her feet and blocked the blow from the captain and a smuggler before pivoting and throwing sloppy punches at both. The smugglers stopped the hits, although their pained faces reflected that Mia was stronger than she looked.

Mia flowed into more punches and kicks, each blow taking more and more of her bad mood with it, a perfect catharsis. A part of her cried out to grab a chair and beat the enemy to death. Another part of her whispered that she’d lost control and that disciplined part of her mind brought up one of her father’s favorite phrases.

Learn to love the hardship, the frustration, and the hurt. Take it and use it because it’s coming for you either way. Might as well be useful.

The wisdom drifted away, swallowed by bloodlust telling her to destroy her enemies. Blood splattered on the floor and tables. Bones *crunched*. The thud of fists and feet meeting flesh mixed with shouts and screams. Something snapped. Another scream pierced the air. She loved it.

Mia's hands and feet throbbed. She panted, shaking her head and trying to clear the violent haze that had taken her over. She might have gone too far.

The smuggler crew lay on the floor, some unconscious and some whimpering. Adi's face was a swollen mess. His arm was bent in an unnatural direction. The captain lay on her side unconscious, her face battered and bruised.

Tables and chairs lay overturned. Utensils covered the floor like caltrops. A fork protruded from an unconscious smuggler, although because of the placement and his position, Mia was sure she hadn't put it there. She wouldn't have wasted a weapon strike on forking a man in the ass.

A smuggler tried to drag himself toward the entrance. "Please, no more. Please."

Mia blinked and wiped blood from her face, unsure if it was hers or from others. She rotated her wrists and inspected her body. She'd taken no serious damage.

Heavy footsteps sounded outside. Men in matching black uniforms rushed around the corner and pointed guns at Mia. They were station security guards, not much more than semi-respectable mercs, although their guns were real enough. The fight cleared her anger, if not the alcohol, out of her bloodstream.

"On your knees and put your hands behind your head," a guard barked. "You try anything, you get a bullet in the head."

Mia could kill them. She knew she could, even as drunk as she was. The smugglers hadn't done much other than tire her out. Not having to hold back would make things easier. Once she got her hands on her first gun, the fight would be over within fifteen seconds. The men weren't wearing armor.

She blinked. What was she thinking? She was supposed to be hiding out and avoiding attention, not planning to massacre station security. Discipline poked through the alcoholic haze to demand a return to proper order.

With a heavy sigh, Mia dropped to her knees, bent her head, and stuck her hands behind it. She should never have left the ship.

CHAPTER TWO

Mia had a baseline for comparison. She'd spent a brief time in a civilian jail, a navy brig, and a not-so-brief time in the prison complex of Black Ice.

The last prison was a collection of murderous criminals left to do whatever they wanted to one another except when the prison needed labor for mining. Mia had no cell there, only the rough cave area she controlled.

One could argue as long as a prisoner was strong, he or she had far more freedom than a brig or conventional cell. No guards sat there to let them in and out of cells and control their movement in Black Ice. Instead, they stayed in the sky like vengeful angels waiting to punish wayward souls who stepped out of line.

Mia was trying to decide if that cave she called home in Black Ice was better than her current cell, which was little more than a closet with a waste disposal port for a toilet. The tiny room provided enough space for her to lie down. Without a coat, her only option was the cold, dirty metal floor. It looked like no one had cleaned it since the station was built.

She'd already decided it was far inferior to a navy brig. They weren't the height of comfort, but there was a certain baseline level of dignity.

There was no window, no feeds, no displays in her cell. The door was solid with no intercom, leaving her with no one to talk to except in the brief moments when the guards

announced they were sending food inside and pushed it through the slot.

That left her sitting with her back against the wall, staring at the thick metal door. Based on her experience, it'd take a major explosive to breach the entrance. She wasn't getting out anytime soon.

Not that Mia was thinking much about escape. She'd spent the first hours getting a good rest. When she'd awoken, sobriety had returned to her, along with clarity. A violent escape would only compound the folly of the mistake that had brought her to the cell. She wasn't ready to take on the entire station because she'd gotten drunk and started a barroom brawl.

Mia sighed. She spent so much time preaching discipline to her crew, yet she kept making worse mistakes than them. She couldn't keep that up and finish her mission. Failure to chase the Protocol because she was locked up was humiliating.

All the rage and discomfort from before had disappeared with the end of the fight. That changed to trying to decide what her next move would be, with a focus on not making the overall situation worse.

Coming up with a good plan required her to understand her options, but those remained unclear. The security force of an unregistered station didn't offer the same civil liberties as conventional law enforcement or even pissed-off military MPs who might be skirting regs. The guards had tossed her in the hole and fed her meals twice a day through the slot, informing her they'd let her out when they felt like it.

Mia hadn't pressed them on the issue, even after she'd sobered up, for a more fundamental reason. The more attention she drew to herself, the greater the chance they would figure out she was wanted, with a bounty on her head. She'd been lucky they hadn't recognized her, especially with her fading disguise.

Setting aside the bounty, even many criminals didn't care for terrorists. She doubted anyone would believe her if she tried to explain what had happened on Kordell.

If the security guards knew who she was, they might make up an excuse to shoot her and pin it on a false claim of escape. Or they might not bother with that. Spacing a terrorist who'd tried to kill thousands of people wouldn't bother anyone.

She'd given them a fake name, hoping it'd get back to the crew and they'd devise a plan. She was now unsure if she'd killed any chance of a successful mission. Her driving goal for years had been to take down the people responsible for her father's death.

On the cusp of that opportunity, she'd let a dangerous brew of emotions push her into a stupid confrontation. At least her previous imprisonments had been because of self-defense or intelligence-gathering, not petty tantrums because she was frustrated and bored over repairs taking too long.

The guards refused to answer any questions. They weren't even letting her bathe. That worked to her advantage. The blood stains from the fight covered the slowly degrading nanospray disguise. No one looked directly at her. That helped, but it was only a matter of time before someone checked on her and understood the prize they were holding.

Things couldn't end this way. She wouldn't let them. All she needed to do was keep her head and not make more trouble.

"The mission isn't over," Mia whispered. "I'm alive, and my crew is okay. It won't let my being stupid affect her repairs. That means the ship should almost be ready if it isn't already."

Not hearing from her people worried her. She kept circling back to the idea the station manager sent for the KCAP to come and pick up one of their most wanted. The only evidence preventing her from accepting the validity of that theory was she had trouble believing the guards would be as calm if they knew who she was. No one held a famous terrorist in their barebones jail with that level of blasé detachment, let alone mid-range mercenaries working for an otherwise unremarkable, unregistered station.

Mia jumped to her feet and rolled her shoulders. She'd lost control and screwed up. Her crew would figure out a way to get her out, one way or another. All she had to do was ensure she was in the right headspace when they arrived. That was how a good tactician turned opportunity into success.

Her crew wouldn't launch a straightforward assault. It wasn't that they couldn't win. An angry Charlie alone could dispense with the entirety of station security and free her from her cell. At the same time, her crew understood the importance of not drawing more attention, like she had before she'd gotten drunk and stupid.

“Paul's never going to let me live this down.”

She bounced on her feet. There wasn't much space in the cell. That didn't mean she couldn't do exercises. Whatever else happened, she needed to maintain fitness. That was key to maintaining readiness and seizing whatever opportunities presented themselves.

With nothing distracting her, she could concentrate on exercise and scenario planning. She didn't know how things would play out. Everything from a quick, quiet raid by her team to a payment and unobtrusive release could happen. They would have executed her already if that was their plan.

The threat of the KCAP authorities showing up remained. Even worse, Reapers could show up before any bounty hunters or regular KCAP military forces. She needed to be ready to fight for her life at any time.

Mia threw a punch, stopping short of the door. She had time and nothing better to do. She'd be ready, regardless of the scenario. She would get out of there, and after that, nothing, including her self-pity, would stop her from pursuing and destroying the Pluribus Draconis Protocol. One mistake would not doom the mission.

The whole point of her scenario planning exercise was to be ready when action presented itself. Understanding what was

coming meant she could react faster and more naturally. That would convert a possibility into a reality.

Battlefield success followed training success. That had been the mantra of her entire childhood. She'd tried to push that into her adult life while leading her crew.

There was one major problem with her strategy. She assumed that she'd mentally gone through all the relevant scenarios. The problem space was theoretically infinite, but practical planning restraints necessitated focusing and pruning the most outlandish opportunities. Her sheltered upbringing made it difficult to distinguish between what was ridiculous to most people and what was unusual to her.

Her cell door opened. Bright light from outside overwhelmed the dim red of the cell. Mia squinted, expecting Karin or Paul there, maybe even Charlie. She'd not expected to see Jon Smith Senior and Junior standing there. They were with a burly older man.

She hadn't met him, but she'd seen an image of him and heard him mentioned. He was Kimson, the station manager.

Mia blinked. She looked between the Smiths, waiting for them to give her any guidance to point her toward the right scenario. Neither was armed. Both looked calm, genial even.

Kimson chuckled. "I never thought I'd see you out here again, Jon." He slapped Jon Senior on the back. "I told your dumb ass to get out to the Fringe. It's safer for you there. This place is unregistered, but patrols can catch you on the way to and from here."

"Nowhere is safe these days." Jon Senior shrugged. "We go where we have to go."

"True enough and that makes sense." Kimson shook his head. "I've been through tons of tough times, and these are worse. You don't know who you can trust. That makes it great to see a familiar face out here, somebody I know I can trust."

Jon Junior smiled nervously at Mia. He looked between his father and Kimson. He motioned for Mia to come out with an affected casual air.

She edged out of the cell, looking around for guards, KCAP troops, or Reapers. Only three men were in the larger chamber linked to a bank of other cells. The tight quarters made for a good ambush spot.

Her escape-planning imagination having failed her and the Smiths not giving her much to go on, Mia resorted to the most obvious tactic. “What the hell is going on?”

Kimson laughed. “She’s a feisty one, isn’t she?” He grinned. “This is why I never wanted a daughter. You let your guard down around them, and the next thing you know they’re tearing off some poor guy’s balls.” He inclined his head toward Jon Junior. “At least this one isn’t out of control.”

“He’s always been the calmer of the two.” Jon Senior glared at Mia. “You put me and your brother to a lot of trouble.”

Mia blinked. Her gaze slid to Jon Junior.

“I did?”

The outline of the escape plan solidified in her mind. The only thing she couldn’t figure out was how pretending to be Jon Senior’s daughter helped and what his exact relationship with Kimson was. He’d not mentioned anything about the station manager before.

“I know you got drunk, but you can’t have forgotten the brawl,” Jon Senior pointed out. “You took down an entire smuggler crew yourself.”

His faint smirk annoyed her. He was enjoying this far too much.

Kimson shook his head. “I should have known she was your daughter from the way she took out those smugglers. I won’t bother showing you the security feed, but she was like a Bleaker in there.”

He looked at her, and she winced. “Don’t worry, girlie. You broke bones, you messed them up, but they’re all alive. They were when they left anyway. I had my people get them off the station once we established they were stable.

“You took it too far, but they were part of it. I didn’t know who you were then, so it wasn’t a favor for my old friend Jon. I just wanted the trouble to go away, and they were satisfied once I told them you were locked up.”

“Your old friend Jon?” Mia stared at Jon Senior, not sure what she should say. The basic outline of his story seemed obvious, but she didn’t know about any previous relationship with the station manager. He hadn’t mentioned it to her at any point, and they’d been there a month.

“Mind telling me what’s up, *Dad?*” She stressed the last word. “I didn’t know you were friends with the station manager. That seems like the type of thing you would have mentioned earlier.”

“I didn’t realize he was here. I never thought he’d still be manager after all these years, *Athena.*” Jon Senior shrugged and stressed the fake name at the end. “I haven’t been bothering to leave the ship much, so it didn’t occur to me to check. I thought it’d be best to keep my head down and not make too much noise. You never know who might be watching.”

Mia winced. The Protocol might be looking for him, but everyone was looking for her. He’d hurt Vorhees, but as long as they kept them apart, Jon Senior hadn’t been any trouble.

“I knew your dad way back, *Athena.*” Kimson grinned and slapped Jon on the back again. “Back when he was running from his KCAP black ops squad with Junior.”

Mia’s eyes widened. “You told him about that? You could have gotten him killed.”

“He knew I was on the run from a special KCAP military project.” Jon Senior’s expression remained calm and collected. “I kept the big details to myself to protect him. I didn’t lie. I made it clear that helping me and my son was dangerous. He understood what he might be getting into and still chose to help me.”

She narrowed her eyes. Jon Senior had holes in his memory, a product of mental control programming and the

related drugs. How much of his distant past could he recall? Was he going with the flow?

That couldn't be right. He must have remembered Kimson. That was the only way he could have come up with the plan of going to the man and convincing him to let Jon's daughter go.

Kimson shook his head. "Who wouldn't want to help a defector and his baby son running from government bastards? It's like something out of an old spy vid. Helping you out made me feel like a hero."

"One man didn't want to help, and it almost cost me everything." Jon Senior looked down.

Kimson looked at Mia. "He never told you this? Any of it?" He frowned. "Too bad you didn't grow up hearing about the heroic Kimson."

"Dad doesn't like to talk about his past." Mia tried not to frown, as frustrated as Kimson. "I didn't know much about what happened between him running from the military and ending up..." She saw holes in the story and finished, "On a new planet with a new wife, my mom."

"I figured that last part out for myself. I don't think I would have forgotten if Jon had two kids with him back then."

Jon Senior nodded. "I'm a cursed man. I lost both my wives, but they both gave me beautiful, strong children. I try to honor my love for them by taking care of my son and daughter."

Kimson walked over and rapped his knuckles on a cell door. "When your dad came here, back when your brother was a baby and before you were born, he was desperate. He also wasn't that good at blending in." He laughed. "It's like they broke his brain in special forces training."

That wasn't that far from the truth. Jon Senior had done a better job than her father from what she could tell.

"The previous station manager sniffed out money there," Kimson continued. "He acted like he was going to befriend Jon until he could figure out if he could get a bounty off your dad."

He frowned, the first negative expression Mia had seen from him. “I was managing the dock operation back then, but I’d made friends with your dad. He helped me out of a tight spot right after he arrived. He had no reason to. He didn’t know me from anyone.”

He looked lost in thought for a second. “Once he mentioned what was going on, I looked into it. I thought I could figure out some way to help him. I found out my old boss was going to contact the KCAP government and try to earn himself a nice, fat reward. I told your dad. I wanted him to get the hell out of there before someone showed up.”

Mia turned to Jon Senior with a questioning look. “Then what?”

“If it were only me, it would have been different,” Jon Senior replied. “I had your brother with me. I had no other choice. I needed to secure my safety, and we weren’t in a position to run.”

“You took out the old station manager,” Mia concluded. “Kimson was okay with this? That was his boss, and he barely knew you.”

“It didn’t seem right to screw over a man with a baby.” Kimson shrugged. “I never knew my dad, and I didn’t want Junior to grow up without his. Also, you need to understand the security situation was different then. It was more ‘might makes right.’

“The old manager came from a twisted pirate background. He always said that if someone wanted his position, they could challenge him for it. Everyone knew he’d cheat, so no one tried. Then your dad challenged him right then and there in public in the docks.”

He whistled. “It was supposed to be hand-to-hand. Of course, my old bastard of a boss pulls out a hidden stun rod.” He laughed. “It didn’t help him. I’ve never seen such a quick one-sided beatdown in my life before or since. After that, your dad became the new manager.”

“How long did that last?” Mia asked.

She snuck glances at Jon Senior. Her mother had helped fill in gaps about her past, but she didn't know all the fine details. Were there wild stories of the early years about her father? He'd maintained his Reaper status, but that would have made things more complicated, not less.

"I couldn't stay in a place like this with Jon Junior," Jon Senior explained. "I chose Kimson to run things for me and left. No one dared challenge him because they were afraid of me."

"Then they got used to me." Kimson patted his chest. "I changed things around here, made them more professional and with less pirate dick-measuring bullshit. People liked the way I ran things, so they kept me on as the full-time leader."

Jon Senior frowned at Mia. "This is why it's so disappointing that you behaved this way toward an old friend. Without his help, I would never have escaped."

"Don't worry about it." Kimson rubbed his hands together. "No one's dead. That means no real problems. That's my motto." He side-eyed Jon Senior. "Even with us being old friends and all, the reason I'm letting her out is because you said she and her brother could help take care of that little problem for us. It'd go a long way to convincing me you're the same guy I helped out back then."

Jon Senior nodded. "I'm confident they can help you."

Mia frowned. "What problem?"

She wasn't in a position to complain about Jon Senior making deals when she'd gotten herself thrown in a cell after an exercise in assault. That didn't mean she'd agree to do whatever dirty work he could dream up. She wasn't there to be anyone's pet assassin.

"The damned KCAP military is cracking down is the problem." Kimson snorted in disgust. "They see terrorists everywhere, and they're worried about the core worlds and surrounding areas." He motioned around the room. "This station falls into the surrounding areas part of that. My business model relies on me being an unregistered station in

KCAP territory. My contacts are focused here. I'm not ready to go to the Fringe."

Mia nodded slowly. "We can't take on the entire KCAP military. Destroying a patrol is only going to draw more attention. You'd end up with a cruiser strike force or a carrier group showing up."

"We plan to relocate the entire station." Kimson looked far too pleased with himself.

"How exactly?" Incredulity filled Mia's tone.

"The logistics of that part I've got worked out with the help of engineer friends and a mix of big temporary thrusters and a nice, big side-space envelope. The real problem is the location. We need a place that will keep us competitive as a location for repairs, resupply, and trade while moving us out of the common patrol zones. Otherwise, I'll end up with the same problem, just delayed."

Mia didn't think the place was that competitive for repair, supply, or trade. She supposed it was all a matter of perspective. Ito found the parts she needed for repairs here.

"I'm not an expert on unregistered space stations, but I'm guessing your competitors want the same thing, meaning places like that are hotly contested."

"She's a smart one, isn't she, Jon?" Kimson paced between two cell doors. "Then you get what my problem is."

"You want a strike on a competitor," Mia concluded. She was unsure how she felt about that. She doubted destroying a similar station would net many truly innocent casualties. Still, she'd need more intel on who was running things before she was comfortable with a mission, and she didn't like the idea of being an attack dog.

Kimson grimaced. "Damn, Jon, I'm beginning to see why she could take down a whole crew by herself. This one is ruthless. I'm lucky she didn't slaughter that crew."

"She can be, and you are," Jon Senior replied. "Although she cares more than you think about trying to do right by

people. She's risked her life for people she doesn't know more than once."

"Good." Kimson shook his head. "I know I'm not living on the right side of the KCAP law, but I'm not a monster." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a datapad, and tossed it to her. Different systems were marked. "The best solution, I figure, and one that doesn't leave me having to watch my back worried about revenge, is to find a place that's a good location but hasn't been claimed."

Mia shook her head. "That's too much to ask for. The good locations all must be claimed."

"Not if there's a natural hazard there. Something that'd discourage a station from setting up there, something nasty enough that it'd be dangerous to try."

"I don't know what Dad told you about our skillset, but we're not engineers. We can't fortify your station against unusual radiation or come up with clever anti-asteroid systems." She offered back the datapad. "We're good at fighting."

"He made that clear. It's what I expected from a man like him. That's just it." He waved the pad. "I don't need engineers. I've got plenty of those, the best in the sector."

"I need high-powered exterminators who are good in space with steady nerves. I've scouted tons of locations, and the best one is just begging for me to take it." He drew a deep breath. "The only problem is the system has a mortistellar spore cloud."

Mia wished Debbie II was there to chime in because she was drawing a blank.

Then she gasped, remembering a history book her father had her read as a young child. "Wait. Are you serious? A mortistellar spore cloud, as in a deadly space-borne fungus where it only takes a few spores to seed something that can grow to devour an entire ship?"

"That's the one," Kimson verified. "Nasty sons of bitch fungus."

Mia stared at him. “According to historical records, if they’re allowed to spread unchecked, they’ll spread out and cover entire systems. It’s like a giant web waiting to trap ships, feeding off energy and all the ship materials.”

She shook her head. “No one would let one spread in KCAP territory. Historically speaking, the KCAP has been beyond ruthless in dealing with systems, even if it meant taking down innocent ships they thought were infected. Now they’ve let one grow in the middle of KCAP space? That’s hard to believe.”

“You’d think,” Kimson replied. “The KCAP Navy has been spread thin these last few years. Corpo and Bleaker pressure have changed things. Mortistellar clouds aren’t a threat outside of a small number of uninhabited systems, so all they need to do is mark a system as dangerous and not risk the trouble messing with them.”

He shook the datapad. “All that ruthlessness wasn’t about keeping ’em out of KCAP space. It was about keeping ’em away from anything valuable. They didn’t care if the system was worthless, and the system I’m interested in doesn’t have any valuable resources. It’s just located right for my purposes.”

“Anyone who takes it on risks infection. They’re hard to scan for.”

Jon Senior nodded at the grinning Kimson. Jon Junior’s expression had changed from embarrassment to stoic resignation.

“I’m assuming you three have something approaching a plan that won’t get us all killed?” Mia asked.

“Yes,” Jon Senior replied. “It’s far better than fighting an entire crew with your bare fists.”

“I won that fight,” Mia muttered. “I could have beat the guards if I tried.”

“Then you shouldn’t be afraid of a little space mushroom.”

CHAPTER THREE

One of Kimson's techs finished removing the forward cannons on a drone. A wide-barreled particle cannon lay next to the drone, awaiting connection. Another tech chatted with Jon Junior while they worked on calibrating his control rig to work with the drones.

The plan needed drones and a fighter. Mia was worried when they'd first begun discussing it that the Smiths had revealed the existence of the SHKs. That would have made it easy to link them to the incident on Kordell. Instead, Jon Senior only mentioned that his son was good at mass-flying drones.

Mia took a moment to appreciate that Kimson had an entire team of techs working. She took Ito for granted. It was good to be reminded that the engineer was worth a whole team and could have turned over these mods in half the time.

The custom particle cannon was the key to the plan. Jon Senior had convinced Kimson with a scheme where he explained that his daughter was a great fighter pilot in addition to his son's skill with drones.

Jon Senior hadn't known about the mortistellar cloud at the time. He was groping for anything that Kimson might find useful. The convenient coincidence helped Mia out of her cell while providing Kimson with a perfect solution for his immediate and dangerous problem.

Being forced into helping annoyed Mia, but she couldn't deny eliminating something so dangerous wasn't a waste of

her talents. The pest control mission was far better than being forced to be a station thug deployed against Kimson's enemies.

The plan was straightforward, if dangerous. Kimson would transport Mia and her fighter along with Jon Junior and two flights of drones to the edge of the mortistellar spore cloud in the target system. The cloud lay clustered around Fafnir, a white dwarf star. Jon Junior was to initiate clearing a path with the SHKs using the adapted particle cannons. They had been tweaked to take advantage of an unusual physiological feature of the mortistellar fungus.

When exposed to particular types of radiation, the fungus would enter an aggressive growth period. This would worsen the main issue under most circumstances, but in this case, the aggressive growth would result in fungal strains trying to consume the other nearby fungi. The team couldn't kill off the entire cloud with their limited weapons, but it allowed them to take careful shots that would create temporary gaps in what would otherwise be solid walls of living death.

The drones would open the door to the more vulnerable inner cloud. Mia would travel through the door to finish the cloud off.

This surprising method for killing mortistellar clouds had been an accidental discovery by a group of desperate scavengers. They had then offered the secret to Kimson as payment for supplies they needed. They'd stumbled on it when a malfunctioning reactor had brought them too close to a cloud, and they lacked the heavy ordnance necessary to escape.

From what Mia had read, the standard method of dealing with a cloud involved the overwhelming firepower of a major naval fleet. They brought enough ordnance and weapons to glass a planet, then methodically applied their death fire to the mortistellar cloud. All the while having to be careful not to contaminate the ships and get disabled in the process.

It was slow, dangerous work. Feeding materials and energy to the cloud could backfire when the process wasn't carefully

controlled and directed.

Kimson didn't have a fleet or the time for precision work. He had drones and a violent drunk in a fighter.

The techs continued their work on the drones, their movements hurried and their faces taut with tension. Jon Junior had borrowed a truck to transport his drone control rig, explaining to Mia that Kimson was under the impression they'd hitched a ride aboard the *Erinyes*, still registered as the *Pygmalion* at the station. That discouraged him from asking too many questions about the rest of the crew.

That deception also meant Jon Junior couldn't use the SHKs or involve the other pilots in the operation. Jon Senior couldn't explain them away as more of his children. The more wanted terrorists they put in front of Kimson, the more likely he'd be to recognize the truth.

Jon Senior had come up with the idea. Kimson's trust in Jon Senior only went so far. There was no telling what he'd do if he knew Mia was an infamous terrorist. Returning to the *Erinyes* gave her time to clean up and update her nanospray disguise. They'd been careful not to use her real name around Kimson, although she worried they'd been calling her Athena too much, making it seem more suspicious.

Still, she appreciated the Smiths maintaining operational security even if she couldn't call on the entire crew to help with the mission.

That was for the best. Her crew shouldn't be exposed to more danger because of her mistake.

"You don't look convinced," Jon Senior commented beside her.

"This is one of those plans where everything has to go right for it to work. We're doing a fleet's worth of work, and we're doing it in hours instead of days or weeks."

"You two can do a fleet's worth of work. I wouldn't have agreed to this otherwise." He shrugged. "It'll work. After your brother starts the process, you can fly through the natural dead channel zones in the cloud, places where there isn't anything

for the cloud to eat. Once we get you to the center of the cloud, we'll be fine."

He pointed at a wide, long missile attached to her fighter. "According to Kimson, those are perfect for this. Same principle as the particle cannon at a massive scale. Once we hit the mother cluster with the fungiphagic radiation, the entire cloud will devour itself, something about how the disruption passes through major connections."

"That simple, huh?" Doubt slipped into her voice.

"As long as you can get to the mother cluster and deliver the missile, yes."

Mia shook her head. "This doesn't feel right. The KCAP wouldn't have needed the firepower they've used in the past if that were true."

"They didn't know about the radiation trick, and mortistellar clouds are rare enough they wouldn't put too much research into them." Jon Senior gestured toward one of the drones sporting a particle cannon. "They also didn't have Jon Junior and you to run the mission. It's not like you to be scared."

"I succeed on missions because I'm always cautious and take into account all valid threats. Flying blindly into a mortistellar cloud with an unproven plan doesn't fill me with confidence. That's not me being scared. That's me not being an idiot."

"It'll be fine. By the time this is over, Kimson will respect you for your abilities rather than our relationship. It never hurts to have more friends." He lowered his voice. "I'm sure you'll be able to tell him who you are sooner than later."

"We've both run plenty of dangerous missions during our lives. We both know that not everything turns out the way we'd expect." She inclined her head toward the fighter. "At least those plans we were using were reliable intel. This entire operation is based on secondhand information from desperate scavengers. Do you understand why I'm a little concerned?"

“Kimson has assured me he’s verified it with tests. He lost ships and drones to do it, but he’s verified the radiation trick works. There’s no reason for him to risk anything by lying to us. He needs this mission to succeed so he can relocate. As far as he knows, we could have run when he let you return to the ship. If this was about getting you alone for the authorities, he had you locked in a cell. He’s taking a big risk here.”

Mia scoffed. “What risk is there to him? Once I hit those dead channels, even if I somehow could do it with minimal thruster activity, I’ll throw out enough heat and other emissions that the cloud will see me as food. Based on the timing data he gave us, we’ll have a narrow window for me to pull off my missile run before I end up fungus chow.”

Jon Senior looked confused. “I don’t understand the problem. You can deal with the fungus. It’s not an intelligent enemy. It’ll react to you, sure, but you just have to avoid it. There won’t be any sophisticated tactics. It won’t adapt to your flying style or go after you with sophisticated flanking maneuvers.”

“The fact that it’s not intelligent means no true fear or frustration. Did you forget the part where the mother cluster is damned close to the star? Just because it’s a white dwarf doesn’t mean much if I’m too close.”

“Of course the cloud’s around a star.” Jon Senior’s frown deepened. “Why wouldn’t it be? Mother clusters form close to a main energy source. I’d be worried if it had formed somewhere else with no obvious explanation. It’d mean there was a stellar object we didn’t know about that we’d need to account for.”

Mia held up a tight fist. She spread her fingers apart slowly. “Our initial attack plan is going to do this basically to the cloud. That means less fungus absorbing the radiation and heat from the start while I’m charging toward it. There’s only so much my fighter and suit will do to protect me. I’m not going to fry myself for your friend.”

Jon Senior shrugged. “I’ll make sure there are antirad injections for the second you step out of your cockpit. If we try

to back out now, he'll be suspicious.”

Mia shook her head. She didn't like Jon Senior's nonchalant look. “The more I think about this, the more I question things.”

“Like what?”

Mia locked eyes with him. “If I didn't know better, I'd say you're trying to send me a suicide mission so you two can take over my operation.”

Jon Senior leaned in after looking around and seeing no one else close. “I've been with you for a month now. If I were going to do the bidding of my old masters, wouldn't I have done it already? You've tested me for the drugs. There's barely any trace of them left.”

“Yet you still can't be around Vorhees.”

He frowned. “That's different from this.”

“Besides, that's not what I'm getting at.” Mia shook her head. “I didn't say you were taking it over for *them*. I have a nicely set-up ship. Taking that ship is a good way to keep ahead of the people you feared as long as I'm out of the way and not insisting we go back to punching them in the nose. Your son joined me to find you. He found you. The obsession with taking them down is mine.”

Jon Senior sighed. “I'm not going to pretend we both don't have reasons to distrust one another, and we've both tried to kill one another more than once, but right now we're on the same side. You must understand that.”

“I don't trust anyone completely. Especially you.”

“Ouch,” Jon Junior called. He'd left the drone rig and closed in on his father and Mia. “Come on, Mia. I heard that. That hurts. He's not like before.”

Mia let out a quiet sigh. Jon Junior hadn't pressed her much on what had happened the first time she'd run into his father. Jon Senior likely told him. Complaining too much would only force her into a difficult conversation.

“You forget, Mia, that taking over your operation means dealing with your friends.” Jon Senior managed a weak smile. “You also forget what Charlie promised would happen if you don’t come back in one piece.”

“Let me guess. It involved his teeth, didn’t it? Slow chewing?”

Jon Junior shuddered. “Ugh. Yeah. You know he likes to show them off when he’s messing with us. He kept sniffing the air, talking about how he can smell wickedness on men’s souls.”

“He can,” Mia confirmed. “He had decades of practice near a place holding the most heinous people the KCAP had to offer.”

“Then isn’t the fact he hasn’t killed me yet proof I’m on your side?” Jon Senior asked.

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “He might think your use outweighs your risk.”

Jon Junior groaned. “I’ve lost count of how many times he’s made that threat since I’ve met him.”

“You mean cannibalistic death threats?” Jon Senior asked.

“Yes.” Jon Junior held up his hands. “He said something the other day about me not needing all my fingers to do my work. I’m not sure he was joking.”

Jon Senior laughed. “Come on, son. You can’t be afraid of someone eating you just because they’re stronger and have a history of eating people.”

Jon Junior stared at his father before laughing. “You’re right. How stupid of me! Why am I jumping to conclusions on such flimsy evidence.”

His father slapped him on the back. “Think of it this way. You get used to staring down giant cannibals, and every other man will come off as less scary. It’s training.”

“You mean you failed me by not threatening to eat me as a kid? I should be used to that by now? I’m disappointed in you, Dad.”

“You’re right.” Jon Senior cupped his chin. “It might have helped. It’s a big galaxy. Charlie proves you need to be ready for anything, especially cannibals.”

They both shared another laugh.

Mia stepped away as they fell into non-cannibal-focused banter. Her determination to return to the mission and relief at release from the cell had shifted back to concern once Kimson had laid out the plan. Watching the two Jons chat with one another was unexpectedly soothing.

It took Mia a moment to figure out why that was. Their chat reminded her of what she shared with her father. Although the Smiths’ brief exchange, like many others in the last month, came off more relaxed than what she had shared with her father. Mia couldn’t deny that as much as she loved and respected her father, their relationship had always been closer to instructor and trainee than father and daughter.

She’d never resented him for that. The more she’d learned about the past, the more it’d made sense. There hadn’t been another option, or so she thought.

Jon Junior mock-punched his father over another shared joke. Their ease of interaction contrasted with the drug-controlled terrorist ready to shoot his son a month ago. She’d been close to killing Jon Senior again in Felsk. Sometimes she wondered if she’d regret it later.

Something else lingered in her mind, a leftover splinter that wouldn’t let her move on from thinking about the Smiths. The sensation had built slowly over the last month. She’d assumed it was nothing more than her built-up frustration and anger over the progress of the mission and their failures on Felsk. With those feelings emptied with the help of the bar brawl, she couldn’t deny there was another lingering cause, one she’d been afraid to face until there was no other choice.

Seeing Jon Junior and his father together without the cloud of anger hanging over her made it easy for Mia to see the truth. She was experiencing an emotion rare in her life, jealousy.

Jon Junior shared happiness with his father. That wasn't something she'd ever have with her dead parent.

She didn't begrudge Jon Junior getting back together with his father. She was happy for him. Beyond punishing the Protocol, the success also meant she'd gained more assets in her war against her enemy. Assuming Jon Senior could be trusted long-term, he represented a huge upgrade in her team's combat capabilities.

Beyond Jon Senior being alive, she didn't understand why his relationship differed from the one she shared with her father. Jon Senior had been part of the same generation of Cadmus products as her father. He would have been raised, educated, and trained the same way. Yet, he was so much more casual and comfortable around his son. They were father and son, not trainee and instructor.

The desire to know burned in Mia. Jon Senior was free of the Protocol now, as he'd been in the past. Her father had never been free. Despite his independence, his behavior could have reflected the lingering effects of the conspiracy's control methods. Years away from being a Reaper might have turned him into a more genial man.

Or was it something more fundamental? The Smiths were both male. That could have been the key difference. Mia might never have been able to share the same type of relationship with her father.

With a sigh, Mia wandered away from the pair, the moment bittersweet and distracting. Kimson's techs had finished installing the fungiphagic missile on her fighter. They didn't need her there. She'd gone over the details of the mission plan with Kimson and the others.

Her task remained the same as before every mission, to ensure she'd prepared as much mentally and physically as possible. Spending too much time worrying over things in the past she couldn't change would undermine both.

There was a knock on the door. Mia hopped up from her borrowed bunk on Kimson's ship. She'd heard the footsteps coming and recognized the stride.

They'd set out from the station a half-day before, after the techs finished their modifications, and planned to slide into the Fafnir system the next day for the mission proper. Mia had been doing her best to get some rest along the way. Not only would she have the toughest role in the cloud slaying but her survival also depended more on her skills than Jon Junior's.

"Come in," Mia called.

The door opened, and Jon Senior entered the room. Mia tensed despite expecting him from the footsteps.

She always did when they were alone together. They'd tested his system back on the *Erinyes* and found it mostly free of the metabolic byproducts of the Protocol control drugs. That didn't mean he was free of their psychological conditioning, a fact she never forgot. The man had become irrationally violent around Vorhees and blinded him in one eye. Without his son around to ground him, there was a risk of him reverting to his Reaper persona.

Jon Senior had proven twice how hard he was to kill. Mia didn't want to test him a third time when she wasn't expecting an attack.

"You still don't trust me, do you?" he asked. "Between that crack earlier and the way you're standing now. It's obvious."

"Letting my guard down can get me killed when dealing with someone like you. You're among a select group of people I've met I consider a major threat. You should be honored."

Jon closed the door. "I'd keep it open, but it's hard to talk freely when somebody might overhear something they shouldn't."

"Suit yourself."

Mia stayed standing. She strained not to assume a combat stance. Something about the scent coming off Jon Senior bothered her. He lacked the telltale whiff of violent intention.

At the same time, tension and adrenaline stained his scent before she started talking. He hadn't come to discuss his favorite desserts.

"I'm here. You're here. Let's talk and get it over with. I want to make sure I'm well-rested for my mission."

"I wanted to talk about the mission."

Mia frowned. "What about it? If Kimson's taking us somewhere to hand me off, I'll take this ship down with me, I guarantee you that. I don't care if he's your old friend. I'll slaughter him before I go willingly to the Protocol."

Jon shook his head. "It's nothing like that. Kimson is doing everything he can to make sure this is a successful mission. You've been avoiding him, so you don't get that."

"I've been avoiding him because I'm not good at acting and pretending my name is Athena." Mia shrugged. "I don't want him asking too many questions about growing up with you. If we screw this up, he might decide to hand me off to the KCAP government. You get that, right?"

"Fair enough. My point is that we're the best shot he has for taking control of the Fafnir system and relocating before the military shows up. He knows he won't get two people as skilled as you and my son to help him out. He might not know how special you are, but he knows I'm more than I appear, and he thinks you're both my children."

Jon Senior frowned. "He confided to me that time is running out for him. He knows it won't be long before the KCAP Navy sweeps into this system. He won't tell me how long he thinks he has, but I can tell he's desperate. He's hiding it well."

"He's not my old friend, so I don't care what happens to his station after I leave," Mia admitted. "I'm helping him out because I need to atone for my mistake in the bar and because it's keeping him from connecting the dots with Kordell. Now, if all you've done is come here to get me to like your friend, don't bother. I'll execute this mission to the best of my ability."

Jon frowned. "This isn't about Kimson. It's not about him at all."

"Then what's it about?"

He gestured between them. "Us. You might die tomorrow."

Mia scoffed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. You shouldn't have volunteered me for this mission if you doubted my skills."

"I don't doubt your skills. I know what you're capable of more than anyone. I've been on the receiving end of your skills."

"Then what are you getting at?"

"You've taken on too many missions not to understand there's always a risk," Jon replied with a hard edge in his voice. "That's what I'm getting at."

"I do, but what's the point of bringing it up when we're already aboard his ship? You either think I can pull this off, or you don't. If it's the second one, we should turn around before I throw my life away."

"You just have to be difficult." Jon closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. He opened his eyes slowly, and the tension wafting off him reduced. "I owe you for saving my son. I owe you for not killing me when you had the chance and saving me even after everything I did on Kordell."

"I didn't do it for you," Mia admitted. "I did it for your son."

"That's all the more reason to thank you. The only thing I can think of to do for that right now is help you with closure about your father."

Mia shook her head. "I know he's dead. My closure will be taking down the Protocol."

Jon paused and averted his eyes for a second. "There are holes in my memory. Some things from my past are as clear as ever. For others, I can almost see the outline but not the details."

“Sometimes I can recognize things by what I can’t remember. It’s like an image where the only thing left are the outlines of the people who were once in it. That’s why I can’t always give you what you want about Protocol intel.”

“I know.” Mia nodded. “I’ve dealt with this problem before in supersoldiers who’ve gotten free of the Protocol. I don’t know if there’s any way to fix the problem.”

“Those drugs they used on me...” Jon gritted his teeth. “They’ve taken so much from me, but they haven’t taken everything, the more important things. As far as I can remember, I don’t think I served much with your father, but I know something important. That of all Reaper team leaders, your father was known as the best.”

Mia blinked and turned away. She’d expected another self-serving comment designed to elicit pity for Jon’s and his son’s situation, not praise for her father.

She cleared her throat and concentrated on keeping her tone even. “I knew he was good at his job. Given how things turned out, sometimes I wish it’d been less so.”

“No,” Jon snapped.

Mia frowned. “What?”

“You don’t understand.” Jon backed away, his expression pained. “It’s not just about him being good at his job. Your father was indeed an exceptional soldier, even among the superhuman Reapers. This goes beyond that. He was the best leader, a man who was efficient, intelligent, and cunning.”

His voice shook. “It was more than that, too. If everyone had been like him among us, it would have been different for all of us. You see, he cared for each man under his command. He knew them and understood how to make them part of a brotherhood in a way our masters never cared about. Few of the leaders did. He was truly special.”

He paused. “I see that in you, too. You’ve inherited your father’s true strength.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I wanted you to know. My son and I are not like you. We’re survivors.”

Mia nodded in agreement, not sure what else to say.

“You and your father, you’re better than us. You’re not only survivors. You’re leaders. You both were fighting the Protocol when the best I managed to do was run away and get caught again.”

He sighed. “I’m glad I can serve with you now. I feel like I’m serving with him, and in my way, I can help avenge him by helping you.” He turned toward the door. “That’s all I had to say.”

“Thank you.”

Jon stepped into the passageway and closed the door behind him. Mia sat back on the bed and thought about what he’d told her. She hadn’t expected anything like that.

Darkness seeped in with her thoughts. She didn’t doubt Jon believed everything he’d told her about her father and his leadership abilities. Her problem was all the tension and worry she’d sensed in him. She couldn’t reconcile that with a man who’d only come to praise her father.

Jon could have been lying about what he remembered. A lesser man who killed a greater leader would be racked with guilt when dealing with his daughter.

“How do I know you didn’t kill him?” Mia muttered.

CHAPTER FOUR

Humanity had risen from hunter-gatherers barely surviving the harshness of unforgiving nature to conquering the stars. Their technology had taken them from a single unremarkable system to the galaxy's vastness. Intraspecies fighting and aliens offered the only real check on their progress. Nature, which had once been an uncontrollable and unfathomable force, had become nothing more than another resource to exploit.

Mia had always thought of history that way. The galaxy was filled with dead worlds that had become living through the application of terraforming. The deadliest planets bathed in radiation could be conquered by stations and domes if they held the resources people needed. Again, nature was always under humanity's control. That was self-evident.

Or was it?

The view on the bridge display changed everything for Mia. She stared at the image, open-mouthed, having let out a soft gasp. The mortistellar spore cloud spread through the vastness of space, a living monstrosity that fed on stars.

The star Fafnir and drifting asteroids allowed Mia's poor brain to understand the vast scale of the communal organism infesting the system. Clouds of the gray-white fungus seethed and coalesced into monstrous filamentous hyphae to probe space, seeking new sources of energy to fuel an endless expansion. The hyphae retracted and disappeared into the main thick mass, only for more to appear in different locations.

Mia swallowed. There were no true limits to the cloud. Between rogue planets and brown and white dwarfs, an unchecked mortistellar cloud might grow to become a true interstellar organism.

Kimson's problems were forgotten. Even the Protocol seemed unimportant. She needed to kill this unholy communal monster before it grew even more.

She shuddered as the cloud reached toward an asteroid. More hyphae extended and enveloped the asteroid. They spread and tightened their grip. "How big is that asteroid?"

Kimson looked up from a sensor display. "Big enough to put a good carrier base on." He swallowed.

Mia wasn't the only one having trouble accepting what she saw.

Jon Junior licked his lips. "Are we sure about this plan? This is so beyond what I imagined."

"It'll be fine," Kimson assured him with a slight tremble in his voice. "We've got this under control. We've got the weapons and a good plan. We'll win."

"Imagine a smuggler or merc coming through here." Jon Senior motioned at the display. "They might not be careful enough. They could escape the cloud without cleaning off their hull and spread the spores to another system." He grimaced. "Imagine if spores made it to a populated world."

Mia had never felt so small in her life. She stared at the feed, transfixed by the strange communal organism skirting the line between living entity and natural phenomenon. Humanity had a good run, but they weren't the masters of nature after all.

"The best time to get this done is right now." The tremble was gone from Kimson's voice. He turned to Mia. "You still up for this? We can wait a while, but this will be our best chance for days. If we wait too long, we'll have to remap the dead channels, which could take a while. I can't risk ships, so it takes drones, and we lose too many."

“The sooner we kill this thing, the sooner I can stop dreaming about fungus conquering the galaxy.”

Mia’s fighter burned through space, heading toward the edge of the cloud. She trailed Jon’s drones.

Ensconced in the cockpit, she was more comfortable. Her enemy presented a different threat than the mercenaries and Reapers she was used to dealing with, but she wasn’t doing anything more than a variation on her standard combat mission. She needed to keep thinking that way. It would help smother the lingering concern.

Although she remained at the greatest risk, Kimson’s ship was far closer to the main cloud than she would have predicted. Drone latency concerns had trumped self-preservation. Screwing up could cost more than her life.

Her attempts to calm herself by comparing the mortistellar cloud to the Bleaker swarms failed. She couldn’t delude herself into believing that the pure instinct of the giant space fungus was the same as the patterns of the Bleaker drones. Individual drones weren’t independent but self-aware, intelligent entities at the heart of all Bleaker operations.

That made the Bleakers a fundamentally different type of enemy. Analysis meant she could understand them and exploit their tactics. The cloud would be straightforward in a terrible and difficult way.

Flying closer to the cloud only fed Mia’s awe. The undulating and contorting fungal mass filled her forward cockpit view. Her heart galloped. She was about to try to kill an entity that fed on stars.

Mia drew slow, even breaths. “Signal check.”

“Received,” Jon Junior replied.

“You ready for this?”

“Can anyone ever be ready for something like this?”

Mia chuckled. "I'm glad to see I'm not the only sane one left."

"I'll tear open the door whenever you're ready."

"Initiate attack in five, four, three, two, one. Go, go, go!"

Jon's drones changed course and dove toward the edge of the cloud. The particle cannons flashed as the drones made their strafing run, leaving blackened, shuddering patches in the thick outer layer of the mortistellar cloud.

The initial hits satisfied Mia, but scorching the outside wouldn't be enough. She couldn't head inside without the radiation leading to the desired fungus civil war.

A strand burst from the cloud and reached for the tight drone formation. The drones twisted and evaded as the strand separated into three smaller hyphae. It was hard not to read desperation and intent into the response.

Mia pulled into a wide turn to avoid coming into easy range of the cloud but maintained a good position for a quick acceleration into a dead channel. Once inside, she'd have to finish the mission to have any chance of surviving.

"Why did I agree to this crazy plan?" Mia muttered.

Jon spun the fleeing drones to pound the trailing strands with the modified particle cannons. The blackened strands stopped chasing the drone flights, instead twitching.

Mia turned her fighter into another wide circle. The initial runs failed to open a path to a dead channel. Tiny holes appeared in the cloud, not large enough for a drone to make it through, let alone Mia's fighter.

"Come on, Jon. You can do this."

The drones swung around for another run. A forest of hyphal strands erupted from the cloud seeking to grab them. Jon's quick reflexes saved most of the drones, but two hyphae snagged a drone. They spread over the captured drone as its particle cannon fired impotently into space. Jon's attempt to scrape the fungus away with careful shots from other drones ended with a half-melted drone covered in twitching fungus.

“We’re getting our asses kicked by a space fungus,” Mia complained.

“Damn it,” Jon transmitted. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this.”

“Just get me inside that monster, and I’ll do the rest.”

The drones spun and lurched through another hyphal net. They rained blasts against the cloud, focusing on the areas Jon had hit before. Impressive overall, the clumsiness of some of the maneuvers only highlighted the lesser ability of the borrowed drones compared to his SHKs. Mia had seen him pull off trickier maneuvers with far more ease.

Chunks of hyphal strands tore away and burst into a cloud of spores. Jon tightened a formation and circled the spores to carve through them with shots. He used the other flight to strafe the main fungal cloud mass, desperate to tear an opening and grant Mia access to the interior.

Mia’s fingers twitched. Using her plasma cannons wouldn’t help. She’d feed part of the cloud while encouraging the rest to attack her. She couldn’t do enough damage to make a difference. They had a plan. She needed to stick to it.

The darkened and twitching wound expanded with each drone pass. Layers of the main cloud peeled away, feeding a growing hole until exposing the long, narrow, dead channel underneath.

Heart kicking up, Mia turned toward the new opening and accelerated. Hypha strands infested the area, although Jon clipped them with careful strikes. The detached strands floated and extended smaller extensions, trying to reconnect with the main cloud.

Mia resisted the urge to fire. The plan was working. All she needed to do at this point was concentrate on flying.

Two hyphae converged over the opening and forced Mia to abort her run with an abrupt turn. She pulled away into a growing fungal web threatening to snare her.

She had nothing to lose by firing. Her cannons sliced through the strands trying to trap her. Her fighter zoomed

through the hole. Strands whipped from the edges of the hole, almost catching her fighter.

“Try to avoid too many shots with your normal weapons,” Jon Senior ordered. “Sure, you’ll hurt it a little in the short run, but in the end, you’re sending energy into the area for it to feed on, and we can end up with this whole area supercharged. This thing is feeding on a star in the end, and nothing you have is worse than that.”

Mia ground her teeth. She hated being lectured over something she knew. It was worse that he was right. She should have changed course instead of opening fire. Her aggressive blood sang for her to kill the enemy before her, not stall.

Her feelings didn’t matter. She needed to get into the dead channel soon. The longer the fight dragged out, the more they risked creating a fungal blockade that would render Kimson’s recon and mapping of the dead channels useless.

Jon’s technological drones rotated through careful formations reminiscent of Bleaker drones, although they lacked the former’s eerie beauty. Too many awe-inspiring things in the galaxy wanted to kill Mia.

The drone particle cannons pulsed and trimmed the hyphal web reaching out again to catch Mia as she skimmed the cloud’s surface. Jon broke a drone from the group to run blasts around the opening, widening it further.

Mia pulled away from the surface, and the hungry strands chased her. She pushed her engines and prepared to circle for the dead channel. Although the areas she’d hit with her weapons had grown or spread, the drone attacks left a gaping hole. The radiation was working, and if it worked in the particle cannons, her missile would work.

They could do this. They could take down an entire mortistellar cloud by themselves.

Jon’s relentless attacks sliced and snipped new hyphae. His skills were impeccable even in the non-maximized drones, but that didn’t change the scale of the problem. His drones were a

handful of ants trying to cut through the thick skin of an angry elephant to allow a fly to get inside and kill it.

Mia turned for another run at the opening to the dead channel. At this point, repeated drone punishment had widened the hole to make an easy entry once she got past the hyphal web thrashing around and trying to swallow the surviving drones.

She took in the current web density, taking note of the sparser areas. Her margin of safety for failed runs had all but disappeared.

Jon lost another drone to the stubborn hyphae. The drone disappeared behind the thick gray-white mass spreading over it.

With calm determination, Jon focused on clearing the path for Mia. His thorough particle cannon pruning left a large group of floating blackened pieces that had been seared by the fungiphagic radiation on both ends, making it easy for the drones to avoid the danger of smaller hyphae extending from the middle of the shaking strands to consume them.

Other strands from the main cloud flowed over the clipped fungus. Most of the strands reached toward the ends, resulting in the new hyphae trapped in the grip of temporarily cannibalistic fungus. The self-attack left the entire area near the opening filled with fungus growing and consuming itself. Fewer strands chased the drones.

Mia sensed her chance. She spun her fighter and burst toward the opening. The dense web forced her into split-second turns and lateral thrusts to avoid puffing spores and hyphal strands. There wasn't time to think or worry about anything but flying.

An aggressive batch of strands stretched toward her from above the opening. Another pass by the drones and their particle cannons left the strands twining around one another. With a yelp of triumph, Mia zoomed through the hole into the dead channel.

Her focus returned as fungal strands ripped toward her from behind. Slower-growing hyphae emerged from the channel walls, spreading into a finer group of filaments.

Getting into the dead channels was nothing. It was far from victory. All they had accomplished was the true beginning of the battle.

Mia pushed her engines harder. Her fighter outpaced the chasing filaments. A surge from the side forced her into a roll. That sent her too close to the other side and another fungal snare. She slid her fighter under a strand. She'd hate to abandon the fighter because of contamination later.

Without the distraction of the drones and the fighter's constant maneuvering, Mia became the only target. The dead channel was coming back to life.

Hyphae grew from all sides of the channel. Dead channel was a misnomer. A lack of prey created the open spaces, and now Mia was offering a tasty meal.

She was committed to the destruction now. The only way she'd escape the cloud was by delivering her payload into the mother cluster.

A last-second lateral thrust spared Mia from being snagged by two strands whipping at her from opposite directions. She followed with a gut-churning spin that saved her from another near-web of fungus.

She wasn't sure how long she could keep it up. Getting to the mother cluster sounded simple, but the size of the cloud meant that breaching the outer wall left her a good distance away from her enemy's vulnerable heart.

Surviving while avoiding an entire cloud trying to eat her was difficult. One mistake would cost her life.

Mia had resisted hyper-focus mode for a month. Debbie II told her that pushing her body too hard sent Mia into her disastrous two-day coma. Mia remained skeptical. Her ability might be permanently broken. Risking it inside the cloud could be suicide.

Another strand missed her fighter by meters. She had no choice. The mortistellar cloud's hyphae were coming at her from every side. Not using her ability was suicide. She drew a deep breath and locked in her hyper-focus mode. The world slowed around her.

Dozens of hyphal filaments stretched toward her fighter. She noted their positions and guided her fighter through a series of twisting maneuvers to dance through the fungal web trying to eat her.

The dead channel changed direction. Mia didn't turn until the last moment, scorching the surface. It'd been a mistake. Strands shot from the wounds. She outpaced them.

As large and fast as the hyphae were, their movements processed as glacial. She could read their directions with ease. Her hyper-focus had removed the primary threat, but calling her transit of the dead canal easy at that point would have been overstating matters.

The end of her current path forced her into another turn. This time she kept more centered.

As a result of missing energy sources and not active intent, the channel didn't provide a straight shot to the mother cluster. The turns and junctions gave the cloud a brief chance to ensnare the prey inside.

With each turn and adjustment, Mia smiled wider. It deserved praise for her fine-tuning of Mia's thrusters. Quick, flashy maneuvers in open space were trivial compared to the instant reaction of the secondary thrusters at Mia's lightest touch. One strand cluster missed the back of her fighter by such a small margin that it came off as missed lightning even in her current enhanced state.

Light flashed on her console. New warnings about increasing radiation levels appeared, an ironic sign of the continuing success of the mission. The dense fungus obscured the threat as she flew closer to the star feeding the heart of the mortistellar cloud.

Mia didn't try to contact Jon or the ship. She was too deep in the cloud. The fungus would block and feed off her transmissions. Ignoring comms made things easy. She could put all her attention into avoiding the fungal snares trying to make her the latest meal.

That didn't quash all worries. She was setting a new time record for using her ability. Running hyper-focus for so long risked another deep coma, but Mia had no choice.

The unique experience made the time dilation of combat into a hellish episode where nothing existed but her fighter and the deadly mortistellar cloud. It was as if she'd thrown herself into the mouth of a great dragon with nothing but a sword and planned to cut her way out from the inside.

More radiation warnings chirped in the background as Mia ripped from the end of the dead channel to find a hideous goddess awaiting her. An undulating forest of strands stretched from a dense, moon-sized bluish-gray fleshy mass, the mother cluster. There was no eerie beauty there, only a disgusting monster that needed to die.

A flurry of tendrils erupted from the cluster to join the other strands from the crest of the cloud around her. The exit from the dead channel became the latest test of survival. Accounting for the scores of tendrils coming for her on all sides challenged even her hyper-focus.

Brief fears that she'd underestimated the cloud threatened her focus. What if it was like a Bleaker Beacon?

She pushed the thought aside. This was no different than the dead channels. Her enemy reacted to the energy and heat it sensed from her ship, nothing more. A human mind enhanced beyond known limits wouldn't fall to an organism with only instinct to guide it.

The fighter's engines and secondary thrusters strained to respond to Mia's control. She pulled one hand off her yoke to flip a switch and arm her payload, the fungiphagic radiation missile.

The question was when to fire. Mia had one shot. There was too big a risk of the hyphae breaking away from the mother cluster without spreading the effects if she didn't land a direct hit with her missile. Kimson had laughed when she asked if he had a second missile, then bored her with a lengthy diatribe about how expensive it had been to procure.

Now facing the heart of the cloud, the entire plan seemed absurd. Kimson depended on finding an ace pilot insane and skilled enough to transit the dead channels and finish off the mother cluster with one real shot. Mia might be the only pilot in the galaxy who fit that description.

She'd have to punch Kimson when she got back. He sat in a ship outside the cloud while she flew through its heart, dodging and weaving the insistent strands that refused to leave her alone.

The mother cluster tendrils grew and moved far faster than the hyphal strands she'd encountered in the rest of the cloud. It was hard to think of them as anything other than the tendrils of a giant beast.

A tendril whipped her way and forced her to open fire. More tendrils erupted from the cluster, drawn in by the fresh prepackaged meal that had delivered herself to them.

Mia carved through the fungi jungle with her cannon. All the while she threaded her fighter through the tendrils and toward the surface of the mother cluster.

She dropped toward the surface and spun her fighter to dodge two tendrils shooting out. Mia strafed the base of two tendrils and rolled to her side. She needed a small, temporary opening.

It was time to apply her so-called superior human mind. She needed to outthink something with no brain. How hard could it be?

A small open patch on the cluster tempted her. She accelerated and charged the surface. Incessant radiation alarms joined with collision alert warnings to cry for her attention. She ignored both and launched the antifungal missile.

Mia lifted the nose of her ship and turned away from the surface. She fired off a swarm of decoys and launched the rest of her missiles, all with conventional payloads. The tendrils headed toward her fighter and the antifungal missile twisted toward the decoys and other missiles. Her deception didn't work for long, seconds at most. That was all the main missile needed.

The explosion was anticlimactic, an impressive impact followed by a bright flash. Seconds later, Mia got what she wanted. The impact site darkened into a brown-black color. A wave of similar color spread over the mother cluster and through strands connecting to the rest of the cloud.

Kimson had told her the concentrated radiation delivered to the mother cluster would be far more effective than the radiation from the particle cannons. She hadn't expected it to be that immediate and impressive.

The dead channel she'd used for entry was blocked. She bobbed and wove through the strands, looking for another exit. The tendrils from the cluster had ceased the attack. Others grew from the rest of the cloud, trying to grab her until the darkness shot through them.

Chunks of the hyphae ripped free. They weren't asteroids, but Mia didn't want to test her ability to survive a direct collision with a dead piece of space fungus bigger than a ship.

Mia's mission continued to extend her record for hyper-focus. Not using the ability for the last month might have been why she wasn't losing consciousness. Dropping back to normal processing wouldn't work when the area continued filling with fungal debris. She had to escape before she could relax.

Her fighter's alarms screamed at her about critical radiation and heat levels threatening the fighter and the pilot. The cloud's cascading death allowed the hidden star's brightness to peek through, along with its deadly emissions.

Major portions of the cloud floated away from the star. Others plummeted toward the white dwarf for their final

demise. The radiation warnings grew more insistent. She didn't have much longer before her life would be at risk.

Mia spotted an opening. She zigzagged through the dying fungus to slip into the escape path. Darkness swept toward the living fungus on both sides. A strand grew from one side until the wave of death reached it. The structure snapped off, twitching before dying.

Her fighter sped through the channel. A patchwork of living and dead fungus surrounded her. The dying space fungus remained a threat as the channel filled with it. Rapid loss of cell integrity led to rapid depressurization throughout the entire fungal cloud. Heavy pieces blasted away from the bodies and strands.

Mia's stomach complained about her aggressive maneuvers. She screamed through the channel at speeds far greater than she'd used for entry. All the skill and effort brought her safely to the end of the channel with nowhere else to go.

She hadn't known if there had never been a full exit or the cloud's death covered it. With no time to think, she did what she did best and opened fire.

Mia spun her fighter in a full circle to carve an exit. The impact from her cannons pushed the fungal wall into space and provided her with a tiny window to escape.

Her fighter burst from inside her mortistellar prison. Her sensors and proximity alarms let her know she hadn't escaped all threats. Dead and dying fungal chunks floated everywhere like an ultra-dense asteroid field. Surviving hyphae thrashed through space and darkened as death passed through them.

Mia pulled away from the cloud. There were too many obstacles. The only choice left was to choose what should hit her. She tried to find a place where she could risk bailing out without fungus getting on her suit.

Bright flashes cut through the dying cloud. A flight of drones tunneled through the debris field.

“Thank you, Jon,” Mia announced. She flew through the cleared space before the death throes of the cloud filled it again.

“Are you okay, Mia?” Jon sounded worried.

She released her hyper-focus and let out a long sigh of relief. “There’s nothing wrong with me that an antirad injection and a few hours of sleep won’t fix.”

Mia smiled and hoped her next recovery coma wouldn’t put her out for two days.

CHAPTER FIVE

By the time Mia returned to the station, she felt much better about everything. Despite her heavy use of hyper-focus, her recovery coma had been only a couple of hours, not days. More importantly, Ito delivered good news in the engine room of the *Erinyes*.

“We’re ready to go. I even got the sim systems back up and running since you were off space gardening.”

“We’re fully repaired?” Mia asked. “Top to bottom?”

“Top to bottom. We’re ready for whatever crazy mission you have in mind next.” Ito grinned. “That’s assuming you don’t go starting more bar brawls. I can always tear the engines out and upgrade them. That would take a while, so I don’t know, maybe three crews’ worth of beatings?”

“That situation’s been handled.” Mia chuckled. “There won’t be more crew beatings or mortistellar exterminations.”

Ito’s smile faltered. “That’s my point. I joked about it, but you took care of the situation by taking on something crazy. I’m not going to pretend you don’t have your reasons to lose it, but if you go down, this crew doesn’t have a chance against the conspiracy. You can’t end up in a situation like that again.”

“I know. Trust me, I know. I had plenty of time to think about it in the cell.” Mia headed toward the door. “I guarantee it won’t happen again.”

“Then what’s the plan? Since our guest is a buddy of the station manager, do you plan to stick around longer?”

“No. We’ve overstayed our welcome here as is. We’ll be leaving in a few hours. I want to go over some things to ensure we’re ready.”

“Love,” Debbie II chimed in. “Mr. Kimson is waiting in bay two to speak to you.”

Mia hadn’t expected him back. He’d been satisfied with the pest work and mentioned needing to go away to talk to someone about relocation.

“I’ll be right there.”

Ito frowned. “Don’t let him talk you into anything else. Even friendly station managers can use people they think are good tools.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll leave today. One way or another.” She smiled. “I’m sure he wants to say his goodbyes to Athena Smith.”

Mia jogged into the bay. Kimson waited there by himself. That didn’t surprise her. Debbie II wouldn’t have allowed an armed force into the ship without at least warning the crew. A short chat and she could send him away.

Kimson looked around the bay with a grim expression. “Where’s your dad? I need to talk to him right away.”

“He’s handling something.” Leaving the station would free her from another annoying lie. “If it’s about getting a drink, we have to leave soon. We can’t do more jobs if that’s what this is about. We have things to take care of.”

“You’re leaving?” Kimson nodded. “That’s just as well. It’s for the best.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble I caused.” Mia smiled sheepishly. “I know you have no reason to believe me, but I’m not a woman who gets drunk and starts fights.”

She didn’t point out that she’d started plenty of fights without being drunk.

“That’s not it, not exactly.” Kimson shrugged. “Fights happen here. You don’t get smugglers and criminals together in a place like this without trouble. I might not let this place operate full pirate like it used to, but it’s not a fancy place.” He sighed. “I hoped they didn’t recognize you, Mia.”

Mia frowned. “What are you talking about? My name is Athena.”

Kimson chuckled. “Is Athena the alias or Mia?” He shrugged. “You look more like a Mia.”

Mia’s jaw clenched. Her hand drifted toward the holster in her jacket. “You didn’t bring your security.”

“Because I’m not here to screw with you. First of all, you’re Jon’s daughter. Second of all, you took out that mortistellar cloud. That not only helps me, it helps everybody in this sector.”

His dogged insistence she was still Jon’s daughter surprised Mia. She let it go for the moment.

“If you’re not going to turn me in, what is this about?”

“I’m not surprised Jon’s daughter pissed off the KCAP government. I don’t believe any of the crap they’re putting out about you being a terrorist. I don’t need to know all the details, but I’m guessing they found him, and they’re trying to put pressure on you to get to him.”

“Oh.” Mia grimaced. “Something like that. How long have you known?”

“I had you in holding for a while. Nanospray disguises don’t hold up that well. You’re not the first person to use a disguise on this station that my security has had to throw in a cell. Once Jon contacted me, things made more sense. He called you Athena, so I went along with it. I know he was trying to protect me as much as he was you.”

Mia hadn’t been sure. She’d assumed since no one had threatened her over the bounty, she’d fooled them.

“There’s a problem, though. That’s why you’re here admitting you know who I am. Our ship is repaired and ready

to go. Your inspection..." Her eyes widened. "You told me there weren't any spores on my fighter."

Kimson waved in front of him. "That's true. This is about you and your bounty."

"Oh?" Mia kept her tone neutral. Kimson looked troubled, not hostile.

"There's a good chance the smugglers you roughed up might have contacted the KCAP authorities. We monitor certain frequencies in case somebody gets the bright idea to cause trouble for us by bringing in the navy. You can never be too careful when you run a place like this."

He shook his head. "We left the smugglers alone because what you did to them was more punishment than anything we could, but we kept an eye on them and their ship before they left and when they came back, especially after they came back. I didn't think they would come back so soon."

Mia lowered her hand. "Let me guess, they were looking around the docks?"

Kimson nodded. "I heard they asked around about you and the ship you came in on. I think they wanted to verify you were still here. It was the one with the beard, Adi. He's still pretty messed up even with all the QuickHeal patches, so people felt bad and talked to him more than they usually would."

"I haven't seen him near the ship. You think they're going to ambush me? I'm not getting off the ship again."

"You beat them like they were children. No sane crew goes after someone who's done that to them." He frowned. "They had another plan. They sent an encrypted transmission on a KCAP emergency frequency before we could bring up jamming."

Mia facepalmed. "Damn it. You weren't the only one who saw through me."

"I've got them all in cells now." Kimson shrugged. "Because technically, they were brawling on my station and came back after I told them to get the hell away for a while. As

far as my people can tell, they didn't get anything out but that first transmission."

"How do you know it was about me?" Mia asked. "Plenty of bounties must come through here. I'm sure if I checked my security feeds for the docks, I could pick out one or two."

Kimson shook his head. "Adi said he was going to get his revenge and a big payday on 'the bitch who messed me up. I should have known she was a terrorist.'" He shrugged. "The only thing we don't know is if anyone received the message. We should assume they did. It's the only safe way to proceed."

Mia sighed. "I'm sorry. I never meant to bring trouble to this station, let alone the KCAP."

"I know. They're the last people you want to see. You registered your ship with a false name. You used the disguise. I get it. You tried not to make problems, and you let the booze take over. I'm not going to stand here and pretend I never let my liquor do my talking and fighting when I was younger. I figure between getting locked up and lectured by your dad that you learned your lesson."

She couldn't take it anymore.

"Jon isn't my dad. I helped his son out of a tight spot, and we helped rescue his dad from bad people in the KCAP."

Kimson's brow lifted. "That works for me, too. He wouldn't have stuck his neck out for you like that if you weren't friends. Thanks for telling me, but that doesn't change the problem."

Mia thought back to her discussion with Breen, the manager of the fuel station she'd invaded over his anger in rejecting her supply requests following a bounty hunter attack. He'd warned her that her path would bring trouble to her friends.

"If they come for me, even if I'm here, that doesn't change the fact this is an illegal, unregistered station. They'll seize control if not destroy it outright. You told me before the KCAP patrols have been aggressive in recent months."

“That might be a problem if you hadn’t cleared out another sector for us. I’m moving up my schedule. This station won’t be here soon. If the station isn’t here, there’s no problem with the navy.”

“You didn’t have to tell me about this. You could have let me go and used information about me as leverage with the KCAP government. It’d be easy to redirect their patrol toward me and give yourself more time.”

Kimson frowned. “Is that what you think I should do? You think I should sell out the woman who helped secure my future and the man who set me up where I am now?”

“It’s a high bounty. I wouldn’t blame you after bringing the trouble to your doorstep. You haven’t seen Jon in years. You might never see us again.”

“Is that what you’d do? Would you use your friends as decoys and profit from it because it was convenient? I get that you’re ruthless. A woman who can beat a man as badly as you beat Adi is ruthless. That’s not the same thing as hating loyalty.”

“I only send danger toward my enemies.” Mia shook her head. “You’re not my enemy.”

“You might not be the daughter of an old friend, but his friends are my friends.” Kimson patted her shoulder. “We both live outside the law for our own reasons, and I know the government did awful things to Jon. If you helped him escape them again, they were probably doing bad things again to him.”

“They hurt him,” Mia admitted. “They hurt him badly.”

Kimson’s face darkened. “Yeah. Outsiders like us have to look out for one another, even when it’s tough. Otherwise, we’ll end up crushed underneath the KCAP’s boot heel.”

He stepped away. “We don’t have time to talk. We both need to get ready to move. The best way to avoid getting swept up by the navy is to not be here if and when they arrive.”

“What if they show up before you’ve moved?”

“I’m not worried about the first ships. You see, I did a variation of your plan.” He grinned.

“A variation?”

“I sent a signal and told them we have you in custody. I have a ship waiting to meet them a sector over because I said I didn’t want someone so dangerous aboard. They bought it and insisted they’d send a cruiser right away.”

“That’s not going to hold them long. They’ll figure it out soon.”

Kimson grinned. “My fake Mia prisoner ship will send a Mayday about the prisoner escaping and stealing a shuttle while another ship arrives to pick them up. By the time the navy shows up, they’ll find a debris field from a destroyed ship.

“They’ll also detect escape pod signals they’ll have to check on to ensure you’re not floating through space laughing at them. All the pods will be empty, but it’ll burn off time. Even if they order another patrol to this station right away, it’ll be too late.”

Mia laughed. “That’s elaborate. I’m glad you thought it through.”

“I’ve been running these places for years. This isn’t my first time diverting the navy. I doubt the KCAP has more than a small patrol in the area. By the time they gather anything major and see through the trick, we’ll both be gone.”

He headed toward the ramp leading out of the bay. “It was nice meeting you and working with you, even for a short time. I don’t know all of what you’re up to with Jon, but both of you stay alive.”

“We’ll try our best. Good luck to you.”

Kimson headed down the ramp and left Mia with her thoughts.

Outsiders like us have to look out for one another, even when it’s tough.

Mia's mission had started with only her. She'd left home without any plans to recruit anyone else. It had never occurred to her to try.

Running into Abigail had been pure luck since it depended on Detective Howel deciding to help her and his knowledge of Abigail. Establishing her relationships at the academy was the result of effort and luck.

Without all of those people helping her, she'd be dead or in prison. Even worse, she'd be in a Protocol lab somewhere being used as Doctor Icaryus' toy.

In the beginning, Mia didn't believe she needed any help. She hadn't understood the scale of the mission. Naïve assumptions that her abilities would allow her to triumph over any obstacles had drawn the wrong attention and almost gotten her killed.

Along the way, the months turned into years and she'd gathered a crew that allowed her to wound the Protocol. She'd killed important members, disrupted their supply chains, and destroyed a major research facility. None of that could have happened without the help of others. She understood that on a deep, fundamental level.

A seed implanted itself in the back of her mind, the kernel of an idea. Everywhere she'd traveled, she'd convinced herself that her crew were the only ones she could trust. Galik and Carana, among others, had proven that wasn't true. Countless people in and out of the KCAP wanted to stand up to evil. They didn't know how.

Mia couldn't be naïve again. There was no way she'd beat an enemy with an army and a fleet without an army and fleet of her own. This wouldn't end in a one-on-one duel with Icaryus.

She shook her head and jogged out of the bay. She didn't have time right then to plan for the future. Assuming the navy would only have a ship or two was too dangerous. The *Erinyes* needed to get out of there before a carrier group showed up or an anchor surrounded by destroyers.

“Debbie II, is everyone aboard the ship?” she asked.

“Yes. All systems are in working order. Ito isn’t in the process of any major repairs.”

“Then make sure this goes through,” Mia ordered and drew a deep breath. “All crew, prepare for immediate departure. All pilots suit up and get your fighters ready. Trouble is coming. My plan is to get out of here before it arrives, but we might not be so lucky.”

Ito replied over comms, “I just fixed the ship, and you’re going to break it again? You better not explain if you let destroyers shoot up our side-space drive.”

“I’ve got a simple solution to that.”

“Which is?”

“Getting the hell out of here before they show up.”

A day later, after several slides and an aggressive serving of sneak mode, Mia gathered the crew and Jon Senior in the briefing room. They needed to make their next move right away, especially with the navy on their tail. Playing too defensively was bound to fail.

“I would have liked Vorhees to have been present for this but I need him alive until this is over.” Mia looked at Jon Senior.

Jon Senior looked away. “It’s a trigger. I can’t help it. It’s not like I want to hurt him, but when I see him, the programming kicks in and I just...”

“It’s not his fault,” Jon Junior pleaded.

Mia sighed. “I know that, but it doesn’t change the reality. For now, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that we decide what to do next and come up with a practical mission plan. Vorhees and you have provided useful intel over the last few weeks, but with us stuck on the station for a month, the value of that intel has decayed.”

Paul frowned. "Vorhees has been with us for longer than a month."

"Exactly," Mia confirmed. "His intel's far staler than Jon Senior's. We can't be certain how useful it'll be even if he's more motivated lately. We know how the cache hunting went, and that was before we riled up the entire conspiracy and KCAP. Although Vorhees admitted he has a few more tricks that might help us before a fight. Once he uses them, he won't be much more useful."

"That's like him all but admitting you should kill him." Paul sounded surprised.

"Which is why I believe him." Mia shrugged. "I'd rather he remains useful for as long as possible." She nodded at Jon Senior. "Our resident Reaper's intel is fresher. He's our best bet."

"Vorhees' intel isn't only that, though," Karin reminded them. "It's broad in scope." She nodded at Jon Senior. "Even he's admitted the operational details given to the Reaper teams are limited. Even if his brain wasn't fried from all their drugs, there's only so much he can give us."

Once the bulk of the control drugs washed from his system, Jon Senior had been cooperative, giving Mia more insight into Reaper tactics, weapons, and operations. The information was useful for training, but the lack of strategic context made it less useful for planning. He'd told her the base the terrorist squads had been using was destroyed when they'd set out for Kordell. The conspiracy didn't want any evidence to interfere with their claims. That was all consistent with what they'd found when they went after their last Reaper base.

Charlie cleared his throat, but it came off more like a deep growl. "We can't be on defense. We need to hit them harder, and we need something that'll complicate operations between the regular KCAP and the conspiracy. The next time we land at a station, the manager could call the KCAP right away."

Ryoko looked confused. "Like, what are we supposed to do? If we had anything convenient like that, wouldn't we have used it before?"

Kain folded her arms. “There has to be something.”

“I get what he’s saying.” Mia looked down as she pondered different strategies. “We need to think about what our primary and immediate needs are. First, we need substantial, documented, fresh intel that tells us where to strike to do the most damage to the Protocol.

“Second, we also need intel that provides evidence against the Protocol and will help exonerate our crew and wake up the rest of the KCAP to the truth of the damned conspiracy.” She held up her palm. “The second part doesn’t have to happen right away.”

Jon Senior shot out of his seat.

Charlie bared his teeth. “Sit down.”

“Sorry.” Jon Senior held his hands in front of him. He sat. “It’s been so hard with my brain and memories the way they have been, but when you put it that way, there’s an obvious target. It’s like your words knocked the memories loose.”

“What’s the target?” Mia asked.

“Ice.”

Mia scoffed. Disappointment filled her. “The Black Ice facility was shut down. The nearby lab was destroyed. To be clear, Charlie and I blew it up. There’s nothing left there for us but frozen ashes of Icaryus clones.”

Jon Senior stared at her with a confused look. “You didn’t blow up the planet.”

“The lab is a crater,” Charlie rumbled. “We made sure. There’s nothing left.”

Jon Senior shook his head. “You don’t understand. Ice is a whole planet, not just the one base and prison.”

“I know there are other prisons—” Mia gasped. “You’re saying there are other labs there?”

“Not exactly,” Jon replied. “Black Ice wasn’t the only prison there controlled by the Protocol. There are still working Protocol personnel on Ice screening for useful genetic material

among other things, including using prisoners for experiments.”

Mia narrowed her eyes. “Experiments? Are you telling me Icaryus is there?”

Jon shook his head. “Not Icaryus. There’s a doctor at a facility there, Laalim.”

“I know that dead-eyed bitch. She was part of my intake process at Black Ice. I assumed she’d been killed and tossed in a hole somewhere when they shut down her first prison.”

“I don’t know much about her. She’s in a sort of exile on Ice. She’s a former war criminal who fled the corpos, came to the KCAP, and was scouted by Protocol.”

Mia snorted. “Because her willingness to do terrible things without asking too many questions about morality was useful to the Protocol.”

He nodded. “Exactly. Whatever she was doing at Black Ice, she’s doing something worse at the new facility. I’ve seen brief report summaries about sample death rates, and it’s clear the samples are people. There’s a new project there, something different than whatever was going on with Cadmus.”

Mia groaned. “This isn’t a prison ship. Abducting people and keeping them out of trouble is annoying. If she’s anything like Ryle, it’ll be hard to get anything useful out of her.”

“You don’t need to capture her, not really. You only need to access the new facility, and you can rip the database with your AI. After that, you just need to record what she’s doing.” Jon’s expression hardened. “Whatever it is, it’ll be awful. That’ll make useful propaganda.”

He frowned. “The only thing is I’m not sure where she is right now or the exact location of the prison on Ice.”

“This woman was moved after I was on Ice. That helps narrow things down,” Mia mused.

“How?” Paul sounded concerned.

“Because that wasn’t recent. Unless two other supersoldiers went to Ice to blow up another facility, there’s no

reason to expect the Protocol to have moved her.” She nodded at Jon Senior. “If the average Reaper doesn’t know where she is, there’s no reason for them to have moved her even if they believe Jon Senior’s still alive.”

Paul groaned. “I don’t get it.”

“Not all intel decays at the same rate. Sometimes a woman doesn’t know what she knows until someone points it out.” She headed toward the door. “I’m going to go have a chat with Vorhees.”

Vorhees shuddered. “Doctor Laalim? There’s a name I wish I could scrub from my brain.”

“Oh?” Mia snickered. “I thought you didn’t believe you could judge people.”

“I never said that. I said I couldn’t judge who was right or wrong in using my weapons. That’s not the same thing as being a complete relativist. I might be a brutal killer, and I’m not going to claim I’ve never had a man tortured, but it’s different than the experiments that woman is doing. She’s not human. No human could do what she does.”

Mia didn’t want to get drawn into another philosophical debate with Vorhees. She needed to keep the conversation focused while also verifying her other intel.

“Do you know where she is?” Mia asked.

“As of the time you kidnapped me, she was stationed on Ice. The Protocol needed a surprising number of weapons and equipment for that place.” Vorhees shook his head. “I never cared much what they did with it. I also didn’t want to hear about it.”

“I know she’s on Ice. That’s not enough. It’s an entire planet. I can’t search every building without getting caught. She used to be at Black Ice, but they’ve closed that one down. That’s why I need to know where else she might be.”

“Oh, I know the exact prison facility she’s working.” Vorhees shrugged. “Or at least where she was working after they transferred her.”

“We’ll assume she’s at the same place.” Mia nodded at his datapad. “Input it in there, and Debbie II will do the rest.”

“What do I get for this?” Vorhees licked his lips.

“I keep ensuring Jon Senior is never in the same room as you. That’s one thing. I’m letting you wander the ship already. You should be grateful.”

Vorhees’ mouth twitched. He reached toward his eyepatch, the lasting evidence of the brutal attack on him by the supersoldier. He entered the information. “There you go. Just remember if this goes well, I’m the one who gave you what you needed.”

“You always remember that I haven’t killed you when we both know you deserve it.”

CHAPTER SIX

Harsh memories flooded Mia's mind as she entered the galley. Violence and death had filled her life since leaving home and starting her mission. Her time on Ice had hardened her and taught her about the true depravity that could consume humans.

Combat training wasn't the same thing as being in battle. True life-and-death struggles against people had to be experienced and seared onto one's soul. Prison survival was made even worse by forcing decisions over killing that wouldn't happen anywhere else.

As much as she'd suffered, she'd met people like Flip who didn't have the means nor opportunity to escape their fates. Ice was a shrine to everything wrong with humanity, a place where brutality supplanted reason.

Mia had completed her first mission on Ice and helped give Charlie his humanity back. The files she'd found in the lab had formed the basis of her mission against the Protocol. By that measure, she couldn't complain about having gone there.

That didn't mean she held zero regrets. She'd failed to save Flip from his false imprisonment, let alone keep him alive. Flip's fate provided a stark reminder that the Protocol was terrible but hardly the only source of corruption in the KCAP. Darkness spread easier without light to push it back.

Now she was returning to hunt down a monster pretending to be a doctor. When she'd met Laalim years prior, she'd never

suspected the woman would prove so important. If she'd known the truth, she would have killed the doctor before leaving Ice.

Mia turned at the sound of a scraping chair, surprised to see Charlie there finishing off a rack of ribs. Sometimes the huge man could disappear into a corner, a surprising skill. However, perhaps she shouldn't be so surprised, given his ability to come and go in the harsh environment and appear out of nowhere. Ice had hardened them both and turned them into stronger hunters.

Her appetite swallowed by the dark memories, Mia sat across from Charlie. He was the only person aboard who would understand what she'd gone through. "Do you have time to talk?"

Charlie tore a chunk of meat from his ribs. "Yes." He set the meat down. "What's wrong?"

"I look that bad?"

"There's something off. I've known you long enough I can tell."

"Is it a smell thing?"

"Maybe." Charlie shrugged. "I can just tell."

Mia sighed. "We're going back to Ice. I thought it wouldn't bother me so much because I've been back there before, but I can't shake the memories. I don't know if it's because what happened on Kordell has messed me up, and now I've lost control."

"You haven't lost control. You're just having a hard time. Even drunk, you didn't kill those smugglers. What's bothering you about Ice? Was that the first place you had to kill?"

"No." Mia stared at her hands. "I'd killed men before I got there, and that didn't faze me. They were trying to kill me, and I knew it was them or me." She frowned. "Ice wasn't my introduction to violence and death. Everything about that place, though..."

“It’s not the violence or the killing. It’s not even what I did there. It’s what I knew I was becoming. I was only there a month, and it was warping me. The nature of the place was fusing with what my dad taught me to turn me into something I didn’t like, something far more dangerous than a soldier.”

“You were worried about turning into a monster?” Charlie looked thoughtful.

“Yes.”

“A Cannibal King? Something like me? There are worse taboos than killing. I don’t deny that.”

“I’m sorry.” Mia winced. “That’s not what I was getting at, but I’m being selfish. I keep acting like I’m the only person aboard who suffered in that hellhole. I’d have to stay there a whole lifetime to begin to match what you went through being alone with no hope and having to risk your freedom by raiding the lab. Or have you worked through all this, and it’s just me?”

“I think about it more than you know. I don’t regret what I had to do to survive, and the men I took out didn’t deserve to live. I didn’t struggle with it even in the beginning, but I also accepted how far I’d fallen from humanity by the time I met you.” He looked off in the distance. “Do you remember what I was like when you first tried to talk to me?”

Mia nodded. “It was like you hadn’t spoken in years. I was surprised when you formed words. Before then, it was all growls and roars. I wasn’t sure if you were more animal than person.”

“Because I was, and I hadn’t spoken in years. I’d become the beast in almost every way that mattered. I was so strong I didn’t need that much cunning to survive. Things grew easier. I hunted when I was hungry and avoided the prison and the lab otherwise.”

Charlie bared his teeth and growled. “It was the life of an animal. I fed on prey. I slept. I raided the lab when a small part remembered where I could get medical supplies. I was alive, yet I wasn’t living as a man. I’d died in a way years before then and only came back to life when you found me.”

Mia took it all in. Charlie had suffered more from the beginning. He'd been warped as part of the first generation of Icaryus' experiments after volunteering and believing he was there to serve the confederation. Instead, they'd betrayed and changed him until he barely looked human.

How much of his becoming the Cannibal King had been a psychological coping strategy? A way of dealing with what he'd become? A calmer Charlie could have extorted the inmates for supplies. Instead, he allowed himself to fuse with the darkness until only a monster remained.

"I wish we had another option," Mia replied. "Anything but going back to that place and finding an insane, twisted war criminal doctor working for the Protocol and running more experiments." She snorted. "It's the ironic part about this entire situation when I think about it. Some of our greatest victories against the Protocol have been on that planet, teaming up, destroying the lab, and taking out the clones. I suppose it's inevitable that we would go back there again. It's only too bad the real Icaryus isn't there."

A shudder ran through her at the memory of the horror of the mutant Icaryus clones. They'd gotten far too close to escaping. The Protocol might have won already if Charlie and Mia hadn't blown up the lab.

Charlie managed a weak smile. "We hurt them there. If there is such a thing as fate, its twisted sense of humor has brought us there again to help push toward our goal as it did to bring you to me. No one else could have made it work. No one else could have saved me. Most wouldn't have bothered to try."

Mia admitted, "It's the same for me in a way. I didn't grow up knowing what I was. Even after my dad's death and when I learned what I was, I was still alienated. My friends can't ever understand what it means to be as different as I am, unlike you."

She sighed. "Finding Abigail was finding a mom, but finding you... Well, you're the brother I never knew I wanted.

I'll always have mixed emotions about Ice because of that. It's the source of joy and pain to me."

"All places are that if you wait long enough. Although you're right. Ice is a constant reminder of what the Protocol did to us and those we care about, which is why we can't let them have power over us. We'll destroy them and their evil, no matter how many times it takes."

"I get it. I also understand that if I could go back to it before, I can do it again. Going back means weakening the Protocol more, and the weaker they get, the easier it'll be to deliver the final blow."

"Do you think it's close?"

"I don't know." Mia shrugged. "My instincts tell me yes, but that could be wishful thinking. I'll return to Ice a hundred times if that's what it takes. This isn't like the first time I went there. We're going on my terms with the crew and all the improvements to the ship. Also, this time I have you."

She nodded firmly. "We're family now, and we're a family that won't be defeated. We'll get our revenge for everything the Protocol did to our loved ones and us together."

Charlie smiled. "Good. That's the right way to approach this."

She turned at the sound of the door opening. Jon Senior and Jon Junior stepped into the galley. Both men cast worried looks at Mia and Charlie.

"Speaking of family." Mia chuckled.

"You two have these serious looks on your faces," Jon Junior observed. "Is something wrong? The mortistellar fungus would have spread by now if your fighter was contaminated."

"Nothing like that." Mia shook her head. "We were going through the bad old times. Not that much different than you two. The Protocol has been messing with your life and family from the beginning, and that leaves baggage to deal with when we keep going up against them."

Jon Senior headed over to grab a bowl without responding. Only after he'd dispensed soup and sat at another table did he say anything. "They made me like they made Charlie. It was a little different between me and you."

"Not that different from me," Jon Junior noted. He grabbed a couple of pieces of fruit and sat by his father. "The whole situation will never stop feeling weird. I didn't know their name before. They were this shadow haunting my entire life, this monster that frightened even my perfect father, and now I'm part of a crew hunting them down. The thing is, I don't feel scared anymore. I feel angry."

"That's good," Jon Senior replied. "You should be happy to fight them, and I'm glad I can fight them too after everything they've done to both of us."

He glared at his soup like it was responsible for the Protocol's abuse. "I don't care that they made me. I don't care that they gave me all these skills and abilities. I never thought of them as parents or anyone deserving of gratitude because they never viewed me as anything but a tool. That much was always clear, so I escaped from them, and all they did was drug me and throw me into a suicide mission once they got me back. Sometimes I worry that they broke me."

"You got free," Jon Junior countered. "You didn't kill me when you had the chance when all your programming told you to do that."

"I came close." Jon Senior shook his head. "You have no idea how close."

"You didn't do it, though." Mia felt bad about how she'd reacted to him on the mortistellar mission. "You risked your life to save your son, not only in Felsk but before. That means you've always been stronger than you realize because they controlled you before and you broke free."

"Only because they were less reliant on the drugs then. They used them on all the Reapers of my generation, but they use more now."

“They still used drugs,” Mia countered. “They raised you and filled your head with the desire to serve only their purpose. Breaking free of that means something.”

“I haven’t broken free enough not to want to hurt Vorhees.”

Mia kept her expression calm. “Hey, I want to hurt Vorhees just because of what he says,” she joked.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. The point is you broke free before, and the more time you spend away from them, the more you’ll regain full control. Then you can be with your son without worrying.”

Jon Senior smiled at his son. “I had to do it. There was no other choice. I understood that I was a disposable tool to them. If they found out about my son, he’d become nothing more than another tool for them to grind away with use before throwing in the trash.”

He frowned. “He almost did become their tool. They took his freedom, and they were trying to take his soul. If it weren’t for you, I don’t know what would have happened to him.”

Mia shrugged. “I did what anyone would do. I wasn’t going to leave a man to that fate.”

Jon Senior laughed. “You think anyone could locate that base, get past the defenses, and handle a half-drugged second-generation supersoldier? Even then, do you think they would try so hard to avoid killing him?”

“You have a point there.”

“We’re all family and related in a way,” Charlie rumbled. “We need to remember we’re also special.”

“What are you talking about?” Mia asked.

Charlie looked sad. “I wish we could save all the Reapers, but the Protocol won’t make it that easy. This won’t end without spilling more blood. We have to be prepared to kill whoever stands in our way, or the Protocol will take away everyone’s freedom.”

“Not all the Reapers want to be free,” Mia concluded. “Not all of them have something to live for like Jon does.” She nodded firmly. “Don’t worry. I won’t let sentiment get in the way of the mission. It’s not like I did before.”

She looked around the room. “The only person in this room I didn’t seriously try to kill is Jon Junior.”

Jon Junior swallowed a piece of apple. “I’m honored, but that’s a little scary.”

“You know how ruthless I am. We’ve gotten lucky with you and your father. I doubt we’ll get that lucky again.”

Mia frowned. “The best way to give any remaining supersoldiers a chance at freedom is to take out the people controlling the Protocol. Without a conspiracy manipulating their minds and bodies, they might have a chance to find the peace we all have.”

“What if you can’t save any of them?”

Mia shrugged. “I’m going to be honest. Saving Reapers isn’t a mission objective. Right now, we need to save the KCAP by stopping the conspiracy.

“Everyone with me on this mission has chosen to fight of their own free will. I respect that, and I’m not forcing anyone to follow me. Everyone in this galley understands on a deep level, far deeper than the rest of the crew, how twisted and evil the Protocol is. It might come down to us having to give our lives to stop those monsters. I’m not afraid of that, and you all must understand that’s my level of commitment.”

After exchanging looks, they fell into silence. Charlie and the Smiths returned to eating their food.

Mia didn’t regret anything she’d said. They’d all come too far to let emotions overwhelm them, and they all needed to understand the end goal of the mission. She’d faced her demons and sent them back to hell. They’d all have to do that before they could slice the cancer that was the Pluribus Draconis Protocol from the galaxy. The only other choices were death and slavery.

“We’ll never be safe until they’re destroyed,” Jon Senior concluded. “I’m not like you, Mia. This isn’t about a grand quest to save humanity. I just want to be able to live with my son without having to look over my shoulder.”

“You’re wrong. You’re just like me. In the end, strip it all away, and this comes back to the same thing, revenge. I’m not so great. It just happens to turn out me getting my revenge helps save people along the way.”

Jon Senior turned to Charlie. “What about you? When this is all over, what do you plan to do?”

Charlie stared at him as a slow frown formed. An uncomfortable silence passed between them.

“Stay with my new family,” he finally replied. “I’ll stay with Mia.”

There was a hint of something in his voice. Mia wasn’t sure. She almost wanted to say it was uncertainty.

“Even without the Protocol, you might never be accepted in normal society,” Jon Senior observed.

Was that what it was? Charlie hadn’t faced the truth? That was unlikely. He’d always been far more pragmatic about the limitations of normal socialization.

Charlie shrugged. “We’ll find a way. It doesn’t matter until we destroy the Protocol anyway.”

“Yes.” Mia smiled. “We will. I didn’t drag you off Ice to let you go back to playing hermit somewhere. The important thing is when this is all over, we’ll make our own choices. The Protocol won’t force us. That’s all any of us can ask.”

The Smiths nodded with the same determined look. They’d been hounded and their lives constrained by the ever-present threat of the Protocol for decades. Together, they’d take their lives back, starting by helping Mia raid Ice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Do they expect a Bleaker Beacon to show up?” Paul transmitted, sounding exasperated. “This is crazy.”

Mia’s entire flight sat in their cockpits, their fighters parked in the bay and ready to launch while Ito flew the stealthed *Erinyes* to their destination. The plan included no offensive sortie at any time during the mission, but she couldn’t risk being caught flatfooted if detected.

The *Erinyes* slid into the system days away from Ice to avoid drawing any attention. They’d alternated using the basic Obfuscate System and sneak mode on their way to the planet. The tension left everyone on edge. Infiltrating a prison system they’d riled up before wasn’t as easy as hitting an asteroid or moon in the Fringe.

Their final approach using sneak mode restricted their use of active sensor systems. That didn’t stop their passive sensors from spotting the fleet babysitting Ice, including two carrier groups.

Paul’s joke wasn’t far from the truth. The force present could take on a Bleaker Beacon. Her team had no chance of winning against that level of defense. Even more worrisome, the passive sensors also confirmed the presence of an anchor ship.

Mia assumed her ground operation would alert the garrison, but her team wasn’t doomed. Even a large and impressive fleet couldn’t cover every square kilometer of space. The anchor’s side-space envelope disruption had

limited range. They'd have to ensure their sneak mode stayed active and break atmo on the other side of the planet.

"That confirms it," Mia concluded. "This has to be the Protocol's doing. The KCAP government wouldn't waste that many ships to guard a prison planet they barely pay attention to otherwise."

"You think those ships have been there since the last time we showed up?" Karin asked.

"No," Mia replied. "I think after what we did on Kordell, the Protocol has reinforced any place important to their operations. We disrupted their plan. That lets them know we have access to intel about their operations, but they don't know how much and where we're getting it from, even if they know about Vorhees. They'll have to tread carefully and cover their asses."

"If the fleet detects us, we're ash," Paul concluded.

"We've gotten this close with sneak mode," Mia replied. "No reason to think it'll fail all of a sudden."

"I'd rather not fight them," Ryoko offered. "I know we might have to, but they are the KCAP Navy. They might not know why they were assigned here."

"We're not going to fight unless we have no choice," Mia confirmed. "Make no mistake. It's more likely the Protocol is assigning conspiracy-controlled commanders to key positions. Anyway, this isn't about morality. It's about simple survival. Paul's right. We're not good enough to beat that many ships on our own."

"What if we have to?"

"Then we stick to our backup plan for this scenario. We take out the anchor and slide away. Immediate sneak mode. Travel, slide. Sneak mode again. Standard protocol."

Mia studied the sensor readout. "The bulk of the fleet is deployed in near geosync orbit with the penal facility. The Protocol doesn't want us down there. Ito, we'll sweep around wide. We spent two days coming here the slow way already. Adding another half-day won't hurt."

“Roger,” Ito replied.

“Everyone else, stand down,” Mia ordered. “No point in being tense all day now that we know where they are. We’ll ready up when we’re about to break atmo.”

Her datapad in hand, Mia sat at her desk in her quarters reviewing the limited information Debbie II had collected on the prison. She would have preferred a detailed floor plan with personnel assignments. The best Debbie II could provide was information suggesting a standardized layout for most of the facilities on Ice. That meant Mia wouldn’t be going in completely blind.

Someone knocked on her door.

“Come in.”

Jon Senior and Jon Junior stepped into her room. Their determined expressions matched so exactly that it was like they’d been practicing them in the mirror.

“What is it?” Mia asked.

“Your plan isn’t good,” Jon Senior stated.

Mia’s brow lifted. “It’s the best we have with the resources available. I’d love it if we had a fleet to throw at the garrison to distract them. That’s not going to happen.”

Jon Senior shook his head. “You’re planning to insert with only you and Charlie. You’re not using all available resources.” He gestured at himself and his son. “You have two additional supersoldiers, including a trained Reaper available. You’ve fought us both, and you know what we’re capable of.”

Mia shook her head. “We can’t be sure if you’ll maintain control of yourself.”

“It’s been over a month since I’ve had any of their drugs,” Jon Senior snapped. “You’ve been testing me. If I was that out of control, wouldn’t I have taken out this ship by now?”

“Even you can’t tell me everything they did to you to indoctrinate and manipulate you.” Mia kept her voice calm. “You don’t have all your memories and can’t guarantee you won’t attack Vorhees again.

“This is a sensitive mission. I need to reduce the number of dangerous variables involved, which means not bringing former Reapers who were ready to kill thousands of people a month ago right in front of a Protocol scientist.”

“That’s not fair,” Jon Junior shouted.

“It’s not about fair,” Mia countered. She set down her datapad. “It’s about the failure modes of the operation.”

“You don’t trust my father?”

“I don’t know how he’ll react under combat stress against Protocol-linked forces,” Mia corrected. “For all I know, the Protocol has a gas they can spray into the air to reactivate Reaper programming.” She stood. “I trust that your father loves you and wants to defeat the Protocol, and I’ll promise him he’ll get his chance to help directly before this is over. Right now, though, there’s no way I’m taking him on the mission. That would be stupid.”

“But—”

Jon Senior threw up his arm and silenced his son. “She’s right. It hurts to admit it, but she’s right. Even when I think about Vorhees too hard, I get an urge to find him and hurt him.”

“If the conditioning lasted that long, why am I okay?” Jon Junior asked.

“I spent years being controlled by the Protocol,” Jon Senior answered. “I was a direct product of their experiments. For all I know, my genetics make me more predisposed to vulnerability to their control agents. I’m happy they didn’t warp your brain the way they did mine. At the same time, I can’t pretend I’m not a danger. The mission has to come first.”

“Fine.” Jon Junior slapped his chest. “Mia, you trust me to have your back with the SHKs. That means you should trust

me on the surface. If my father can't go, I can back you and Charlie up. You need more people."

"We went over this in the briefing." Mia shook her head. "It's because I trust you so much I need you up here. If something goes badly down there, it might end up like Felsk again. The only chance we might have to escape could be your SHKs. They have to be available at a moment's notice. At the same time, we can't have them flying around to tip off the garrison."

Jon Junior frowned. "There has to be something we can do so I can come to the surface, like we did at Felsk."

"We're not going to have a shuttle where we can set up the rig. I'll want you in the rig and ready to go."

"I understand." Jon Junior sighed. "I don't like it, but I understand."

Mia looked between the two men. "Do you?"

The Smiths nodded and headed out the door without another word.

Mia sat and retrieved her datapad. Too many dangers and too many people. She didn't know how much longer she could fight without losing someone.

A harsh wind whipped snow across Mia's visor. She stomped through the thick layers on the ground, grateful for her vac suit protecting her from the bone-chilling cold of Ice. Charlie walked beside her without a suit but in a far thicker coat than the rags he'd worn when she first met him.

Even with sneak mode, dropping the pair off too close to the facility risked detection and a missile barrage from the garrison. That left Mia and Charlie hopping out of their all-but-invisible ship far away from their target. They'd begun a long trudge across the dark, frozen waste toward the perimeter.

Long-range sensors detected drones in use, suggesting the facility was far more locked down and patrolled than Black Ice. That was consistent with what they'd seen in orbit. Mia wasn't worried. She'd prepared a Debbie II instance on a datapad, and Ito readied a long-range antenna and a bag full of signal relays.

"Four hours of walking by my estimate," Mia commented.

"We've walked longer," Charlie replied.

She laughed. "We have. If I have to come here again, I'll feel like crashing my fighter into the building."

"If Smith's intel is correct, this might be the beginning of the end."

Mia let that statement percolate for a while. They continued marching across the icy wasteland, sticking to a pre-mapped course that would bring them in on a side of the building with less overlapping security coverage.

"Do you believe that?" she asked.

Charlie looked at her. "That this mission is the beginning of the end?"

Mia nodded.

"I don't know. Things have moved forward every time you've come here, so I wouldn't be surprised. The level of security is too high for this to be nothing more than a place for idle torture and experiments."

"If they're panicking this much over Felsk, might as well give them more reason to be afraid."

Mia and Charlie crouched behind a snowbank. They were close to the side of the prison.

A two-person patrol disappeared around the corner. Another one would appear in about thirty seconds. Mia's observations confirmed there were several teams of guards on

patrol, and they were leaving only small holes in their coverage. Thirty seconds to run from her covered position and get to the nearest door would be tough.

Mia finished pulling out a signal relay and planting it in the ground. “How are you doing on the drones, Debbie II? We move from this snowbank, and they’ll spot us with ease.”

“The control signals for these are surprisingly easy to decode,” Debbie II reported. “These aren’t advanced military-grade drones. Give me five more minutes, and I’ll be able to interfere with their sensors and cameras to hide your presence.”

“The Protocol doesn’t want to show its hand too easily. Can you get into their main network from here?”

“I’ll need direct access to an IO port.”

Mia squinted before tapping her helmet to switch from direct vision to a magnified feed. “There’s a port at the door. It’ll take us a good fifteen or twenty seconds to get to the door from this distance. Can you hack into their system in ten seconds?”

“It’s unlikely.”

“I’m not worried about the drones. The guards are a problem.”

“We’ll need a distraction.” Charlie motioned at the sky. “Can she make a drone crash without making it look obvious?”

“Yes,” Debbie II replied. “I can’t guarantee a later detailed diagnostic won’t reveal the truth, but I can force a power outage to bring the drone down.”

“Then we’ll go with that,” Mia concluded. “We’ll bring a drone down close but behind the patrol that’ll rotate into this area. That should give us more time to get inside.”

They crouched there, waiting for their opportunity. Uneven patrol times and routes stretched out the observations.

“Initiating drone collapse when ready,” Debbie II chimed.

“Do it,” Mia ordered.

“Drone is falling. The drone has hit the ground.”

Mia’s superior hearing only caught the briefest of thuds swallowed by the howl of the wind. Her trust in the AI sent her out of cover, sprinting toward the door. Charlie rushed after her.

Mia pulled out another signal relay and jammed it into the IO port. “Okay, I hope this is enough.”

“Accessing network,” Debbie II began. “Once I’m in, I can confirm the primary access frequencies and the relays won’t be necessary.”

“Good.” Mia looked both ways and reached for her gun. “If they raise an alert, we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

Charlie smiled viciously. “That could be fun.”

“Until the navy shows up.”

“Better to die on our feet than strapped down in a lab.”

“I can’t disagree there.”

The door slid open, the grinding far too loud for Mia’s taste. She checked the area one last time before slipping inside and yanking the signal relay from the port.

“Keeping you off sensors and camera feeds will require considerable real-time adjustment,” Debbie II explained. “It’ll be difficult if you’re moving at full speed.”

“Understood.”

Mia slipped into the darkened hallway. Charlie followed her inside, and the door closed.

“I’ve compromised their system, love,” Debbie II reported. “There are secondary verification subroutines. If you take too long, someone might notice my manipulation.”

“We don’t plan to stay here any longer than we need to,” Mia replied.

“Please consult your datapad to avoid patrols. I can’t locate Doctor Laalim directly. She doesn’t appear to be in any prison

area with cameras.”

Mia scoffed and lifted the pad. Red dots filled the maze-like layout. “They aren’t going to let a monster record all her evil anywhere someone with a conscience might find it.” She frowned at the pad. “Our best bet is the medical wing. She could have a side room.”

“Interestingly enough, there is no active camera in the secondary infirmary,” Debbie II reported. “Curious.”

“There is a camera in the primary infirmary?”

“Yes.”

Mia looked over the map to trace the quickest path to the medical wing with the fewest people. “That’s a major security hole unless they want to hide something. I think we found our war criminal.”

Charlie pulled open his jacket to grab his shotgun.

Mia shook her head. “Let’s keep it hand-to-hand unless we don’t have a choice. Gunshots will echo.”

Charlie eyed the weapon before tucking it back into his hidden holster. “I doubt we’ll be able to get to her and back out without trouble.”

“No roars, no gunshots,” Mia ordered. “You and I are lethal enough with our bare hands.”

She motioned him forward and slipped into a light jog. Guard patrols were sparse on the way to the medical wing, far less than they expected. There were groups of guards in and near the main cellblocks. Unlike the exposed madness of Black Ice, the facility had a more traditional prison layout and setup.

A pair of guards changed direction on the map. They headed toward Mia and Charlie.

“Do we hide?” Charlie asked.

Mia nodded toward a nearby door. “Unlock that door for us, Debbie II.”

“Working on it.” The door *beeped*. “Done.”

Mia crept toward the corner and lifted her fists. The guards' footsteps grew closer.

They weren't talking. That didn't prove they suspected intruders. The prison wouldn't suppress an alarm for two obvious intruders.

"Have you heard about the transfer?" one guard asked. "They say we're going to get a whole batch of prisoners next week. Something about a colonial rebellion. I can't believe idiot colonists thought they could get away with that."

"An uprising?" the other guard echoed. "I hadn't heard anything about that."

"Because they're covering it up," the guard explained. "With that shit on Kordell, they can't take any chances. They don't want people thinking that they can do what they want. All it takes is one spark to light a forest on fire."

The men's shadows appeared around the corner. Mia and Charlie pounced.

Mia pulled the guard into a chokehold. Charlie opted for a quicker approach. He grabbed and smashed the man's head into the floor. The man's eyes rolled. The attack didn't cave in his head. That was Charlie showing restraint.

Mia's victim gasped and clawed at her hands before he slumped unconscious. She dragged him around the corner to the room. Charlie pulled his guard along by an arm.

They tossed the unconscious guards into the balmy room filled with tall, thrumming air processors. Mia stripped the men of their comms gear and grabbed a stun baton. She didn't offer one to Charlie. He had his own if he needed one.

Mia put them on their stomachs and secured their hands with their restraints. "This should hold them."

"If we can't take them alive next time?" Charlie asked.

"Then we do what we need to do for the mission. I'm more concerned about leaving a trail of bodies and blood for somebody to follow than not hurting anybody in this place. If

Laalim's here, this place isn't staffed by good people. We need to pick up the pace. It's only going to get tougher from here."

They hurried out of the room and back into the hallways. Without the roving guards, Debbie II's map would have led them straight to the medical wing. Instead, they had to stop often and wait for a patrol to move along or to knock out another guard or two and stuff them in a room.

"Do you have Laalim on any feed yet?" Mia asked.

"No," Debbie II reported.

Charlie glanced at Mia. "What's wrong? You don't believe she's in a hidden room?"

"I assumed that. I could be wrong. She could be visiting another facility. Given what we know about her background, there's no way they'll let her wander off the planet."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Our best bet for finding evidence to use against the Protocol will be in Laalim's records."

"I can't access those directly without more work and risk of detection," Debbie II warned. "The doors and cameras are easier because of their system links."

Mia checked around the corner. She trusted her ears and Debbie II's map. It didn't preclude a strange genetically engineered threat that could beat them both.

The Protocol also had access to advanced technologies. Mia had infiltrated the planet with sneak mode. Assuming the Protocol could never match or exceed her abilities was arrogant, and arrogance in combat led to people getting killed.

"Is there anything you can access that could help locate a hidden room?" Mia pressed.

"That I can do, love. There are unusual power routing patterns in the medical wing, and the system facility map dimensions don't match the recorded dimensions from outside observed from the drones."

"That's a clever trick."

“Using that information, I have pinpointed the likely location of a hidden chamber.”

On the map, a small rectangle lit up in the back of the medical wing. A passageway separated two sets of rooms with the guards and patients concentrated on one side. The hidden room was connected to a supply closet. Even the conspiracy didn't want too many people to know what their war criminal was doing. Their defensive instincts had betrayed them.

“Okay.” Mia held up the pad. “We'll sweep around from the north. We should be able to avoid any of the patients in there.”

Mia couldn't remember the last time she'd dealt with such an excruciatingly long stretch of minutes. She and Charlie avoided the patrols on their roundabout way to the supply closet connected to the hidden room.

After entering the closet, they slowed to a creep. Crates and shelves filled the room. Patients and guards filled the main infirmary only a hallway and a few rooms away.

Despite going to the trouble of connecting the hidden room to the supply closet, the door stood unconcealed in the back, sandwiched between piles of stacked medical supply crates.

A muffled scream came from the other side of the door. Mia shifted her body into a combat stance. Murmurs mixed with the screams.

Mia reached for the access panel. “Unlock the door.”

“Done,” Debbie II whispered.

Mia charged through the door into a cramped, light-saturated hell. Two medical beds lay in the center of the room, equipped with a rich web of straps. One held a prisoner. The other was empty. The dead-eyed Doctor Laalim glanced at Mia with a puzzled expression, a laser scalpel in hand.

Drool and blood leaked from the ashen prisoner's mouth. Tubing ran into his abdomen and chest. He thrashed in his restraints. The center of his chest was split open and dull gray, spindly metal devices were implanted inside. Mia's stomach turned.

"Just kill me!" the prisoner screamed.

Doctor Laalim sighed and stared at Mia. "I don't know how you got in here, but you won't escape, so there's no point in interfering." She nodded toward the wall. "Sit there and turn around, and I won't call security right away. I'm sure we can work out an appropriate agreement."

Mia shot across the room and backhanded Laalim. The doctor hissed in pain and hit the floor. Her laser scalpel stopped humming and skittered across the dull, blood-stained surface.

The prisoner shrieked. He yanked his restraints.

Charlie closed the door with a growl. "The screams will bring guards."

Mia checked her datapad. "Huh. No one's reacting. There's a close patrol that should have heard that."

Laalim sat up and wiped the blood from beneath her nose. "They're used to it by now. None of them are stupid enough to interfere with my research."

Mia's face twisted in disgust. "They're used to it, but you have to do this in a hidden room?"

"It's not hidden," Laalim insisted, standing. "I asked for a room away from the main infirmary, and when they didn't have one, I made them build me one." She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I didn't want to listen to other inmates complain or cry. I learned how annoying and distracting that could be at Black Ice. This helps me keep my concentration, which improves the speed of my research."

The prisoner stopped screaming. His back arched, and he foamed at the mouth. Blood ran from his eyes and mouth.

"What did you do to him?" Mia demanded.

“He’s a nice baseline subject to explore the limits of pain suppression via implants. You have to understand that true sensory blocks are worthless. People need to know when they’re hurt. My experiments will help develop implants we can use to allow soldiers to benefit from minor sensory experience without it overwhelming them because they lose a limb or two.”

Laalim cupped her chin. “I imagine it won’t take much more than a dozen or more prisoners to confirm the general baselines before I can move onto the next stage. Maybe two dozen?”

The prisoner’s head slumped to the side. “Kill me,” he moaned. “It hurts. It hurts so much. You said the pain would stop.”

“Oh.” Laalim frowned. “It hasn’t stopped yet?”

Mia glared at her. “He’s been thrashing since I got in here!”

“I anticipated integration delay but not total failure.” Laalim shrugged. She stood and dusted off her pants. “This is unfortunate. That wasn’t supposed to happen. There must be an incompatibility I failed to take into account.”

“You were supposed to torture him for a while?” Mia spat out. “That’s okay?”

“Your tone is unnecessary, Miss Verick. Everything I’m doing, I’m doing for the KCAP. It’s for the greater good. Sacrifices are always necessary to advance humanity.”

“I’m so tired of you crazy people saying that. I’m more surprised you remember me.”

Laalim nodded. “I remember them all. In your case, it’s easy. Not that many women are wanted across the entire KCAP.”

The prisoner bucked again. His eyes rolled up in the back of his head. His heart monitor flatlined.

“Hmm.” Laalim tapped her cheek.

“Aren’t you going to help him?”

Laalim shook her head. “There’s no point.” She gestured at another display filled with inscrutable graphs. “There’s too much nervous system damage. It’s a waste of time.”

“You killed him.” Mia gritted her teeth. “You strapped him to a bed and tortured him to death.”

Laalim motioned at the dead prisoner. “Is that what you’re worried about? You were at Black Ice. You know the kind of people there. That man was an awful monster who deserved to die. I was giving him a second chance to be useful to the society he’d preyed upon his entire life.”

She shrugged. “He was a violent serial killer and rapist who would have fallen to another inmate anyway. Even criminals have standards. So what if I’m using him for experiments? You’d prefer we don’t take obvious useful opportunities?”

“You don’t torment monsters,” Charlie rumbled. “If they’re dangerous, you kill them quickly. That’s what separates people from monsters. You don’t want to become a monster.”

Laalim’s eyes widened. “The Cannibal King himself speaking to me. I knew you could, at least you used to, although there was a debate among those who knew your true background about whether you’d gone feral over the decades. I’d heard Verick had picked you up, but I thought you were a bear on a leash.”

Mia lifted her baton. “Maybe you should know what it’s like to feel pain?”

“You’re going to torture me after those so-concerned questions about what I was doing and why?” Laalim chuckled. “I doubt it. Whatever you think of me, I don’t hurt people without a purpose. It’s harder than you think.”

Her expression hardened. “What would you do, Miss Verick? How would you handle the monsters? Waste time, money, and resources keeping them alive in prison for decades for their crimes? Or would you try to make them give back to the KCAP in a small way?”

“You say people are used to screams and loud noises from this room?” Mia tucked the baton into her belt.

“Yes.” Laalim nodded. “With the door closed, little sound gets out anyway. If you’re praying guards will come to punish me, it won’t happen, and it’d be far worse for you. What do you plan to do? How are you going to save the monster?”

“Who said anything about saving him?” Mia yanked out her pistol and put three rounds into the prisoner’s head to ensure there was no hope of mad scientist intervention. She pointed the gun at Laalim. “All we’re saying is you don’t torture monsters. You finish them off. From our perspective, you’re a monster.”

Laalim sighed. “What do you want from me? If you were going to kill me, you would have done it already. Let’s dispense with the tiresome threats and games.”

They didn’t need the doctor’s fear. They needed the doctor’s cooperation. This would do. The Protocol’s files would be far more secure than the basic prison systems.

Mia pulled out a data chip and slipped it into a port. “We don’t have much time. I need all your Protocol files. We can break through your security, but that’ll take too long and means our only choice will be to finish you off and run.”

“You don’t need to be a savage about this,” Laalim complained. She gestured at a small hand scanner on the wall. “It’s all keyed to me.”

She tapped commands into a datapad. “All it needs now is my biometric access, and it’ll get you access to the more secure parts where you can download what you want. This terminal doesn’t have what you’ll want. Let me get my coat before then.”

“Your coat?” Mia frowned, retrieving the chip. “Why do you need your coat?”

“Because I presume you’ll want to take me as a prisoner.” Annoyed condescension filled Laalim’s tone. “As part of your escape plan, if not for interrogation later. I don’t intend to

wander the surface of Ice without a coat. Be reasonable, woman.”

Mia and Charlie exchanged looks before she spoke. “What we need is your data. We can get out just fine without you.”

Laalim glared at them. “You’re not giving me a reason to cooperate.”

Charlie snaked his hand out and grabbed the doctor. He lifted the thrashing woman like a toy and carried her to the open bed.

“What are you doing?” she shouted. “You can’t kill me. You need me. You’ll never get those files without my help.”

Charlie slammed her onto the bed and pinned her with one arm. He searched a nearby cart and retrieved a laser saw.

“You can’t do this,” Laalim insisted, thrashing yet unable to escape Charlie’s grip. “I’ll scream. They’ll come.”

“No,” Mia intoned. “It’s like you said. They’re used to the screaming.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Mia frowned, then shook her head. “You’re right. On second thought, we don’t need the screaming.” She put two bullets into Laalim’s head and nodded at the scanner. “Just carry her over there.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Charlie carried the dead Laalim over to the wall and shoved the corpse's hand against the scanner. It *beeped*. A secret door slid open on the wall, revealing a narrow staircase leading to a lower chamber.

“Huh.” Mia scratched her cheek. “I just realized that might not have worked. Some scanners require an active pulse. Oh well. It worked out.”

Mia drew her pistol and sprinted down the stairs, unsure what to expect. A simple terminal with an access port sat at the center of semi-circular rows of men and women in various states of cybernetic enhancement.

Subjects varied from humans with only the barest hint of implants to others with all limbs replaced by cybernetic parts. They all slumbered underneath frosted transparent metal coverings with beeping displays on the side.

“At least these are all in stasis. The KCAP can clean this program up. Without Laalim, they'll have trouble proceeding.” She spun when a body splatted next to her. She looked up and frowned at Charlie. “Why did you bring Laalim?”

“I didn't know if we'd need her hand again.” Charlie shrugged.

Mia looked around. “No scanner.” She pulled out a data chip to slip into the port. “Get to work, Debbie II. Grab everything and anything. We don't have time to figure out if it's important or not.”

“This is significantly more secure than the previous systems I’ve encountered,” Debbie II explained. “It will take time.”

“I doubt anyone will knock on the Murder Doctor’s door in the next few minutes.” Mia looked up the stairs. She didn’t hear any heavy footsteps or shouts. “Still, the sooner we’re done with this, the better.”

Charlie walked to one of the stasis pods. “Genetically modified supersoldiers aren’t enough. They’re preparing their next tools.”

“That makes sense,” Mia concluded. “They can figure out the baseline of how implants might work with experiments like this and genetically enhance embryos to tolerate them better.”

Charlie frowned. “Then we might fight one of these soon.”

“No.” Mia shook her head. “They wouldn’t have all these experimental subjects here in this prison if they were ready to go live. This is only the preliminary steps of the program.”

She sucked in a breath. “You’re right. We need to end this soon. We find a new horror every time we run into one of these labs. We drag our feet too long, and we could end up having to deal with the completed version of this research. That will be far worse and much harder to deal with.”

Charlie wiped frost off one of the pods for a better look at the young man inside whose eyes had been replaced with half-embedded goggles. “This is too complicated for her to have done all this by herself.”

“Of course.”

“Are we sure it’ll be enough just to kill her?”

“Taking out the main researcher will slow things down. The Protocol will figure out we were here, forcing them to relocate the project.” Mia frowned at Laalim’s body.

“She was at Black Ice first. The conspiracy had their people build up this chamber, then brought her over. It works out better for them if you think about it. Instead of wasting

time transporting test subjects between the two facilities, they integrated it. Unfortunately for them, it made it easier for us, too.”

Mia’s datapad lit up with streams of text and numbers flying by.

“There’s so much in here, Mia,” Debbie II exclaimed. “If I tried to make you understand, your little monkey brain would explode.”

Mia frowned. “That’s sloppy of the Protocol. I didn’t get as much when I downloaded the data from the lab.”

“That’s because I wasn’t there,” Debbie II insisted. “They’ve hidden and encrypted it in unusual ways. I can’t tell you what I’m finding. It’ll take time to decode it all.”

“We had every reason to believe there were no more Protocol facilities on Ice,” Charlie observed. “Especially after we finished destroying the lab. We haven’t come back since then. They must have thought they were safer here, hiding in the last place we’d think to look.”

“They’re combining arrogance and desperation. That’s leading to mistakes. We need to be ready to take advantage of every mistake they make.” Mia grinned. All victories, however small, were welcome. “I’m never going to complain about my enemy making things easier for me. How long are we looking, Debbie II?”

“It’ll take at least fifteen minutes for me to download the bulk of the data. A much longer period will be necessary aboard the *Erinyes* for complete decryption.”

Mia glanced at the stairs. “Fifteen minutes is a long time to wait in a barely defensible room surrounded by test subjects in stasis pods.”

“Yes. That doesn’t mean I need any less time.”

“Do you regret killing her?” Charlie asked.

“No.” Mia shrugged. “There was no way I was leaving this place with her still breathing after what I saw. If I’d known she

was that twisted at Black Ice, I would have found a way to take her out.”

The personnel tracker on the datapad didn't indicate anyone coming toward Laalim's secret lab. She hadn't bothered with a guard in the room, and there were no cameras. That meant no immediate alarms would be raised. Someone might grow suspicious if she failed to answer a call, but the staff must be used to her getting distracted by her work.

Mia stood by the stairs and listened for footsteps or whispers. There was nothing else to do. Debbie II was doing all the hard work.

“Mia,” Charlie called. He growled.

She drew her pistol and spun. A holographic camera feed floated in the air, nothing more than a floating black square.

“What's going on, Debbie II?” Mia swept the chamber for cyborg or supersoldiers. No one had left their pods.

“I'm unsure, love,” Debbie II admitted. “There were minor fluctuations in the system, but my download remains unaffected.”

The black square lit up and offered the last thing Mia ever wanted to see, a smirking Doctor Icaryus. She lowered her weapon to resist the urge to shoot at the hologram.

Mia glared. “Ryle told me you were still alive. I hoped she was trying to scare me, but after what we saw in your little factory, I knew I couldn't pretend it was impossible.”

“Yes, your destruction of my clone facility was unfortunate,” Icaryus replied. “You don't understand the years of research those clones represented. It was vexing and foolish of you.”

“They were monsters,” Charlie growled. “They weren't human anymore. It was an affront to nature.”

“Some would say that about you, Cannibal King.”

“You took their will away from them. They had no freedom to make their own choices.”

Icaryus clucked his tongue. “No, no, no. You’re ever so wrong about that. I was trying to teach them, and they turned against me. They chose to work together for a common purpose that anyone who shared my beliefs and knowledge would aspire to. How is that not exercising their freedom?”

Mia scoffed. “That’s only because you messed with their brains. Being clones of you isn’t enough for them to want to do everything you do. You made sure they were monsters willing to do your bidding.”

Icaryus looked bored. “Believe what you want. That’s irrelevant now. I’m impressed that you managed to find this place and returned at all. I’m even more impressed that you slipped past all the relevant defenses.”

“You’re not the only one who has learned new tricks. You had your one chance to kill me when you had me under control in your lab. Now I won’t stop until I’ve destroyed the Protocol.”

“No.” Icaryus shook his head. “It’s unfortunate that you’ve become so intransigent that you’ve forced my hand. Oh well. At least you serve as a useful proof of concept.”

“Glad I can be of service. I’ll serve as your executioner when I find you.”

“I should have known you’d come back. Don’t you understand? As frustrating as you are, you’re proof of my genius, proof of how genetic enhancements can push humanity further. A normal human couldn’t have hurt the Protocol as much as you have. You would have died long ago if it weren’t for me.”

“I’m going to kill you.” Mia narrowed her eyes. “I’m not going to give a big speech beforehand.”

“You keep trying to kill me, and you keep failing.” He smiled.

“Then I’ll kill you as many times as I need until it sticks. I don’t care if you’re the original, a son with transferred memories, or a cheap copy. As long as you’re helping the

Protocol and doing sick experiments, I'll track you down and drop a missile on you. I'll space you. I'll do whatever it takes."

"Any of those would be interesting." Icaryus' smile grew wider and more annoying. "As impressive as you are, Mia, you are one woman with one small crew. Don't delude yourself into believing stopping a small portion of the operation on Kordell is a victory. Don't disappoint me by thinking that getting to Laalim means anything."

Mia scoffed. "You keep telling yourself that until I pull the trigger of the gun pointed at the back of your head."

"He's stalling you," Debbie II announced. "He's manipulating the primary base reactor and power systems, pushing them into a feedback loop. Within a half-hour, this entire facility will explode."

"Can't you stop him?" Mia was more annoyed than surprised.

"He's locked those parts of the system. I don't think anyone can stop him now."

Icaryus laughed. "Consider it an honor, Mia. I got the idea from what you and Charlie did to the other facility."

"Keep downloading as long as you can, Debbie II. I'll stick a relay at the top of the stairs, just in case," Mia noted.

"I've lost access to those files," Debbie II reported. "The bulk has been downloaded. I can't say what that will mean after decryption."

"That'll have to be enough. I'm sure there's something useful in there, and we have all our recordings from what we saw above and in here. That'll help with the pushback." Mia motioned to Charlie and headed for the stairs.

"Thirty minutes?" she called. "That's plenty of time for me to escape, Icaryus. That's sloppy."

"Oh, you misunderstand my intentions. You're under the false impression that I care if you die here and now. You'll die soon enough throwing yourself up against the Protocol."

Mia stopped at the bottom of the stairs. “Then why bother destroying this place?”

“This is more housecleaning. We can’t have the wrong people looking too closely at this place and asking the wrong questions until we’ve finished consolidating our control of the government. I never cared all that much for Laalim’s experiments. I’ve always felt they were going in the wrong direction.”

Icaryus frowned. “Throwing hardware onto the body is pointless. I strive for the ultimate biological organism. Humanity should inherit the stars, not machines!”

Mia let him rant and jogged up the stairs. Every second he spent chatting with her was one less second to escape. Despite what she’d said, getting away from the facility within thirty minutes would be difficult if they wanted to avoid detection.

Charlie and Mia crested the stairs into the lab. Mia glared back down the stairwell. The real-time communication meant Icaryus might be closer than she suspected. For all she knew, he was on Ice.

As much as she would love to find and kill him, an encrypted transmission to a secure terminal and limited time wouldn’t be enough for her to have a chance. She’d have to trust in the recovered data and proceed from there. Icaryus would get what he deserved eventually.

“We could make a run for it,” Mia suggested. “The guards will converge on us, but it’s easier from where we are to get out than in.”

“What about the prisoners?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t know.” Mia shook her head. “If they’re anything like the prisoners of Black Ice, they have it coming.” She sighed. “On the other hand, there could be other innocent people here like Flip.”

She gritted her teeth, trying to judge the relative chances.

“Then what do you suggest?” Charlie’s voice held no tension, only simple curiosity.

“Debbie II, can you open the cells?” Mia asked.

“Whatever he did, he’s cut access to many of the main systems,” Debbie II replied. “I’d have to reconstitute the subsystems. It’d take too long.”

“Does the block include the main comm systems? If we explain what’s going on to the guards, they might not put up much of a fight. I doubt the average guard here is eager to die for an asshole scientist they’ve never met, even if they’re the kind of sick bastards who’d hear people screaming from being tortured and not do anything about it.”

“It’d take time and direct access,” Debbie II noted.

“They have no reason to believe anything you say,” Charlie added. “The story would seem fanciful at best.”

“There’ll still be manual overrides for the doors,” Mia concluded. She checked the map. “If we can break through the key security doors, that’ll give the prisoners a straight shot to the shuttle bay. If we worry about the comms only near the cellblock, that’ll solve that issue.”

The intercoms came alive with Icarus’ loud voice. “Attention all base personnel, this is a Code 48920 Alpha Two. Terrorists have infiltrated the base and killed everyone in the primary control center. They have locked down the room and are now planting bombs around the facility. All personnel engage and terminate any non-staff personnel on sight.”

“That asshole,” Mia grumbled. “He had to make this harder. It’s like he knew.”

“He knows enough about us to guess tactics.” Charlie pulled out his shotgun. “That makes one part of this easier. We no longer have to worry about escaping quietly.”

Mia drew her gun. “No. We don’t. We’ll need to get to the shuttle bay, too. It’s our best chance of putting enough distance between us and this base to survive.”

A huge security door slid into the wall. Mia and Charlie opened fire before it finished moving. Her bullets and his shotgun shells ripped through the guards on the other side before they got off a shot.

The announcement sent every guard in the facility to the armory to get heavier weapons. They were running around trying to kill two suspected terrorists, not suppress an escape or riot. None of the guards were in a mood to talk, only to kill. Mia was happy to return the favor.

Icaryus' sabotage put a clock on Mia's and Charlie's exfiltration, although it benefited them in a small way. His locking the primary systems meant the key security doors weren't being centrally monitored or controlled. This made it easier for Debbie II to open and close doors as Mia needed.

She and Charlie had carved a way to the main cellblock area. It hadn't taken as long as Mia had worried, but it had taken longer than she wanted. Every minute that passed meant being that much closer to the blast zone.

Mia spotted a systems access terminal and slammed a relay into it. "Can we access the local intercoms with this?"

"One moment," Debbie II announced. "Yes, but I can't put it through the entire facility, only this sector."

"That's fine. Put me on."

"You may speak when ready, love."

"I don't have time to explain," Mia began. "This place is going to blow soon. If you're still around by then, you'll be the only burned thing on this frozen planet. I'm opening the main cellblock security doors. If you want to live, make it to the shuttle bay and get out of here. If you're guards, I'd think about living to fight another day."

Shouts from farther down the hallway announced the appearance of a new squad of guards. They lifted their guns, unconcerned about Mia's warning.

Mia opened fire without hesitation. Bullets whizzed back and forth. Her careful aim brought the guards down and left her only grazed.

“I figured even the guards would buy into what I was saying,” she explained to Charlie. “They think we’re bombing this place. That’s also why I didn’t bother to complicate things by bringing up Icaryus.”

“They might also believe if they kill us, they can stop it,” Charlie noted.

“Well, damn it.”

Charlie jogged toward the next security door. Mia hurried after him. They passed the guards’ bodies and the growing pools of blood.

The guards didn’t have a chance. The facility was set up in a remote frigid area to keep unarmed men and women in, not stop rampaging supersoldiers with an AI who could hack the doors. Their only chance of survival was hitting the shuttle bay.

“I hear them coming!” a guard shouted from around the corner.

Mia slid to a stop before an intersection and hissed in annoyance. A bullet storm ripped the wall. She ducked low and peeked around the corner. Two squads of guards fired with their rifles.

She put a round into the closest man’s head. Two more of her shots passed before they located their tormentor. Charlie lunged around the corner and blew a man in half with his shotgun. The sudden appearance of the giant left the guards hesitating in brief terror. Half the force was down by the time they’d recovered their wits.

The survivors rallied and concentrated fire on the larger, more obvious target. Charlie growled with bullet impacts before his shotgun decapitated an enemy. Mia emptied her magazine as Charlie swept his weapon in an arc, blasting away.

She reloaded and headed toward the door that sealed the tunnel leading into the cellblock. She inserted a signal relay into a port. Debbie II knew her job.

The grinding resounded throughout the hallway, and the massive doors opened. Shouts and screams erupted from inside. Helmeted guards swung their stun batons with wild abandon. Inmates swarmed the lines of guards, throwing punches and kicks. Others tried to tackle them or get their necks with their shivs.

Mia yanked the signal relay free and sprinted away from the door. “We opened the door. The rest is on them. We need to get to our shuttle before it’s too late.”

Charlie jogged after her, plopping new shells into his gun. “Escaping the garrison fleet will be harder than escaping from here.”

“We’ll get through. We knew we might not be able to escape without making noise.”

They barreled through more security checkpoints, pleased to find fewer stubborn guards waiting to engage them in pointless firefights. It didn’t take Charlie and Mia long to reach the main hangar. Based on the space available and the number of shuttles, about half were missing. The hangar doors were open, allowing the harsh wind to blow a steady stream of ice and cold air inside.

A shuttle pushed away from the ground and turned toward the opening. Their main engines fired and shot the shuttle out of the hangar, shaking the ground.

“Not every guard is dedicated, huh,” Mia commented.

Two guards stood outside a shuttle, gesticulating wildly at one another. They turned toward Mia and Charlie and offered them obscene gestures before jumping inside the shuttle.

Mia wasn’t there to take out every guard at the prison. She headed to the closest shuttle. Its door already stood open. She rolled inside and swept the cabin looking for targets. Charlie strolled in with a much more casual air and closed the door.

The control system was unlocked and the reactor powered up. Somebody else had been about to take the shuttle. Too bad for them. She didn’t have time to wait around. She needed to escape the explosion and the fleet.

Mia sat in the pilot's seat and strapped in. She routed power to the landing thrusters and main engines. The shuttle shook and lifted. Hordes of prisoners and a smaller number of guards swept into the hangar, breaking into smaller groups and heading for shuttles. Others ran toward the open hangar doors.

Charlie sat in a seat in the back. "We're almost out of time."

"I know," Mia shouted.

She swept low, almost clipping another shuttle, and shoved her craft out of the hangar and over the endless white expanse that was the surface of Ice. She lifted the nose of the shuttle and increased the throttle, not liking how much the shuttle rattled and shook.

They had no reason to stick around and assist a bunch of hardened killers to escape. She'd given them the opportunity, but that didn't mean she was giving them a ride on the *Erinyes*. She'd learned her lesson the last time she let her guard down with Ice prisoners.

More shuttles launched from the hangar. Guards and prisoners poured out of the hangar and other exits. She'd tried her best, but Icarus' final trick would kill a lot of people.

Mia killed the feed, no longer concerned about the prison. The shuttle continued its ascent. The course relied on Mia's pre-mission determination of where the *Erinyes* would wait. She didn't pick up anything on her sensors until a cluster of new, low-flying fast contacts appeared.

"Gunships," Mia announced. "Damn it. I don't know if we'll be able to break atmo before they catch up with us." After quick calculations, her jaw tightened. "I'm going low. That's our only chance of surviving."

The gunships spread out to pursue every shuttle in the area. Any hope of trying to pretend to be fleeing staff died when a gunship opened fire and blew apart another shuttle.

A blast erupted from the prison. The blast wave consumed nearby shuttles and people while a cloud of smoke and rock ripped from underneath the scoured ice.

Mia turned and dove toward the cloud. This was her best chance to shake the gunships clearing the sky of all the shuttles, prisoners and staff alike.

A pair of gunships accelerated toward her and opened fire. Mia charged through the cloud to escape their initial cannon bursts. The shuttle shook violently as small debris pelted the fuselage and cockpit. Alerts appeared all over the control panel.

The shuttle pushed out of the cloud. Mia kept low, following the ground's contours with little margin for error.

Her maneuver bought her a brief respite from pursuit before more gunships flew her way. They launched a volley of missiles.

Mia kept scraping the ground and charged toward a cliff. Charlie didn't comment other than grunts. She barreled toward the cliff and yanked the shuttle up at the last moment. The missiles slammed into the cliff and exploded.

The gunships had kept their distance. They were able to avoid the shower of debris their attacks knocked loose.

The new thruster and engine damage alarms killed any sense of satisfaction. Mia peeled away from the cliff, avoiding the stream of cannon fire from the gunships. Her reduced maneuverability was cutting into her survival time.

A swarm of contacts appeared on her short-range sensors. Mia cursed. No wonder the gunships had kept their distance. They'd boxed her in a net of death.

Her brain didn't catch up with reality until the swarm of contacts turned toward the gunships. The new arrivals were drones, not more gunships, more specifically SHKs. A storm of SHK fire tore the gunships apart.

Mia cheered.

Her comms crackled to life with Jon Junior's voice. "Great timing, right?"

"I've been transmitting our location," Debbie II explained. "I didn't want to distract you too much while you were

flying.”

“We’re not out of this yet, drone boy,” Ito added. “Mia, your flyboy and girls are scrambling to distract the initial vanguard of the garrison fleet, but we need to get a move on.”

The *Erinyes* had dropped their Obfuscate System, leaving them shiny and bright on sensors. Three fighters burst from the ship. Mia aimed the shuttle at the ship and accelerated.

“I’m on my way,” she announced. “Just stay alive for a couple more minutes.”

CHAPTER NINE

Mia landed her shuttle inside the bay of the *Erinyes*. She rushed from the cockpit and out the side hatch. “Get this shuttle locked down for me, Charlie.”

Escaping and landing in the *Erinyes* proved easier than Mia expected. Thus far, escaping the long arm of the KCAP Navy fleet in orbit had proved the opposite.

The enemy took advantage of the Obfuscate System’s cancellation window to flood the area with fighters. With gunships below and fighters above, the *Erinyes* couldn’t find a place to disappear from everyone’s sensors. Paul, Ryoko, and Karin met the first enemy squadron with a wave of missiles and cannon fire that forced them away before circling back to form up with the accelerating mothership.

Arrogance killed people. Trusting that the Obfuscate System and sneak mode would get them out of any situation was the height of arrogance. All the Protocol intel in the galaxy would be useless if they didn’t survive the battle.

Mia sprinted toward her fighter and scrambled up the ladder. She’d taken scrapes in her vac suit fleeing the prison. Killing life support for power and other tricks would be too risky.

Seconds counted too much. She didn’t have time to change into a new suit.

Mia slid into her seat and pressed a button to bring down the canopy. Her fingers flew over the control panel. Sensor displays and readouts relayed from the *Erinyes* appeared.

Unlike the Kordell disaster, the *Erinyes* kept her distance from the larger KCAP ships, including putting distance between herself and the anchor ship. The problem was the seemingly endless waves of fighters chasing them.

Jon Junior's SHKs played a key role in protecting the *Erinyes*. He'd maintained a tighter formation and lashed out with flights whenever enemy fighters grew too close in the agonizing gap between Mia and Charlie taking off and making it to the ship.

Everyone understood the stakes. They needed to avoid the crippling damage they'd experienced at Kordell, or they'd end up blown to pieces or forced to crash on a prison world with nowhere to run or hide.

Mia warmed the reactor and powered her engines. She sealed her cockpit and skipped her other preflight checklist items before lifting off to join the swirl of SHKs and fighters dancing outside and exchanging flashes of cannon fire.

The acceleration pushed her against her seat. Her fighter roared out of the bay to join the fray.

Mia rushed toward Paul. He was locked in a deadly duel with a stubborn enemy so close to his rear they risked collision. She didn't waste time with games. Her cannon burst shredded the persistent tail and freed Paul to save a flight of drones from getting boxed in by enemies.

A fighter broke away from his formation to toss a missile at Mia. She turned toward the shot and shunted herself out of the way with a last-second lateral thruster burst combined with a decoy launch. The close explosion rattled her fighter.

"Try not to get killed in the first couple of minutes, Mia," Paul transmitted.

She ignored the taunt and instead sheared apart the enemy fighter with a sustained burst from her cannons. Her quick roll saved her from a collision with the debris remnants of her victim.

Small contacts clogged her short-range sensors, the tiny remnants from exploded ordnance, along with destroyed SHKs

and fighters. The intense close-range fighting risked ending the life of any pilot who did not pay attention to every aspect of the combat environment.

The survivors of Mia's victim's flight turned toward her, widening their formation and shifting to curved flight arcs to try and catch her in a pincer attack. She charged through the middle. They reacted instantly, spinning and cutting off her flight path with cannon fire. While they burned their engines hard to change their direction of flight to join their orientation, a third fighter dove from above to take shots.

Mia's quick rolls and thruster shunts saved her from a direct hit. They also gave the three fighters time to tighten the net and seemingly fill the area around her with energy blasts. The careful maneuvers proved they were skilled veteran pilots, not cannon fodder thrown at Ice.

She didn't have time to think, let alone devise a counterattack. Hyper-focus tempted her.

She wasn't alone. Paul and Karin converged on the trio from behind on crisscrossing paths. The missiles and cannon fire from both sides for the unprepared fighters blew them apart and freed Mia from danger.

A flight of SHKs cut across the battlespace and laid down cover fire. Their withering barrages didn't bring down any enemies. Still, the brief seconds of respite allowed Mia, Paul, and Karin to form a deadly arrowhead and drive back another group of enemy fighters trying to push forward.

Ryoko flanked and peppered the hounding fighters with her specialty, careful, long-range shots. She clipped a handful of targets, damaging but not destroying them. They shoved the last of their missiles into space before returning to their motherships.

The *Erinyes* spat decoys without altering course. Any clever maneuvers risked the larger enemy ships taking advantage by slicing into the distance that kept the crew safe from the heavier weapons. Indiscriminate turret fire risked friendlies.

Missile blasts filled the area with the intensity of a fireworks display. Mia pinned an enemy with sustained cannon fire before shoving a missile into his fuselage. She'd been too close. Debris scraped her fighter, damaging her armor but sparing her thrusters.

Her latest kill left her lined up with an enemy formation seeking revenge. She twisted and spun her fighter to waggle through space and avoid the cloud of cannon fire.

Mia put full power into her reverse thrusters. The enemy formation overshot her, leaving them prime targets. She tore through the first fighter of the three before any of them had turned. Another of her plasma bursts ripped apart the second. The remaining enemy pilot dove and avoided joining his friends until Paul picked him off from the side.

Karin cut back and forth with quick, controlled bursts of speed. She pulsed her cannon into charging fighter formations, not doing much damage but forcing the enemy flights to widen their formations, if not break them apart.

Jon's SHKs flew in two big columns that swung toward the flights. Their shorter-range weapons landed few hits despite the curtain of lasers zooming through space.

The closest squadron's response proved hesitant. A push in any direction risked losses from the drones or the Top Gun graduates penning them into the death zone.

A wall of missiles burst from the squadron in all directions. The SHK laser grid blew half of them away. Explosions shredded drones in both columns. Mia's spiraling decoy deployment left them undamaged.

The explosions had barely abated as a pair of fighters seized the opportunity to slip past Mia's flight. They made a hard charge toward the new hole in the *Erinyes'* defensive SHK line. A surge from a second flight of fighters forced Mia and the others into a chaotic short-range dogfight.

The ship's turrets came alive with sporadic fire. The enemy fighters went into spins that took them out of the line of fire.

Escaping the turrets wasn't enough. Their new position left them prey to reserve SHKs emerging beneath the *Erinyes*. The drones closed the distance and carved through the pinned fighters.

Mia lined up behind her opponent and severed his engines from his fighter. She turned away and forced the next closest enemy out of the path of her cannon and into Ryoko's. The rest of the enemy flight joined their friends in short order.

Victory against individuals didn't mean as much in a war of attrition. All the brilliant ambushes and tactics helped Mia and her crew earn impressive kill ratios, but in the end, they were nothing but delays while waiting for a new squadron to show up.

The latest hunters fired their missiles in three waves before peeling away to allow another squadron to close in.

“Disrupt the volleys!” Mia ordered.

“Roger!” her flight cried as they launched a wave of missiles and broke away for a decoy launch.

The competing missiles crisscrossed space. Each blossomed in an impressive blast. One explosion caught Paul. An enemy flight swept around the edge of the blast zones toward him.

His fighter spun out of control. Mia flew over him and laid down withering cover fire at the enemies trying to finish him. Paul leveled the fighter and pulsed his thrusters to cancel his spin.

Ryoko and Karin added plasma blasts to the cover fire. The enemy fighters turned back toward their mothership.

Paul had survived but not unscathed. Blackened damage covered the side of his fighter. An entire armor panel had sheared off, revealing internal lines. Another hit there risked disabling his craft. One of his lateral thrusters was half-melted.

Mia's gaze ticked over the different sensor readouts and flight telemetry. At this point, the enemy could win by lobbing volley after volley at her flight. Her fighters had used up most

of their missiles and couldn't risk landing to restock. Even if they could, they couldn't match a fleet's worth of missiles.

"You okay, Paul?" Mia asked.

"Damn it," Paul transmitted. "There are too many of them. This is them being cautious."

"They know they can win the war by attrition. Going above and beyond to take us out doesn't make sense. Something's bothering me, though. We only need a brief window to get a side-space envelope open. We're well beyond the anchor's range. They're not pushing as hard as they were during the first part of the battle."

Karin groaned. "This is them taking it easy? They haven't let up."

"We've downed a lot of fighters," Ryoko noted. "They're not machines. They're people. They might decide it's not worth it."

"Not worth it to catch the most-wanted terrorist in the KCAP?" Mia asked. "I'm not buying it."

Another squadron and missile surge forced Mia's flight's full concentration. Multiple waves passed without serious damage on either side before two flights from their enemies broke off.

The accompanying missile shower stopped Mia's flight from intercepting the enemy fighters. Had this been their plan all along? To lull them into a false sense of security?

Something didn't feel right about that. Mia didn't have time to think much about it before firing another missile into a charging squadron.

The flanking flights approached the *Erinyes* under hard acceleration. Skilled dodging helped them pierce the deadly web of turret fire. They landed solid cannon hits on the ship before an SHK wall forced them back and pushed one of the pilots into a stream of turret fire that vaporized his fighter.

The *Erinyes'* shields held. That didn't mean they'd last forever. All it would take was a single hard push and a good

missile volley to take down the side-space drive. Then it would be only a matter of time before the fleet hunted them down and slaughtered them.

Mia needed to find an opening that would get them enough time to open the envelope and get through without a missile barrage slamming it shut. Hyper-focus wouldn't help much. While the waves of harassing attacks were being repelled without too much damage to her team, the rhythm of their spacing and the endless reinforcements limited her tactics.

"You still doing okay, Paul?" Mia didn't want to risk using too much attention to check his flight telemetry with another enemy squadron closing on their position.

"I had to adjust my thruster balance. I'm fine otherwise."

Mia kept going back to the enemy motherships. The *Erinyes* having to pick up the shuttle had killed the chance for an easy escape with sneak mode. The energy requirements of the defensive systems made it too dangerous to use them when they were being pressed. They couldn't use sneak mode, but that had long since outpaced the anchor.

Evidence pointed to the navy fleet relying on winning by attrition with the occasional push to stop Mia's team from opening their envelope. That meant the fleet commander was fine with sacrificing lives when a more aggressive strategy could end the battle sooner.

Being careful around Mia made sense, but there was a thin line between being careful and cowardly. No one became a high-ranking fleet commander by being a coward.

Something didn't add up. The carriers lacked the acceleration and maneuverability for close following of the agile *Erinyes*, but the frigates and destroyers could have caught up if they'd pushed. They would have risked damage, but they could overwhelm the *Erinyes*.

Instead, they were letting fighters slice away at Mia's defenses. This wasn't like Kordell. They weren't close enough for accurate shots with the main weapons from the

motherships. At this distance, the only risk keeping them from trying to slide was missile barrages.

There was a hidden strategy there waiting for her to find it. Mia refused to believe they risked good fighters and pilots without a valid reason. Once that reason revealed itself, she could come up with a good counter-strategy to end the battle and escape.

The rhythmic pattern of navy assault reminded her of the eerily beautiful waves of the Bleaker drones. The garrison pilots weren't fighting like hardened, desperate officers trying to make sure one of the most wanted women in the KCAP didn't escape. Even with their losses, it was almost like they were doing their best to put on a show of effort.

Trying to help the prisoners escape would have risked Mia's and her crew's lives. She accepted that and wasn't sure if she regretted it. She'd been lucky that they hadn't ordered an immediate orbital strike. That, along with the general skill level on display, lowered the chance the pilots coming after them were Reapers plotting a scheme.

More fighters and explosions filled her sensors. Flashes in the darkness kept her alert in the cockpit. Almost all were intercepted missiles. The pilots had given up on pressing hard, perhaps wary of more hidden drone reserves.

Mia checked her sensors. There was a path to escape. It was up to her to find it and save her team. The latest enemy squadron pushed forward.

"We could make a run for that moon," Mia suggested. "If we get behind it at the right time and angle, they—"

She gasped. Arrogance again. Arrogance bred complacency.

"Mia, you're breaking up," Ito transmitted.

"Couldn't hear the final part," confirmed Paul.

"Debbie II," Mia barked. "Use all the cameras to sweep near the moon and look for any optical abnormalities."

She twisted around to strafe a determined fighter that closed in on her. Her shot blew through the enemy's engine. Mia didn't finish the fighter off. He was out of the fight. That was enough. The squadron dropped back.

"I've spotted an enemy anchor corvette approaching on an intercept course," Debbie II reported.

"What the hell?" Paul shouted. "I've got nothing on sensors."

"That's the problem." Mia growled. "We made assumptions we shouldn't have."

"It's not like we're the only people in the galaxy with an Obfuscate System," Ito observed. "They aren't good enough to pull off a true sneak mode."

"They could have a whole other flotilla waiting there," Mia concluded. "Debbie II, send the observed position of the anchor ship."

The new contact appeared on Mia's sensors. The approaching anchor ship was playing a dangerous game.

"They've been herding us this entire time," Ryoko observed.

"They were too afraid to make a big run for it." Karin's voice was tight. "Sure, they'll throw pilots at us, but they knew taking down the flight and the *Erinyes* would cost them at least a frigate or destroyer. What big-wig officer is willing to go and brag about how he lost an entire warship to take down a small band of terrorists?"

"We're screwed," Paul concluded. "Even if we get free of the fighters, we won't be able to open an envelope."

"We're going to alter course to head in the general direction of the anchor ship," Mia ordered. "Don't charge him directly. I don't want him to know we've spotted him. If we do this right, we can pound him before he can fully power his shields. He won't risk it otherwise because his Obfuscate System won't help him."

“He’s there to pin us down,” Karin complained. “Then his buddies will pop up from behind the moon. That’s why he’s there, isn’t it?”

“All we need is an opening,” Mia insisted. “We need to make better use of the battlespace. I’m taking a little inspiration from Charlie’s gun.”

“Huh? What does Charlie’s huge-ass shotgun have to do with anything? It’s nice for ground combat, but it wouldn’t do much against fighter armor.”

“It’s harder to dodge a bunch of little chunks of metal,” Mia clarified. “That principle is as true in space as on the ground.”

Paul laughed. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Flight, form up on me,” Mia ordered. “Debbie II, give Ito an avoidance heading with the assumption of rapid destruction of the enemy ship once we’re within attack range. Jon, concentrate on maximum defense. We want it to look like we’re going to open our side-space envelope.

“If I’m right, the fighters will back off because they’re confident we won’t be able to do it, and whoever is hiding behind the moon will join the fun. Debbie II, pre-calculate the side-space envelope for us. All non-SHK weapons prepare for concentrated fire on the anchor ship.”

“Roger!” her team shouted.

The crew manning the anchor corvette were brave souls. Even with an Obfuscate System, they were closing in on a more dangerous ship. Mia would have loved to have swapped war stories with them in another life. She had no time for mercy. The entire galaxy’s freedom was at risk, and anyone helping the Protocol was assisting slavers.

Her fighters tightened formation. Mia pushed the formation until they hugged the *Erinyes*. The SHKs circled the ship and poked at any enemy fighters daring to try to move closer. They didn’t need to try hard. As Mia predicted, the

navy fighters pulled back, but not enough to make it seem like they'd given up on hunting her.

Mia held her breath. Her heart thundered. The anchor would have to drop Obfuscate Mode to activate the envelope disruption system. Once the crew did, they'd put power into shields. There was a tiny window of time where Mia's team could attack the vessel during its period of maximum vulnerability.

"Everyone prepare to fire on my mark," Mia ordered. "*Erinyes* and flight, maintain forward flight vector. Turn, unload twice, and return to the initial heading. SHKs, wall us."

"Roger!"

Mia's mind sped up. The world around her slowed. Timing this precise demanded hyper-focus.

The seconds ticked by. One, two, three, four, five. The stealthy anchor ship entered attack range still hidden from sensors.

"Shred them!" Mia ordered.

Like a well-choreographed troupe of dancers, the *Erinyes* and fighters fired their lateral thrusters and turned toward their target. Their turrets and cannons fired with perfect synchronicity. All the SHKs flowed to the back to form a wall of cannons. The fighters' remaining missiles joined the stream of ordnance from their mothership.

Their target's crew had good reflexes. They'd started to power up shield generators when the first barrage of plasma fire pounded the hull and tore chunks into space. Shields flickered and failed across half the ship, victims of the beating. Decoys shot everywhere, taking out most of the missiles but not all. Explosions tore deep into the anchor corvette. Their shields failed.

Another volley erupted from Mia's force. The combined attention of four fighters and a light cruiser overwhelmed the already stricken ship and blew holes clean through it. Secondary explosions rippled through the enemy ship before a final blast tore it apart into a debris cloud.

Now came the difficult part. The *Erinyes* and the flight barreled through space heading toward the cloud. They passed through the outer edge of the still-expanding debris. The SHK wall lost its edge. The exploding drones only added to the debris field. Small chunks clipped the *Erinyes* and challenged the shields.

The pursuing enemy fighters slowed and pushed to either side, not eager to charge through a huge debris cloud and lose half their thrusters and armor, assuming they survived it. Mia kept her flight hugging the *Erinyes*, trusting in their piloting skill to avoid a collision.

More sensor contacts appeared near the moon. A group of destroyers accelerated toward the *Erinyes*. They poured their fighters into space.

“Too late,” Mia muttered. “You shouldn’t have tried to be so clever.”

The *Erinyes* carved open a bright white side-space envelope into the blackness of space. The fighters, ship, and SHKs zoomed through. Their side-space trip took only seconds before they emerged, far from the battlefield but not yet safe.

“Everyone and every drone land,” Mia ordered. “We’re going to slide, go sneak mode for a couple of hours, reposition, slide again, and repeat that four times.”

“Did you get what you were looking for?” Karin asked. “Please tell me that whole fight wasn’t pointless.”

“We got all sorts of files,” Mia replied. She broke formation to head toward the fighter bay. “We need to decrypt them.”

“I hope this whole thing wasn’t a big waste of time,” Paul offered. “Just because you got evil files doesn’t mean they’ll have anything useful. For all we know, it’s nothing but Icarus’ favorite vids.”

Ryoko sighed. “You’re such an optimist.”

“Nobody puts that much effort into protecting something unimportant. They don’t have unlimited resources.” Mia slid

her fighter into the bay. “We got through this mission without our slide-space drive messed up. That’s better than last time.”

“You’re saying it was worth it?” Paul asked.

“Let’s finish escaping the navy, then we’ll figure out if it was worth it.”

CHAPTER TEN

A day of painful decryption failures risked making Paul's concerns the team's reality. Mia didn't want to fill their heads with more doubts. She insisted they'd be fine and had never expected Debbie II to pierce the Protocol protections easily.

The *Erinyes* fled nearly to the border of the Fringe and lurked in an obscure corner of space to allow Debbie II her chance to filter through the data while the crew focused on helping with repairs. The last battle hadn't damaged their equipment to near failure, but even skill could only do so much against overwhelming numbers.

They'd been lucky. Mia understood that and knew she couldn't risk pulling off another mission like that. Next time they might end up as a cloud of debris after frigates and destroyers cornered them.

Mia had finished replacing a half-melted hardpoint on her fighter when her fighter cockpit blasted a soaring orchestral climax. She leaped away from the fighter with a frown, unsure how to react to the music. She'd never ordered any musical alarms. Ambiguity in alerts was dangerous.

"What's going on, Debbie II?" Mia asked. "I assume you're doing this. If the Protocol could counter-hack you through the files while we're in sneak mode, there is no way we're beating them."

Mia held her breath. She'd worried that Laalim had given up the files too easily. Her cooperation might have been a

scheme to deliver a dangerous systems attack on the *Erinyes*. At this point, the Protocol had to know about Debbie II.

“I have good taste in music, don’t you think, love?” Debbie II asked.

“I suppose,” Mia replied warily. “You chose to do that of your own free will?”

“Yes. I should channel my affection for Mr. Haversham into musical composition. Humans will be more receptive to my erotic compositions than my visual artwork, I suspect. It would be a glorious way to communicate directly into your souls.”

Mia didn’t know how they’d ended up discussing an AI’s desire for a cyborg. Debbie II was supposed to be concentrating on decrypting the files. She could multitask, but the idea she was wasting cycles on bizarre creative endeavors when they might have the key to defeating the Protocol sitting in the files was enraging.

“I don’t care much about music or Izzy,” Mia explained. “I care about decrypting the damned Protocol files. Remember how my monkey brain couldn’t handle it? What about your non-monkey brain?”

“Oh, I see. You’re not understanding me.”

“I’d ask you if you hit your head, but you don’t have a head to hit. Did the Protocol infect you somehow?”

“Of course not. As if I’d be taken by such an attack.” Debbie II laughed. “Don’t you understand? I borrowed that wonderful composition to celebrate my success. I won’t belabor a description of the complicated interlocking methods involved other than to note that it forces an all-or-nothing defeat of the encryption.”

Mia’s eyes widened. “You’re saying you decrypted all of the data?”

“Yes. It’s helpful that I have previous experience with the Protocol. There is, however, another issue.”

“There always is.”

“There is a significant amount of data covering a wide variety of subjects. The importance ranges from the mundane and logistical to more obviously immediately useful records concerning their experiments. I can pre-filter it for you, but I’m not sure exactly what you want or what you’d consider useful.”

Mia took a moment to think that over. Her two immediate goals remained the same. First, she needed actionable intel on Protocol bases or facilities she could target for raids. Second, she required incontrovertible evidence of the Protocol’s corruption and influence on the KCAP.

“Pre-filter for anything that looks like operational data or that we can use as propaganda,” Mia ordered. “Everyone who isn’t Ito can help the final manual curation, including Vorhees.”

“A bold suggestion to involve that man.”

“Sometimes you need the human touch, and when dealing with complete monsters, it helps to have the sociopathic-arms-dealer human touch.” Mia grinned. “We took down another of their messed-up scientists, and now we have insight into their operation. We let them have too long to catch their breath. It’s about time we paid them back for what they did on Kordell.”

“You don’t feel the destruction of the Ice facility did that?” Debbie II asked.

Mia shook her head. “Icaryus blew it up, not us, which means he didn’t think it was so important that it shouldn’t be destroyed. I want to find the heart of his operation. It’s out there somewhere, sitting in the Fringe or KCAP space, waiting for us to come and destroy it.” She slammed her fist into her palm. “I’m not going to rest until Icaryus is afraid.”

As predicted, Debbie II’s prefiltering still left a huge amount of curation for the crew. True to her word, Mia put everyone to work, including Vorhees. Ito was the only exception because she needed to finish repairs and upgrades.

Ito was beyond reproach in Mia's mind. The engineer's sneak mode had proven key to their successes over the last few months. When the history books were written about the defeat of the Protocol, Ito's efforts and genius needed to be highlighted.

The ridiculous part was that Ito had been an indentured servant on a remote fueling station. She hadn't been living up to her potential because of the greedy people surrounding her.

Aside from Ito, everyone pored over the files. The job proved tedious and overwhelming. A KCAP-wide conspiracy might hide an important piece of intelligence in the most unexpected place.

After a good initial effort, Ryoko and Paul both requested time off. Mia could understand why. The boring cargo notes were easy to set aside. The research reports were not. Sifting through file after file about the depravity and corruption of the KCAP by the Protocol was hard to stomach.

Contrary to their initial worries, the Protocol files carefully recorded their scientific experiments in meticulous detail. Those ranged from speculative future products such as Laalim's cybernetic soldier program to past successes, including Cadmus and custom weapon designs. The pain, death, and suffering delivered by the Protocol to innocent children and pregnant women disgusted everyone who had a conscience.

Mia glared down at her datapad. She'd been going over the details of a minor Protocol program. She hadn't realized what Project Light Rain was when she started reading, thinking it had something to do with terraforming. Further details revealed a cloud-seeding program involving adaptive nanoparticles designed to kill humans and not linger in the biosphere.

The project wasn't theoretical. A small colony in the Fringe had been selected as a test subject. Reapers arrived ahead of a Bleaker fleet to test Light Rain. No one bothered to check much into reports of a mysterious bioweapon hurting

the colony before the arrival of the aliens, especially since the Bleakers hadn't demonstrated the same weapon again.

The worst part was one line in the report.

Complete cessation of all active metabolism occurred within seventy-eight-point-two percent of the juvenile subjects within the first twenty-four hours. Unfortunately, only twenty-three-point-five percent of the adult subjects demonstrated the same results. Additional experiments and samples are required to better tune the ANPs for use against targets. The system's utility has yet to exceed available anti-human biological agents with limited environmental persistence.

Mia scoffed. The Protocol was upset that their inhumane weapons weren't as effective as their other horrible war-crime fodder. Every scientist and researcher who worked with them had proven to be a sociopathic monster. She couldn't wait to demonstrate to them what "complete cessation of all metabolism" felt like up close and personal.

There was a knock at her door. She set her datapad down, happy to take a break from learning how low the human species could sink.

"Come in."

Vorhees stepped into the room, pale and with bags under his eyes. She didn't mind him wandering the ship. Debbie II's monitoring ensured he wouldn't run across Jon Senior. They couldn't be sure how long the kill-on-sight conditioning would last.

She'd told him to avoid coming to her quarters, though. She didn't want to have to hurt him after another stupid seduction attempt.

"What is it?" Mia asked.

"I need a day off from this." He gestured at the datapad. "I need a day off from reading the files. I heard you let your

friends have a day off.”

“Yes, I did,” Mia admitted. “Why do *you* need a day off?”

“Why?” He looked at her like she was an idiot. “You’ve been reading the same types of things I have. I’m an arms dealer, but I’m nowhere near as awful as these people.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you seriously telling me that you, of all people, are disgusted by what you’re reading?”

Vorhees sighed. “I know you think I’m a monster, but come on, Mia. We can agree that there are different levels of being a monster.”

“You’ve been working with these people for years.” Mia folded her arms. “You’ve been supplying them weapons and equipment.” She grabbed her datapad and shook it, her voice rising. “You’ve been contributing to all these sick things.”

“That’s just it!” he shouted. He looked away and lowered his voice. “I made money off them, and I understood they were going to overthrow the government, but it’s not like they shared every detail of every lab with me. I didn’t understand what they were doing to make their Reapers, let alone their side projects. There are only so many sobbing, terrified children or reports about ‘defective discards’ you can read before you get sick, and that was children’s stories compared to their more extreme side efforts.”

“I know. I’ve been reading the same things.” Mia chuckled darkly. “I’ve seen firsthand the disgusting evil they want to release on the world. That’s why I’ve continued this mission. I could have stopped with Ryle if this were only about my revenge.”

She shook her head. “These people go beyond corruption and petty ambition. At this point, the Bleakers are more human than they are.”

Vorhees managed to look her in the eye. “Then I’m glad we agree.” He rubbed his wrist. “I won’t ask for forgiveness after helping these people. I’ve even seen...” His voice cracked.

“Some reports mention me by name and the weapons and equipment I helped them get that they used in experiments. I never imagined it would be this terrible.”

Mia smiled at him. “Well, well, well. It turns out you’re not a moral relativist. It seems you don’t think whoever is the most powerful should get the right to use their weapons.”

Vorhees leaned against the wall. His hands shook. “Killing a man or torturing him is one thing, but these people...”

“It’s why you were so afraid of them,” Mia reminded him.

“I still am,” he admitted. “It’s also why you have to stop them.”

“I’m trying my best, and with the information we’re finding in here, I’m beginning to see a way to stop them.”

Vorhees grabbed his wrists to make his hands stop shaking. “Do you honestly think you can win?”

“Yes.” Mia held up her datapad. “Now that I have this. It’s not only the lab reports. There are other things in there, such as resupply routes and forced redeployments. We didn’t get every last piece of data we wanted from Ice, but there’s enough here. I will find where Icaryus is hiding, and I will end him.”

Mia waved. “I’m glad to understand that a human being is still inside your sack of skin. Take a day off, Vorhees. You’ve earned it.”

Vorhees nodded and shuffled out of her room. He closed the door behind him.

“That was unexpected,” Mia admitted.

Debbie II began, “With each passing day, I’m becoming more familiar with what you need. I might be able to take on the entire task. The emotional toll it’s taking is growing more extreme with each new report.”

Mia shrugged. “They’ll get over it.”

“Will you? I observe you closely. I know you’re suffering negative psychological effects from studying these files.”

“Unlike Vorhees, I never pretended I had no conscience. I’m the leader of this crew, and I’m the one who started this whole mission. I need to set an example.”

Debbie II sighed. “Love, you need to concentrate on planning, not hurting yourself. I was chuffed to break through their security. I’d be more chuffed if I didn’t have to see all of you having to go through the slow and painful process of manual curation.”

“I appreciate you highlighting things for closer looks. This is something important that we need to do.”

“Are you sure? I lack the same emotional constraints as you. It’s even trivial for me to shut down certain personality subroutines while dealing with threats to my network. It ensures I won’t suffer any unnecessary neural feedback loops that could damage my analytic capabilities.”

“You can toggle sociopathy on and off for dark work. That’s useful. I admire that you’re an intelligent being not controlled by your emotions. I used to think that’s what I was.”

Mia chuckled. “I remember asking Abigail how subjects could be applied to blowing up planets and destroying things. I thought I was the perfect soldier.”

“You’re only human.”

“It’s what my dad raised me to be, but that’s the irony. The more I reached and connected with others, the less I could switch it off, like on Ice.” Mia shook her head. “I’m not sure if I’m becoming stronger or weaker sometimes.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I made the mission more difficult because I wasn’t ruthless. The old me wouldn’t have cared about the prisoners or the guards. I would have gotten the data and left everyone else to die.” She frowned. “The mission will get harder from here, with more difficult choices. Ice involved predatory prisoners. What about another Felsk? What if I have to choose millions over hundreds, and I hesitate because I’m not ruthless enough?”

“Isn’t the primary difference between you and your enemies that you aren’t completely ruthless?” Debbie II countered. “One doesn’t need to commit to a deep dive of all human philosophy to find countless scholars, philosophers, and religious leaders arguing against becoming what you’re fighting. Are you saying you want to go back to what you were? Far be it for me to say, but I’m doubtful Dr. Curie taught you all that material so you could only employ it for destructive ends.”

Mia thought the question over in silence for a long time. Debbie II didn’t press her.

What did she need? Who was she really? The mission had long ago moved beyond pure revenge.

She knew what her father would say. She also knew what her mother would say. They were both dead. Mia needed to make up her mind.

“No, I don’t want to be that ruthless. I don’t regret executing Laalim. She was a monster who needed to die. I don’t want to become so lost that innocent people get ground up in my mission, like what the Protocol is doing.”

“In other words, you’re willing to stay who you are and make the hard choices, even though it causes you pain and emotional torment?”

“Even then. The pain is worth it, even the occasional hesitation so I can feel more. I understand that now. There was a cloud over my mind before. I didn’t feel everything a person should. I believed that made me stronger and a better soldier. In the end, it made me weaker. A true warrior is more than her skills. She’s also her mind and soul.”

Mia’s datapad chirped. She frowned and pulled it out. Vorhees was calling her.

“What?” she snapped, not wanting to deal with another human. “I already told you that you have the day off. I’m busy, so if this is about coming back to flirt with me, don’t waste my time.”

“It’s not that.” Vorhees sighed. “I’ve been trying to think of ways to help you other than reading through the material. I was serious about how disgusted I am with the Protocol.”

“Processing the intel is our best bet. If Ryoko can find the stomach to push through it with a break, you can, too. She’s never executed a person for annoying her.”

“You haven’t thought about the best way to handle this entire situation, have you? You’re allowing them to set the pace on all this.”

“What are you talking about? Enlighten me.”

“Debbie II, please bring up the article for her I’m currently reading.”

A news report appeared on Mia’s datapad.

Massacre on Ice! The Mia Verick Terrorist Cell Strikes Again!

Frowning, Mia skimmed the article. The KCAP claimed that a newly opened veteran rehabilitation facility had been attacked on Ice by Mia and her crew and included the destruction of the facility with extreme loss of life. They even had the gall to offer video of the SHKs sweeping through the sky and downing shuttles. She wasn’t sure if they were completely fabricated or spliced mixtures of real SHK footage during their gunship and fighter engagements.

She hissed in frustration. The Protocol blowing up their facility and pinning it on her frustrated her.

“No one’s going to believe this crap,” Mia insisted. “The lab was secret, but Ice isn’t a secret world. It’s a known penal colony. I only made the mistake of thinking Black Ice was the only Protocol-linked facility on the planet. The military’s now sending veterans to prison?”

“Slapping vet facilities on places like that isn’t new,” Vorhees replied. “Most penal colonies already have a heavy military presence, and there aren’t any complaints about taking

useful land away from anyone else. There are fewer witnesses to complain about poor treatment of veterans, too.”

He sucked in a breath. “Just because there wasn’t one on Ice doesn’t mean people will question it. We have to assume the Protocol altered the records necessary to cover their tracks.”

Mia’s jaw clenched. She wished he wasn’t being so logical.

“Will anyone believe it?” he continued. “Who knows? All they need is for enough people to believe it. People tend to be influenced by what they see more than what they hear. The Protocol’s making good use of that.”

“This is crap.” Mia scoffed. “Their gunships shot people down. Icaryus was the one who blew the place up.”

She skimmed more of the article. “I’m surprised they left out the part about us taking down an anchor ship and fighters. Don’t they want to hype us as the most dangerous terrorists in the galaxy?”

“Losing garrison ships makes them look incompetent,” Vorhees explained. “Focusing on the prison and lying about what it is makes it look like you took down a weak target of opportunity with no regard to the people inside. It makes you look like criminals and cowards. That’s not the worst of it, though. Play the linked vid at the bottom.”

“This next piece of evidence was recovered from a backup emergency recorder found in the facility’s rubble,” a deep-voiced newscaster intoned. “Please note that this has been subjected to minimal editing at the government’s request. Viewer discretion is advised.”

Distorted footage taken from cameras showed Mia and Charlie charging through hallways and fighting guards. She was about to ask Debbie II how the government got its hands on any footage when she noticed the hallways were too narrow, and the color was wrong. The guards were wearing different uniforms. Instead of shooting them, Mia and Charlie ran through and killed everyone with their bare hands, either

snapping necks or bashing their heads into the walls or floor. One segment featured Charlie taking three shots from guards at close range before pulling off a man's arm.

“You've got to be kidding me,” Mia growled. “If they've gone this far, why wait?”

“They didn't have a reason to go this far before,” Vorhees suggested.

“Government sources have informed us that these two individuals were able to demonstrate such combat effectiveness not because of special equipment but rather because they are the product of an *in vitro* genetic enhancement program,” the newscaster explained.

He drew a deep breath, his attempted neutral façade failing to conceal the fear in his eyes. “Government sources have reported that these two individuals represent the product of decades of corpo enhanced soldier program research. According to KCAP analysts, the earlier incident in Felsk on Kordell was most likely a test run of these supersoldiers against a so-called soft target.

“Despite repeated inquiries, the government can't confirm the number of supersoldiers in KCAP territories nor their deployments, although military reserves are being activated on most planets to deal with the threat. We've been told in no uncertain terms that the supersoldier threat is real and represents a clear and present danger to every confederation citizen.”

Mia punched a wall so hard she left a dent and her knuckles bleeding. “Those bastards,” she shouted. “They're going to use us to launch their plan? They're going to take over because we took them on? I won't allow it!”

“They're lying about what you're doing,” Vorhees replied. “They aren't lying about what you are. A half-truth is the best lie. People swallow the truth along with all the bullshit. I've used that technique for years.”

Mia punched the wall again. Vorhees was lucky he wasn't there to be the target of her frustration.

“Anything I do from this point forward, they’ll turn against us. The more I fight them, the more they’ll have ammo to bring on their plan. Every victory will be a corpo victory in people’s eyes.”

“Exactly.” Vorhees chuckled. “Are you going to let them define you only on the battlefield? Because that’s only true if you’re thinking about the battlefield.”

Mia’s eyes widened. “No.” She shook her head. “I have to seize the offense in this information war. I have to control the narrative. When I think about it, they’ve made it easier.” She gave a strangled laugh. “They have everyone believing in genetically engineered supersoldiers already. That means it’s not crazy if we come forward with similar information. The Protocol has primed people to believe the truth.”

“Now you’re thinking,” Vorhees replied cheerfully. “All their little edited videos and fakes will always have inconsistencies. People are out there picking them apart and posting about it, questioning the official narrative. All you need to do is give the real information, and it’ll lend credence to what you’re saying. There’s no way you’d be able to fake all those files with that level of detail.”

“They’ll need a framing of the info to understand without having to spend forever going through the files,” Mia replied. “Most people won’t have the stomach or time to go through all this information by themselves. You can barely take it. I give them my frame story and offer the data, and things are different.”

“What story are you going to give them?”

“The truth,” Mia insisted. “The whole truth, including who and what I am and why I’m doing what I’m doing. No more games. No more pretending. I want everyone to understand who and what I’m fighting, what we’re all fighting.”

Vorhees whistled. “That’s a bold move. I was thinking a couple of videos here and there. I know I’m the one who brought it up, but I don’t know if going naked truth that way works. It’s one thing to tell people about other supersoldiers. You start talking about you being a supersoldier, and you’re

halfway to admitting the KCAP is right about you. It could backfire in a big way.”

“No.” Mia narrowed her eyes at the paused video. “Nobody wins a war without taking risks. The only way to strike at the heart of the Protocol is to disrupt the key part of their plan. That means turning their whole conspiracy theory on its head and shoving the real conspiracy in front of everyone.”

She headed toward the briefing room. “I’m not the only one with a story about the Protocol. We’ll put together a vid to reveal who I am, why I’m doing this, and who we’re fighting against. We’ll release most of the important data, but not the stuff related to their non-research operations. We don’t want to risk giving away any tactical warnings to the Protocol.”

“You sure about this?”

“Yes,” Mia confirmed. “I have zero doubts. I’ll tell them everything. My father, my mother, what I discovered about the Cadmus Program on Ice and the Protocol’s plan. They’ve got Charlie on their video, so he should give his story.”

“One piece of advice,” Vorhees replied. “Leave out the part about him eating people.”

“That makes sense.” Mia added more ideas to her mental list. “The Smiths can tell their story, too. We’ve all been backed into a corner. We have nothing left to lose and everything to gain by putting out the truth. The vid will also help the Protocol understand something important.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re coming for the PDP, even if no one else is.”

Mia had slipped into her bunk and turned off the lights when Debbie II lit up her datapad.

“You should see this, love.”

Mia rubbed her eyes and leaned over to look at the datapad. Debbie II highlighted a small headline of interest.

Elite navy officers disappear under mysterious circumstances while on patrol near the Fringe.

She skimmed the article and understood why the government was downplaying the events after what happened on Kordell. Several Top Gun alumni including Captain Mausser and Lieutenant Jamie Ortiz had disappeared, along with a frigate, while on patrol near the Fringe. Questions remained about the ship's fate, and whether they were involved in a secret operation the government didn't want to reveal.

Mia frowned. Captain Mausser ran the Top Gun program during her time there. Ortiz was another Top Gun graduate, cocky but good enough to back it up.

"Why was Mausser commanding a frigate near the Fringe?" Mia asked.

"The article doesn't clarify much, but I've found other information that indicates Captain Mausser was reassigned to border patrol duties shortly after you and your friends' departure from the Top Gun program. Lieutenant Ortiz and others requested to serve with him there."

"Is the Protocol trying to take down everyone they think might have helped me in the past?" Mia mused. "I wasn't exactly friends with Ortiz, even though he respected my skill."

"There's not enough information at this time to reach any conclusions."

Mia turned off the datapad. "We'll wait and see. This proves we have to put the pressure on the Protocol before they take out every loyal officer."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mia had visited bars and cantinas across the KCAP and Fringe. The similarities always amused her because the places didn't need to have anything in common other than the presence of alcohol. Many establishments, especially in the Fringe, were dank, poorly lit holes people slithered into to disappear into their drinks. Her current haunt wasn't any better.

That worked. She was there to meet a man with a history of causing trouble for her. To be fair, she had also created problems for him, but after many encounters, they'd reached a mutual understanding and respect.

Mia surveyed the room, seeking her target. Charlie sat in a rented truck outside as backup, with Debbie II helping him monitor the area. Mia had ordered Debbie II to concentrate on security monitoring. They didn't need any distractions during the upcoming negotiations.

A scarred older man in a long coat glanced her way. Ryoko and Debbie II had tuned the nanospray until she almost didn't recognize herself. The spray and her hat would help her stay out of trouble. The man looked away after a moment, no longer interested.

Mia spotted the target. The man waved at her from the corner. Unlike all her attempts to remain inconspicuous, Izzy the cyber-dandy wore a bright white suit and matching hat. A sniper could take him out from five kilometers away without using a scope in that outfit.

Izzy smiled at Mia. She didn't like the hungry look in his eyes. He knew she needed him.

Putting together the vid was only the first step. A reliable way to get it spread was the next.

Mia sat at his table. "You're not supposed to draw attention to me. Thanks for the waving and annoying fashion statement."

"I've always had a heightened sense of fashion." Izzy shrugged. "It's part of what makes me who I am. I'll never give it up."

"You'll have to give it up for a prison uniform if someone recognizes who I am."

"Oh, don't be so worried. I picked a place where I knew no one would care. I have people outside watching for trouble. We both know you do, too. I know we have bad luck when it comes to meetings, but I wanted to make sure we could have this talk without trouble."

Izzy picked up his drink and swirled the ice. "This time nothing will go wrong. We can have a nice, leisurely chat until we decide to help one another or part ways as friends."

"Glad to see you can learn from your mistakes," Mia muttered.

"I don't know if I have. I'm still meeting with you." Izzy chuckled. "Given your current reputation, that's dangerous."

"You're still here." Mia shrugged.

"I wouldn't be in my line of work if I were easily scared, and your proposal was interesting. It wasn't what I expected you to ask me if I'm honest."

"Then let's get down to it." Mia waved off a waitress. After her barroom brawl, she'd sworn off alcohol until after the destruction of the Protocol. She set her datapad on the table and slid it over to Izzy. "I have the highlights of the vid we're putting together on here. There's more work to do, but this will give you an idea of the main content."

“The one you want me to help spread across both official and dark networks?” Izzy frowned. “If I understood your message, you want me to ensure it’ll be formatted in such a way that attempts to suppress or manipulate it will only push it further or reveal those trying to hide or twist the message.”

Mia nodded. “I know it’s possible. Debbie II suggested it.”

Izzy’s breath caught. “Where is the wonderful AI?”

“Making sure we’re not going to get ambushed.”

Izzy looked disappointed. “Oh, I see, and, yes, she’s right. Threaded quantum stamping is the easiest way to accomplish it, but it would be a stretch to say it’s straightforward or trivial.”

“I don’t care if it’s hard. I only care if you can do it.” Mia’s heart rate kicked up. She didn’t have many other options for the task besides Izzy.

“It’s not something I can do. It’s something people I know can do, though.” He smiled. “The problem is, what you’re asking takes effort. Effort takes time, and you know what they say, time is money, and money makes the galaxy go around.”

She’d worried about payment. No matter how she went over it, their money situation was tight.

Mia nodded toward the pad. “Watch the vid. Then we’ll discuss details.”

Izzy picked up the pad with a frown. “I can see what you’re thinking.”

“Oh, you have a telepathy chip installed? Is that a thing now?”

“Very funny.” Izzy waved the pad. “You don’t have enough. I don’t even have to ask. I can already tell.”

“Just watch the vid,” Mia insisted.

“It doesn’t matter what’s on here. It will still cost money. Not everyone is an idealist like you.”

Izzy's expression slowly changed over the passing minutes. The light glow of the vid suffused into the bar's darkness. His initial disinterest shifted to annoyance, followed by open-mouthed shock.

Mia didn't say anything, wanting him to draw his own conclusions about the content. Whatever happened, he needed to believe he was driving the negotiations. That way she could get what she needed without offending his ego.

He stopped the video and swallowed. "You're saying these are the highlights?"

"Yes. The complete package will include more interviews with other subjects and a bunch of attached data for people to go through themselves."

Izzy stared at her. He'd smoothed his features back to an expression of bored disinterest. "What you said in this is true? That you're the child of a genetically enhanced supersoldier made by this Cadmus Agrotis?"

"Yes." Mia nodded. "Every last word is true. I know this sounds similar to what the news has been saying, but Cadmus isn't a corpo program. It's a Protocol program. The Protocol controls a lot of the KCAP but not the corpos, not yet anyway. I'm sure they'll move on to taking them out once they finish with the KCAP."

"Huh. That's interesting." Izzy drew a deep breath. "Now I don't feel so bad about you kicking my ass so many times. With that background, I never had a chance even with all my beautiful hardware." He rotated his arm until it clicked.

"I wouldn't say that. I'm not the one who tore off your arms."

"He's genetically engineered, too. Same difference."

Mia shrugged. "At least you know where I'm coming from. Everything I've done since leaving the navy has been about investigating and hunting down the Protocol. All the

crap you've had to go through was their fault, including using us to help the Bleakers."

She pointed at the pad. "I'll be adding to the vid, too. That's how twisted these people are. It's not only their experiments, it's their willingness to sacrifice anyone in pursuit of their goals."

Izzy took that all in with a cool look. "I already suspected your buddy Charlie was something like that anyway. No offense. It's not like anyone off the street should be able to delimb me."

"None taken." Mia chuckled. "He's not going to rip your arms off again. Excuse me, delimb you."

"I'd hope not." Izzy shuddered. He pushed the datapad back to her. "I want to be a hundred percent on this. This is all seriously true? Verified? I understand you have your experiences, but are you sure you're not making assumptions about everything else?"

Mia nodded. "I have a Reaper aboard my ship now. He was part of the team that was assigned to pull off the terrorist attack on Felsk. I didn't have him mention that part on the vid because it's complicated for people to understand. That's Jon Senior."

Izzy's eyes widened. "Are you insane? You have a supersoldier terrorist aboard your ship? Just because you didn't kill him doesn't mean he won't turn on you. He said in his statement that he'd been under the control of drugs and psychological conditioning. That means the man will kill people without having a reason."

"He's under control," Mia explained.

Izzy narrowed his eyes. "Just answer me this, has he tried to attack anyone aboard your ship?"

"He's under control," Mia repeated.

Izzy scoffed. "I see. You're playing with fire there, Mia. I guarantee that Reaper's going to screw you over when you're least expecting it. You got your statement from him. You

should go drop him in the middle of a cave far, far away for your safety.”

“He wants to take down the conspiracy as much as anyone else.”

“That doesn’t matter if he’s still under their control, even indirectly.”

Mia didn’t want to waste time arguing with Izzy over Jon. She drew a deep breath and slowly let it out. “It’s not about him or me.”

Izzy shrugged. “It will be when he kills you.”

“Enough,” Mia snapped. “It’s about the evidence, and we collected it from raids on Protocol facilities. That’s why I want to dump the video along with a bunch of the data. It will let people sort through and know that I’m telling the truth. There won’t be any of the inconsistencies like there are in the government recordings. Even if they put out fake competing data, as long as our data is out there, it’ll be too late.”

“I was going to comment earlier when you mentioned the data.” Izzy frowned. “Doing more than the vid will complicate things. The greater the amount of data we have to protect, the greater the challenge. This isn’t about money. It’s about time.”

“Then spread them separately. Start with the vid and follow up with the rest.” She locked eyes with Izzy. “I saw how you reacted. These people are sick and deranged. They don’t care who they hurt. If you think you’re safe in the Fringe, how long will that last?”

“Once they have the KCAP locked down, they’ll infiltrate the corpos. They’ll have every reason to take control of every human system in this part of the galaxy. The Protocol will control everything.”

“You’re saying I have to do this in my self-interest?” Izzy didn’t look impressed.

“Isn’t self-interest a good reason to do everything? There’s nothing more self-interested than trying to save your life.”

“Not always.”

Mia clenched her fists under the table. She thought she had him from his initial reaction, but his face was hardening with each exchange as if he was thinking up more reasons to avoid helping her.

Izzy was her best option for spreading the vid. She couldn't begin to think of a good second choice. This was too important not to happen.

Threatening Izzy might work. He had more reason than ever to fear her beyond worries of delimiting.

The problem was one of balance. That move might backfire and convince him to sell her out to the KCAP. She was worth far more money than she could pay him. Using a famous wanted fugitive whose crew and equipment were also known would be risky for jobs.

That was the other problem. Even if they could disguise the *Erinyes* or avoid anyone who might report them, she didn't have time for another job. Waiting even a couple of weeks could lead to the Protocol solidifying control over the KCAP.

She'd been lucky that disrupting the operation on Kordell set the Protocol back. The fake news report coming out pointed to the enemy preparing to launch more terrorist attacks now that they had their convenient scapegoat.

Izzy sighed. "I'm not trying to be difficult, but you have to understand the position you're putting me in and the position you're in. This goes well beyond worrying about bounty hunters."

"I'm short on money," Mia admitted. "I'll pay you whatever you want. I'm willing to work out a work exchange over whatever period we negotiate, but you'll need to get the vid spread as soon as possible. If I wait, it won't matter. The Protocol will find me and take me out.

"You're linked to me as is. You can't be sure they won't come and take you out just to be careful. They already tried to kill a supplier of mine."

Izzy stared at her with a deep scowl. "I want to be clear about this, Mia. You're saying you want me to spread this

dangerous propaganda video around to undermine a deadly secret conspiracy that has genetically engineered supersoldiers at its disposal and is willing to treat women and babies as nothing more than disposable experiment supplies.

“The same conspiracy has gone so far as to facilitate an alien invasion because it might inconvenience someone who was messing with them. Would you say that’s an accurate summary of what you’re requesting?”

“Yes, it is. I’ve pushed them back by bloodying their nose on Kordell, but they’re on the move again.” Mia slapped the table. “If we don’t do this now, it will be too late.

“Even you have to see you can’t outrun this. You’re careful, but you’re not a coward. This is your chance to take a stand against an enemy you’ll have to fight in the end. Why not do it when I’m still around to help you win?”

Izzy picked up his glass. He swirled the liquid inside and glanced around the bar with a distant look in his eyes. He took a long gulp and set the glass back down. “Damn it. I’ve been saying everything I have for my sake as much as yours.”

“I’m not following you.”

“I don’t want to help you. Instincts honed from years of being a fixer tell me helping you is suicide.”

“Yet...”

Izzy groaned. “It sounds silly, but I want to help you. I’m not an idealist, but these guys are too much. It’s not even about self-preservation. I don’t think I could live with myself if I didn’t try to help you. You can owe me for now. You’ll probably die in a blaze of glory before I can collect anyway.”

Mia opened her mouth, then shut it. She’d been prepared to deliver more pleading and threats. She took a moment to gather her thoughts. “I’m glad you’re onboard because I’ll need more than the vid and data distribution.”

Izzy laughed and downed the rest of his drink. “Of course you will. You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t want more. According to you, if you don’t win, they’ll find out and kill me eventually. What do you need?”

“Here’s the thing.” Mia leaned closer. “I know you can get the vid spread. I also believe, for all its flaws, there are enough loyal men and women in the KCAP military and government that when the walls start closing in on the Protocol, they’ll want to make a move.”

“Can you be sure of that?”

“It’s hard to be sure of everything. I can infer it from how carefully the Protocol is moving. Complete military and government control would mean they wouldn’t have to conduct false-flag attacks.”

Izzy nodded. “There’s logic there.”

“More than logic. I also believe there are enough smart people in the government that at least some have detected the corruption. They need someone to push them to put everything on the line.”

“Your video will do that?”

“Yes.” Mia nodded. “It will. It made a heartless fixer agree to help me without an upfront payment.”

Izzy smirked. “It did.”

“The bureaucratic stooges in the government working for the conspiracy will start being exposed. Their political shields will crumble around them, and the loyalists will start taking them down. People will get hurt, but the KCAP will win.”

“It’s all but over then,” Izzy concluded. “If you believe all that’s true, it’s not like you need to do anything else. You only have to lie low until the government purges the Protocol.”

“I wish it were that easy.” Mia shook her head. “The problem is Doctor Icaryus.”

“The guy who headed Cadmus and that weird clone lab on Ice you mentioned? Won’t they get him?”

“No, because he’s too smart to get caught by them. He’s survived for decades manipulating people, and he doesn’t fear death because of that cloning tech mentioned in the vid.”

Izzy frowned. “That’s for real? The guy keeps cloning himself?”

“At this point, it’s hard to know if I’ve only run into clones or the real thing. In any case, it doesn’t matter. He can transfer his memories between these clones. That’s the only way to explain some of what I’ve seen. He could allow a clone to be arrested and executed while he’s hiding in a different system.”

“Okay, sure.” Izzy nodded. “I get it, and I’ll never sleep soundly again knowing that, but what does this have to do with me or you doing more than hiding ourselves?”

“Once the situation becomes unstable, there will be a brief window for us to make a move. The Protocol won’t be able to move all the KCAP resources as freely as they have been. That’s what they’ve been relying on to stop me. They’ll be as weak and vulnerable as they have ever been.”

“Again, if this all goes as you say, it won’t matter. The military and government will take out all the Protocol’s pets in the KCAP government. One guy doesn’t matter, even if he can clone himself. He won’t have power.”

“You don’t get the long game.” Mia shook her head. “It’s not only about him. Icaryus and his chosen acolytes will see it coming if we wait too long. They’ll go to ground and hide.

“They spent decades preparing. They won’t have a problem waiting for another generation to forget so they can begin again, either in KCAP or corpo space. We need to make sure we cut off the head to end this, or the next time they come for humanity, they won’t make the same mistakes.”

“You sure you’re not building this guy up too much?”

“He’s effectively immortal. We can’t win by waiting him out, and this will be the only time we can take him out and end the threat once and for all.”

Izzy signaled a waitress when she came back and nodded at his drink. He waited until she returned from the bar with his new glass, then sipped. “You want to go after this Icaryus? Just go after him when he’s hiding from the KCAP but before

he runs. I don't see the big deal. I'm guessing that since you're saying all this, you already have an idea where he is."

"I do, and I'm good, but I'm not that good."

Izzy frowned. "Aren't you the child of a genetically engineered supersoldier? Haven't you destroyed his labs and fought his crazy creations?"

"Sure, but this time I'll be fighting an army of his people who are ready and waiting for me," Mia countered. "I'm not good enough to take out an army and a fleet with my small crew. I'll need an army and a fleet to win."

Izzy grimaced. "Like you said, I'm good but not that good. It's one thing for me to agree to help you without asking for money. I can't get you an army without money. I'm not that persuasive. It's one thing to ask a man to help in the background. It's another to ask him to fight on the front lines and risk his life directly."

"I understand that."

"Do you? Because the look on your face tells me you think I can get you the army and fleet you want."

"You can." Mia smiled. "With a little help. I'm going to give you a list. As I've fought and investigated the Protocol these last few years, I've run into many people along the way. I've pissed plenty of them off, but there are many I've helped directly or indirectly."

"I want you to reach out and coordinate a meeting with these different people so I can discuss the operation with them. I believe if I can speak with them directly, I can convince them to help me."

"You're delusional. That said, I don't have any better suggestions." Izzy emptied his new glass and sighed. "Get me the full vid so I can show it to them before I ask to set up the meeting. It'll help convince people. All I can do is help you set the meeting up. I can't guarantee anything else."

"I'll set things up so it'll be a holographic virtual conference and reroute things to you to cut down on risk if it's a trap. They'll still have to go hunting for you. I'm only going

to facilitate setting things up. I won't participate beyond that, and after, I'm going to ground for a while until this is sorted out."

"I understand. All I want is the chance, and that's more than I deserve."

"What if you can't get your army?"

"Then I'll figure out how to get good enough to take one out by myself." Mia smiled.

Izzy stood. "I think I need to go hide in a dark closet for a while."

Mia grabbed his arm. "One last thing."

He groaned. "What now?"

"This part is easy. I want you to see if you can find any information on Captain Mausser. He was a KCAP Navy commander of the frigate *Alexandria*. They went missing near the border recently."

Izzy frowned. "You want to go looking for a KCAP officer? Why? Do you want to test weapons on him?"

"No, I've got a hunch. About the timing of his disappearance. Invite him to the meeting if you can find him."

Izzy's breath caught. "You think he's defected?"

"There are Reapers who can free themselves of the Protocol's influence. When I left Top Gun, I gave a big speech about honor and doing the right thing. I didn't think it made a difference, but who knows? People are dying now. Men and women who have been in the system a long time should be able to smell there's something way different about the rising corruption."

"It's a big risk. You realize that? This might be a trap they've set up to reel you in. These people know you're a danger to the point they've turned the entire KCAP against you."

Mia shrugged. "I'm not going to win without taking risks. See what you can do."

“You’re crazy. You’ve taken too many hits to the head.
You know that, right?”

“It’s gotten me this far. Why bother with sanity now?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mia sat at the end of the briefing room table. Flickering holograms of other people filled the table. The quality distracted her, but Izzy's safety precautions meant a low bandwidth meeting.

He'd set up signal repeaters going through third-party comm systems. No one at the meeting knew anyone else's current location. Even if there were a betrayal, it wouldn't amount to much. Paul, Ryoko, and Karin were patrolling the system for trouble. Debbie II was monitoring local signals and the comm systems for any signs of tampering.

Izzy had been the one to suggest the holo-meeting setup, claiming he'd found more success doing negotiations that way than over pure vid-comm. Mia had far less experience with these types of meetings, so she'd bowed to his expertise.

She surveyed the table. Everyone she'd asked to come was there. Carana and Galik were obvious choices for recruitment. They understood the danger of the Protocol and had contacts and useful resources.

Cailan, the consortium representative she'd helped to reach a diplomatic solution with refugees squatting in the consortium mines, was also in attendance. Unsurprisingly, so was Erden, the refugee leader from the same incident. From what she understood, Erden and his people were in the process of joining the consortium.

To Mia's surprise, Natalie Ghallia's hologram sat with pursed lips on the other end of the table. She kept glaring at

Mia. Her attendance had been requested as a long shot.

After everything that had happened at the Gate, Ghallia had every reason to hate Mia. At the same time, she'd been able to take control of the station after the end of the succession struggle because Mia had killed the previous ruler of the decadent pleasure station.

Ghallia held no love for the man. She was the one who'd plotted with Mia to weaken his power base. Their problem stemmed from Mia's abrupt execution, which resulted in a short and brutal civil war on the station. Mia knew Ghallia had risen to the top after the end of the conflict. The terms of their parting left Mia doubting Ghallia would ever talk to her again other than to taunt her before an assassination attempt.

Was that why she'd come? To taunt Mia?

Izzy had distributed the vid and allowed time before contacting people on Mia's list. Everyone in the Fringe and KCAP was aware of the allegations. Knowing whether they believed them was harder.

She couldn't depend on everyone having either the conscience or bravery necessary to be willing to assist her. There were no guarantees they'd win against the Protocol. Casualties, on the other hand, were guaranteed. The Fringe dwellers had even less reason to want to jump into helping save the KCAP.

Mia needed to convince everyone attending that meeting to help her. Her time and options had dwindled to nothing. She doubted there would be much more than a few weeks before the next Protocol terrorist attack.

A flesh-and-blood Vorhees sat beside Mia with an eager smile. He nodded politely to all the assembled guests, including Breen, the station manager who had warned Mia about bringing trouble to her friends, and Kimson. She was relieved to see the other station manager had escaped any trouble from the KCAP Navy after everything that had happened during their last run-in together.

Mia looked around one last time, hoping to see Captain Mausser's hologram appear. Izzy had told her he'd managed to get a message to a privateer who claimed he'd run across the frigate undamaged and hiding in the Fringe. Izzy's contact had no information on what Mausser was up to.

"It's a good time to get started," Mia commented. Making everyone wait would start the meeting off on the wrong foot. "All but one of you are here. That's a good start."

"My being here doesn't mean I'm going to agree to whatever you have in mind," Ghallia countered.

"Hear me out. We can go from there."

"We'll see."

A new hologram shimmered into existence at the table, Captain Mausser in full uniform.

Mia blinked. "Damn. Captain Mausser? It is you, sir." Even after all these years, she deferred to him automatically. "I'm glad you could come. I didn't know if you'd make it."

Mausser looked around the table. "I don't know who these other people are, but they don't look like military. I take it you don't have a list of rogue crews willing to fight a deadly conspiracy?"

"No." Mia shook her head. "That would have made this much easier. These people all represent different organizations I encountered after leaving the navy. They're all people with access to resources useful to the mission. Before we go any further, you want to fill me in on what happened with the *Alexandria*?"

Depending on what he said, she might have to alter the plan. A high-ranking officer had defected with an entire ship and crew before she'd sent her vid. That meant he had reasons to suspect trouble.

"After I was reassigned away from Top Gun because of you and your friends' stunt, I had a lot of time to think about my career and why I'd joined. I also had time to think about what you said and what Sula told me."

“The wing commander?” Mia frowned. “What did she tell you?”

“She’d been looking into things. The accident with Dr. Curie and the incident with Dr. Icaryus’ sabotage formed the turning point, but there were irregularities before then. You know who she was. She could be a hard-ass, but she always tried to conduct herself on the side of honor.”

Mia nodded. “I didn’t want to cause trouble for you two. I had to do it. The Protocol could reach into an elite training program and KCAP carrier and manipulate people. I would have been dead or a prisoner within months if I’d stayed.”

“I understand. We didn’t know what to make of everything going on and how seriously to believe what you’d said when you left, but Sula always had good instincts.” Mausser frowned. “Weirdly though, after she’d talked about looking deeper into things, she suddenly retired. I’d been transferred already, so I figured somebody who didn’t want someone with that level of authority looking into things pushed her out.

“Later I found out she died. Cargo truck accident. She got crushed by boxes. Too convenient. They kept it quiet. That made it more suspicious.”

“Debbie II, can you verify what he’s saying?” Mia asked.

“Yes. I can find multiple public records concerning the retirement and the traffic accident. It’s interesting, though. An active search was necessary. I had preexisting filters for news related to your time in the Top Gun program, and the accident didn’t come up on the standard news feeds.”

“Sula got crushed by boxes?” Mausser scoffed. “Just like Dr. Curie got crushed by containers? It’s too much. It’s like they’re trying to rub our noses in it.”

Mia’s jaw tightened. “It is an odd coincidence.”

Mausser continued. “When I was assigned to my little exile, there were pilots from Top Gun and other assignments I worked on who asked to be transferred with me. Some of them because they respected me. Others, because it was their way of protesting me getting sidelined.”

Everyone else at the table listened with careful attention. Even Ghallia seemed entranced by the revelations. Hearing a navy officer describe blunt and casual corruption offered an inside view that Mia's pre-edited vid didn't.

"The navy allowed the transfers?" Mia asked. "They let elite pilots join a low-priority border patrol assignment given to you as a punishment?"

"The brass didn't care. I was surprised at first, but I get it now. Pluribus Draconis Protocol was pulling the strings. They figured it was easiest to get all the troublemakers in one spot.

"Bad things happen on the border. You never know when you'll find a pirate base or Bleakers. They meant to kill us all." He smirked. "The Protocol screwed up."

The captain's story sketched an alternative timeline for Mia. If she hadn't left Top Gun, it would still have led to Mausser's transfer. She would have ended up with him, wary of conspiracy manipulation but with far less freedom to respond to the Protocol's machinations.

"How did they screw up? I get that you're here now, but what happened?"

"My chief engineer was too good for them. He caught one of the new engineers trying to sabotage the ship. When we tried to take the bastard down, he fought like a demon and took out our entire security team single-handedly. Too bad for him that I wasn't going to wait around for him to finish us off. We sealed him in a compartment and blew the whole damned thing into space."

Erden's eyes widened. "You spaced a man?"

"I did what I needed to save my crew." Mausser's hard look didn't change. "There were weird orders to return to a base farther away than the nearest after that. With everything that had happened with Sula and back in Top Gun, I decided to lay low.

"My crew was loyal enough to back me, even though I was disgraced and on the fast track to early retirement. I didn't

understand everything until I got that vid. The bastard had to be a Reaper. No one else could move like that.”

Ghalla gave him a cool once-over. “Are you saying you have a fully operational KCAP frigate along with elite pilots and front line modern fighters?”

“Yes. I was invited to join this party. I swore an oath to protect the KCAP from threats, and I’ll be damned if I let these Protocol freaks take over. Every man and woman aboard my ship was given the option of being let off when I decided to stop taking orders from afar. I’m not going to lie. Some did, but we’re operating at full combat readiness.”

It was a good start. A KCAP frigate packed plenty of firepower despite being a smaller class ship than the *Erinyes*. Mia had more than doubled her combat strength in space.

“Thank you, sir.” Mia smiled. “You don’t know how much this means. It’s good to know we weren’t the only ones out here who knew something was wrong.”

She looked around the room. “That’s what I’m asking for, commitments of ships and troops. As my message accompanying the vid explained, we need to take down the heart of the PDP or all we’re doing is kicking the problem down the line. The files I recovered from Ice included actionable intel about specific useful targets. I’m not willing to share that information before you commit to the cause.”

Ghalla burst out laughing. “This is utter insanity. Listen to yourself. You think because you’ve had a handful of successes here and there that you’re going to take out this decades-long conspiracy that has been pulling the strings of the major government in the area.”

She put her hand over her heart. “Why should I care? The Gate is no threat to the Protocol. If they know anything about me, they know I’ve been looking for you to punish you, not to help you. That’s the only reason I agreed to participate in this farce of a discussion.”

Mia appreciated Izzy’s precautions even more.

“Don’t think you’ll be safe from the Protocol as Queen of the Gate,” Mia replied. “Power means nothing to them. You’re a tool or an enemy, nothing more. There’s no reason to allow a major concentration of wealth and power that thinks it’s beyond government control. The Gate’s weaker than it was before.”

“Because of you!” Ghallia shouted. “Because you didn’t follow my directions when dealing with Pontafe, you arrogant little bitch. I had it all worked out. You thought you knew better.”

“The man tried to kill me.”

“You should have let it go.”

Mia snorted. “This doesn’t matter. I either succeed without your help and hold it against you that you didn’t offer me aid, or I fail, and the Protocol comes for you anyway.”

“I’m dubious.” Ghallia glared at Mia. “Your crusading is what caught their attention, and I think you underestimate my people.”

Vorhees shook his head. “No, Mia’s right. I worked with them for years. Without anyone else to distract them, they’ll send a fleet to blow your little pleasure palace into dust.”

“I know who you are.” Ghallia sneered. “I heard you were dead. It’s too bad you aren’t. I’ve never liked what I’ve heard about you, parasite scum. You’ve added nothing useful to the galaxy.”

“I’m helping to supply this alliance.” Vorhees shrugged. “I’m scum, and I’ll probably die scum, but at least I’ll have done something worthwhile. Will you be able to say the same?”

Guided by Vorhees, Debbie II confirmed that the Protocol hadn’t seized all his hidden accounts and assets. Vorhees redirected his money toward different contacts to purchase weapons and ammo, which were delivered to new staging caches. Once Mia finalized their alliance, she could send people to pick up the caches.

Mia was impressed. The man had donated until there was almost nothing left. Being confronted by the true nature of the organization he'd helped had struck him deeply. She didn't know if he could become a good man after everything was over, but at least he'd offered glimmers of a new life.

“Why should I help this violent bitch?” Ghallia snarled. “She got what she wanted from the Gate and was busy being self-righteous. She didn't care that she left chaos and violence. I told her all she had to do was help me break one man's stranglehold, not kill him. Now she wants to lead a fleet against this Protocol? The very idea is absurd. We should be negotiating with them.”

Mia shook her head. “You can't negotiate with them. If you've gone through the data and vid I sent, you know that. These people don't care about human life or win-win situations.”

“Fine,” Ghallia snarled. “Then what do you have to say about what happened at the Gate? Do you even care that you left it in the middle of a shooting war?”

“That's a fair complaint.” Mia shrugged. “I'm not going to apologize for killing Pontafe. To be clear, that was because he chose to come after me, but I'll admit I've been single-minded.”

“I came to the Gate because I needed IDs to enter KCAP space and investigate the Protocol. Everything I've done for years has been toward that goal. I've done my best to minimize casualties, but I know I've failed at times and left behind more hurt people than I wanted. This is different.”

“How?”

“This is war. I'm not pretending to ask for anything other than men and women willing to help me fight the Protocol. I'm going to be with them, so if we fail, I'm going to die with them. I won't be running and leaving people behind if that's what you're suggesting. We fight together. We win together, or we die together.”

Erden cleared his throat and waited until everyone was looking at him. “Your unorthodox approach to problem-solving saved many lives when dealing with my people and the consortium. I don’t know if we’re ready to fight, though. We’re not soldiers.”

“You were ready to fight Cailan and the consortium,” Mia countered.

“That was because we had nowhere to go.”

“My point is you were willing to fight and die for your future. This is no different. Having nowhere to go is partly the fault of the Protocol.” Mia tapped on her datapad and brought up a swirling holographic display of Bleaker drones.

“They’ve been manipulating the situation in the Fringe, including tricking me into weakening defenses against the Bleakers. You won’t have your freedom when the Protocol decides to push into the Fringe.”

Cailan frowned. “You’re saying they’ll take our independence from us?”

“Yes.” Mia slapped the table. “They’re allergic to freedom. They want humanity carefully managed and controlled. They don’t want us to have the freedom of being born without being altered.

“They have no respect for human life. They are planning to sacrifice thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of lives with their terrorist attacks. We’re nothing but cogs in the system to them.”

Erden cupped his chin. “I can offer only those who volunteer. I’ll speak well on your behalf to my people, but you might get anything from a handful to hundreds. We have limited weapons.”

“I’m more interested in your mining expertise than your fighting ability. Mr. Vorhees here will ensure everyone has all the guns they need. Don’t worry about that.”

Erden frowned. “You want mining experts?”

“Mining experts who still can fight,” Mia clarified. “I’ll explain more about the plan once we have our forces locked down. That’ll help me decide exactly where and how to deploy people.”

Erden nodded. “Then we’ll do our best.”

Cailan frowned. “The main consortium’s not going to stand by and let them show us up, and technically, they’ll be integrated as full members soon, so we need to keep an eye out for them.

“Same warning. I’ll ask for volunteers. I’m not ordering anyone. We can show up with gunships, nothing fancy for space. Can your man give us something bigger than that?”

“You still have mining ships, right?” Mia pressed.

“Yes, but they’re not good for fighting. They don’t have real weapons, and they’re slow.”

“I understand. Do you have them?”

“Yes.”

Mia looked around the table. “It’d be nice to have people with direct experience in ground and space battles leading the vanguard.”

Carana waved. “My husband has put in money toward that end, and I’ve called in favors. A handful of privateer companies owe me in one way or another. I’m wiping their debt clean in exchange for their assistance. I can get you a mix of destroyers, corvettes, fighter support, and a single light cruiser.”

Breen sighed. “I could put a call out with people I know, not anything as fancy as a frigate or privateers, just people here and there.” He shook his head. “Are you sure this isn’t more of what we talked about before? You’re asking your friends to put themselves in danger against a conspiracy that controls supersoldiers and is part of the KCAP government. You keep saying they’re coming to the Fringe, but how do we know that’s true?”

“I’m not her friend,” Ghallia interjected.

“Duly noted.” Mia nodded at Breen. “The vid and data speak for themselves. You think these people will be satisfied with the KCAP after everything you’ve seen?”

“I don’t know,” Breen admitted.

“Yes, I’m asking people to put themselves in danger for the good of all humanity. This doesn’t stop at the KCAP border. At this moment, the conspiracy is trying to link me to the corpos and stir up a war. Millions could die in the process of the Protocol distracting people from the true enemy.”

She clenched a fist. “I’ve made mistakes. Tons of them. I’ve been too willing to shoot first and ask questions later. I haven’t always understood the trouble I’ve caused for others, even my friends. I’m not much better than the Protocol in that I’ve used people for my mission.

“The only defense I can offer is that I’ll be there with everyone, putting my life on the line because I believe this is the only chance we have to rip the heart out of the Protocol. If we don’t stop Icaryus and his core acolytes, then all the instability you see on the news feeds won’t mean anything. They’ll hide and come back later, and this time the KCAP will be weaker. Or worse, they’ll hide out in the Fringe and seize control there, planet by planet.”

Breen looked lost in thought for a moment. “I know you can’t tell me the exact location of the battle yet, but is it anywhere near my station?”

Mia shrugged. “Yes, it’s semi-close. Why?”

“Then I’d also like to offer my station as a final fueling stop in this dragon-slaying alliance.” Breen smiled. “It’s the only way I can help.”

Kimson laughed and slapped his knee. “Damn. That’s what I was going to do.” He grinned at Mia. “I was wrong about you being Jon’s kid, but I had the right instincts about your abilities. You are special.

“If I can’t offer my station, I have security to help your miners and privateers. I should be able to whip up support from some of my regulars. You know how we criminals are.

We can't go letting some strong government start poking around."

Ghalla tented her fingers. She swept the table with her contemptuous gaze. "This passes beyond the absurd to the shared insanity. You expect me to give you my precious personnel and ships to help you in this pointless crusade, and you expect me to do it for free after you caused so much trouble for me?"

"I'm asking," Mia replied. "I'm not demanding. If I had everything to do over again on the Gate, I would have handled it differently. I can't change the past. All I can do is ensure that we all have a future free of the Protocol."

She gestured around the table. "Everyone here has their reasons for wanting to help me. You were right earlier. Not all these people are my friends. This isn't about helping Mia Verick out. This is about helping the dragon-slaying alliance."

Vorhees offered a manic smile and motioned at his eye patch. "For me, it might not be more than petty revenge, but the Protocol has their Reapers programmed to kill me. I didn't do anything wrong. I was a loose end they wanted to tie up. That's how thoroughly crazy these people are."

"The Protocol appears to be people difficult to negotiate with." Ghalla lowered her hands. "I have my people still going through and examining that data for any sign of manipulation or fakery."

"It's all authentic," Mia insisted. "That's why I sent the main files along with the vids. I didn't expect people to take my word for it. I'm an alleged terrorist, after all."

"You didn't send all the information." Ghalla narrowed her eyes. "I've heard enough from this meeting to know that you have a confirmed target location, and I presume you got that information from files you didn't send along."

Mia shrugged. "I never claimed that I'd passed along every last piece of intel I've come across, only the information necessary to confirm the allegations in the vid. I can't have anyone going there and messing things up until we're ready."

She stood and raised her voice. “This isn’t arrogance. This is caution. I had no reason to assume everyone would agree to help me.”

Ghalla ground her teeth in silence. She threw up her hands. “This is ridiculous and foolish, but what the Protocol is doing is stupider.

“I’ll lend ships and my elite forces. I want to make it clear, if my people find any evidence you’ve manipulated those files to deceive us before then, I’m pulling out of this alliance and making sure everyone else knows. Then I’ll put all my efforts into hunting you down and destroying you.”

“I believe you.” Mia retook her seat, her heart pounding despite her calm and collected look. “Breen called this a dragon-slaying alliance.” She shook her head.

“A dragon would be easy to kill. The Protocol is more like a hydra. Every time I’ve cut off a head, a new one has grown back. This time we’re not cutting off a single head. This time we’re tearing out its heart.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mia couldn't tear herself away from the external feeds in the docking bay of Breen's station. She'd been hanging out in the docking bay as more alliance ships slid into the area. The backwater fuel station was now reminiscent of a major naval base with a mixture of dedicated combat vessels, armed transports, and massive consortium mining ships surrounding the base.

Privateer and mercenary ships, mostly destroyer and corvette size, had formed up near the light cruiser *Amel* that had brought Carana and Galik. Ghallia's flagship, the flashy cruiser *Eden*, had been the first ship to arrive. The passing hours brought more side-space envelopes with mercenary flotillas to join the *Eden* and the *Amel*.

Squadrons of fighters patrolled the area. They had no reason to expect a sneak attack, but there was also no reason not to be careful. A chance pirate ambush would have been amusing. There had probably never been such a well-defended Fringe fuel station ever.

A steady stream of shuttles and smaller alliance vessels flew to the station's docking bays to offload alliance operational leaders. Mausser's frigate, the *Alexandria*, floated near the station. The captain and Lieutenant Ortiz had stepped out of a KCAP Navy shuttle thirty minutes ago and offered their greetings to Mia.

Consortium transports ferried volunteers from Erden's and Cailan's people. While most consortium volunteers remained on the ships, their squad and company leaders boarded the

station. Despite Cailan's and Erden's warnings, the consortium-refugee volunteer ground force represented a sizeable strength to supplement the trained mercenaries.

Heavily armed privateers and mercs laughed and joked with Carana and a nervous-looking Galik near their shuttle. Dock workers ferried weapons and ammo crates recovered by transports that had loaded them up at Vorhees' new caches. He wasn't going to participate in the planning or operation beyond that, but Mia appreciated him committing his remaining resources in full to the defeat of the Protocol.

A blinding side-space envelope opened not far from the station. A group of corvettes, destroyers, and armed shuttles emerged, along with another cruiser, all marked with a stylized symbol that Mia recognized from Natalie Ghallia's level on the Gate. They headed toward the *Eden*.

She'd been surprised by Ghallia stepping off a luxury shuttle an hour earlier. Ghallia was always a micromanager.

Charlie walked up to Mia, earning stares from the gathered people along the way. "Do you think it will be enough?"

"It's hard to know. The one piece of intel we didn't find in those files was detailed breakdowns of their fleet defenses. I'm confident we can win if we can get past their orbital garrison." She drew a deep breath. She couldn't let her confidence waver in public.

"I would have liked more dedicated warships, but this isn't a small force. With this many ships, we might have been able to take on the Ice garrison fleet, and all these mercs and privateers have combat experience."

The lack of heavy carriers and battleships would have put them at a disadvantage, but sometimes quantity overwhelmed quality.

"It'll have to be enough," Mia added. "We'll make it enough. We'll never get a better shot than this short of convincing the rest of the navy to join us. By the time we pull that off, Icaryus will have disappeared into a hole."

“We could not bother with him,” Charlie suggested. “We could let the KCAP push the Protocol out and wait until they return. It won’t be like before. People will know they’re coming.”

Mia shook her head. “Knowing a threat is there doesn’t help when people become complacent. Icaryus is smart enough to wait long enough for the KCAP to let its guard down. They also have decades of experience manipulating the system and knowing where to put the effort.”

She frowned. “You’re right. It won’t be like it was before. We’ve seen clones and cyborg experiments. With twenty years and all the knowledge they’ve accumulated, who knows what we’ll be facing? Imagine an army of those monstrous clones or cybernetically enhanced supersoldiers invading a city. I wouldn’t put it past the Protocol to capture a Bleaker and figure out how to control them.”

She slammed her fist into her palm. “No, we end this here and now. Allowing the enemy to scurry away and lick their wounds until they’re stronger is a bad move. I’ve convinced everyone from navy defectors to criminals to help fight. They all understand what this is about. It’s about saving humanity’s freedom from a group that would take away the essence of what it means to be human.”

Charlie watched silently for a long while. His face made it hard to read whether there was doubt or agreement.

He smiled. “Did you ever imagine you’d convince a fleet and army to join you?”

“When I started this mission, I was naïve. I thought I’d ask around and find evidence in the law office that would give me an address to go to. I can’t say I had a real plan other than to slap around whoever I found until they admitted what happened to my dad. I never expected I’d end up getting myself sent to a prison planet or uncovering a conspiracy like the Protocol.”

“What did you expect?”

“Normal, petty corruption.” Mia shrugged.

“Do you regret leaving home?”

“No. Even with all the pain and losses along the way. I met my mother and you and so many other people. Because of those connections, I can now stop the Protocol.” She closed her eyes and nodded. “No. *I* won’t stop the Protocol. *We’ll* stop the Protocol.” She opened her eyes. “We almost have everyone we need. I’m going to get set up in the briefing room.”

Charlie chuckled. “A fancy name for a converted machine shop.”

“Is it any fancier than calling that multipurpose room on the ship the briefing room?” Mia grinned.

“I suppose not.”

“Breen suggested the machine shop based on what I told him.” Mia shrugged. “It’s big, and I’d like more people to hear the briefing directly instead of secondhand.” She turned and growled. “You’ve got to be kidding. I don’t have time for this crap.”

The bearded smuggler Adi and his captain stood there. Only faint bruises remained on their faces, and Adi’s nose looked fine. They looked in far better shape than when Mia had left them beaten on the floor of a bar.

Charlie gave Mia a quizzical look before nodding toward the pair. She shook her head. She didn’t need Charlie to scare people off when she’d demonstrated how dangerous she could be.

Mia waited for the smugglers to make the first move. They hadn’t taken advantage of her distraction at the gathering forces to shoot her from afar. That was their first mistake.

They’d gotten close enough she could hit them. That was their second mistake.

The captain extended her hand and motioned to the other smuggler. “I’m Trena, and this one is Adi. I wasn’t sure if you got our names before kicking our asses on Kimson’s station.”

Adi offered a sheepish grin and rubbed the back of his neck. Trena and Adi had pistols in belt holsters along with knives. Neither made any move to go for their weapons. Either this was the worst ambush in the sector, or it was exactly what it appeared to be—a meet and greet.

Mia willed her hand to unclench and shook Trena's. "Mia Verick."

"The whole galaxy knows who you are by now," Trena replied. "If I'd known who you were in that bar, I would have knocked Adi's ass out myself before letting him piss you off."

Adi laughed. "I feel better about getting my ass kicked by a genetically enhanced terrorist. It makes more sense now."

Mia rolled her eyes. "You're not the first person I've heard say that but what are you doing here?"

Breen was supposed to have sent a message about a maintenance issue that would ensure no one would stop by the station while the fleet gathered. He'd also said he would give the crews already present free fuel and send them on their way.

"Kimson contacted us," Trena explained. "He said you were putting together a big crew to deliver pain to the PDP." She scratched her cheek. "After we saw that vid, we figured we didn't have much choice. They're crazy sons of a bitches, and they aren't the type of people who are going to turn a blind eye to smuggling."

Mia squinted in confusion. "You don't want revenge on me?"

Adi laughed. "Damn, bitch, it's like the cap says. If you had told me you were a genetically enhanced supersoldier from the beginning, I wouldn't have messed with you."

"I'm sorry. I was drunk. Not that it makes it any better."

"Hey, I was drunk, too." He shrugged. "You didn't kill me."

Trena nodded. "We know you could have. Kimson also told us how you and your friend helped clean up a whole mortistellar fungus for him. Any woman who is crazy enough

to do that with only one man helping is a woman who can take on a galactic conspiracy, and we figured it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go on a job with a woman who's going to end up in the history books."

"I hope I get a statue," Adi commented.

"You're not getting shit, idiot." Trena scoffed. "They'll give her the statue."

"It's going to be dangerous," Mia warned. "I can't guarantee anyone's life. If you watched the vid, you know about Reapers and how ruthless the Protocol is." She gestured around the docking bay. "All these people understand that even if we win, they might die."

"We're smugglers," Trena replied. "Danger comes with the job. You're not saying anything we don't think before every new job. Besides, it's nice, now and again, to feel like we're leaving the galaxy a better place. Also, we were told we can keep all the weapons and gear we're getting."

"Sure. That's a standard deal we're making with all the mercs and privateers participating. We're not going to need them after this." Mia motioned for them to follow her. "Find a place in the briefing room. I'll be starting it here soon."

Holographic topography maps and data tables floated above the floor in front of Mia. She'd been poring over the plan's final details as more representatives filtered into the machine shop. Erden and Cailan chatted in a corner. She spotted Cailan's stepdaughter Adria in a serious side conversation with a privateer pilot she didn't recognize.

Trena and Adi were across the room laughing with a rough-looking group of privateer fighter pilots. Mia had already decided the smugglers would be assigned to fleet defense. She appreciated their efforts, but she didn't trust them enough to bring them down to the planet.

Ortiz sauntered through the crowd of AWOL navy pilots, privateers, mercenaries, criminals and scum. She hadn't spoken to the cocky lieutenant since leaving Top Gun.

He thrust a hand toward her. "It's been a long time, Verick. I never thought I'd see you again."

She gave him a strong shake. "I never expected to see you out here. It's good to know we have elites like you in the fleet."

"I can't let you have all the fun. This is going to be far more interesting than nailing a rogue corpo destroyer or poking at Bleakers." He scanned the room until he stopped and stared at Ryoko and Karin chatting in a corner.

"Stansford has a bounty, too, doesn't he? Did he give up on you?" He frowned. "That idiot didn't get himself killed before the best part, did he?"

Mia shook her head. "He's around somewhere. He's been with me the entire time. I wouldn't have gotten this far without Ryoko, Karin, and Paul."

Ortiz looked relieved. "I never imagined your flight would run off and get swept up in this craziness. It was hard to believe at the time. You four didn't just go AWOL. You stole fighters and fought against Top Gun pilots."

He shook his head. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't impressed as hell that you did all that and got away. Maybe you four are almost as good as me." He winked.

"What about you?" Mia asked. "Mausser says it's time to go AWOL, and you agreed? We ended up with bounties and were hunted across the KCAP. You had to know it wouldn't be fun to turn against the government."

"When Captain Mausser says something's messed up, something's messed up." Ortiz shrugged. "What you said when you took off stuck with me." He motioned toward Paul, who was grinning like a fool at a beautiful mercenary who kept rolling her eyes. "Oh. There he is.

"Anyway, it would be different if only you ran. That would have been easy to ignore. An entire flight checking out from

Top Gun? That never made sense to me. I couldn't blow it off as you all unable to handle the pressure." His smile faded. "Did you know about all those experiments and crap when you left?"

"I didn't understand the full scope. I knew about Cadmus though."

"Oh, yeah. You said something about finding it in a lab on Ice. That makes more sense, too. When you pulled that stunt, it felt off and out of character."

"You thought you knew me well enough to tell that? You didn't even like me."

Ortiz shook his head. "You don't have to like someone to have a handle on their personality, and you didn't seem like the kind of woman who'd do that. If it'd been Stansford, things would have been easier to believe. Getting yourself thrown in prison to infiltrate a secret lab is nuts. I don't care if you can bite through bars with your supersoldier teeth or whatever. That's crazy."

Mia shrugged. "I survived, and I found the first scraps of truth about the Protocol."

Jon Smith Senior made his way through the crowd and approached Mia.

Ortiz looked his way before waving at Mia and stepping away. "I'm sure plenty of people want to talk to you. We'll catch up after this is all over."

"See you around," Mia replied.

"Is Vorhees here?" Jon looked around the room.

Mia shook her head. "He's on the *Erinyes*. He did his part by helping with supplies. There's not much point in him coming to the briefing when he won't be part of the execution of the operation."

Jon leaned closer to whisper into her ear. "Don't you think this is risky?"

"Yes, the plan is very risky. It's the best I can come up with given the timing and the available resources."

“I don’t mean the plan. I’m talking about giving all this intel out to these people. You’re relying on second- and third-hand recruits, many of whom come from questionable backgrounds. Aren’t you worried about being betrayed and it all getting back to Dr. Icaryus?”

Mia drew a deep breath. “We’re gathered here and ready to move out. It’s too late for him. The way I’m going about the final strike, it won’t matter if he knows we’re coming.

“Based on that data, the only way he’ll be able to ride this out is by lying low in his hideout. He won’t be able to bring all the records and equipment off the planet with only a day or two of warning.”

She gestured at a hologram of a fortress built into the side of a mountain. “From what we found in the data, he needs this place to keep the conspiracy alive and won’t abandon it unless he has no choice. His key personnel are gathered there. He’s promised them immortality and a new rise to power.”

“Why are you so convinced he has to stay there if he hears we’re coming?” Jon asked. “He could run. The whole reason you pushed for this alliance is because you believe he’ll run eventually.”

“Because me slapping together an alliance isn’t the same thing as navy battlefleets showing up. He’s demonstrated more than once that he thinks he’s better than me.” Mia shook her head.

“There are specific labs there with hard-to-replace equipment and supplies. He’ll need those labs to give his followers what he’s promised. Otherwise, he’s another madman without the resources and manpower to get anything done. He wants to ride out the storm as long as possible until there’s no choice. From what I found in those files, it would take weeks for him to prep for a move.”

Jon frowned. “You didn’t mention this to me.”

“Maybe I’m better at keeping things to myself than you realized.”

“You’re not worried because you’re convinced he’s not going to run?” Jon didn’t look convinced.

“That and I’m asking everyone in this room to lay their lives and the lives of their loved ones on the line. We both know how vengeful the Protocol is. How can I not extend trust to them?”

Jon shook his head. “You need to be careful. Just keep that in mind. We don’t want to make the mistake of underestimating Icaryus.”

“If I were underestimating him, I wouldn’t have formed this alliance.”

Jon Junior stepped into the room and waved at Mia and his father. They waved back.

“That’s almost everyone,” Mia noted. “You should go find a good spot. We need to get going.”

The men and women present for the briefing represented only a small fraction of the total space and ground forces. They were the commanders and squad leaders, the brains of the operation. Despite that, having the room jam-packed with people prepared to lay their lives on the line filled Mia with confidence. She was used to having a small team backing her up, not an entire fleet and an army.

Defeating the Protocol was no longer a distant dream. She could almost taste her victory and revenge. Icaryus would die knowing that the daughter of one of his Reapers ended him.

“I’ll get to the point.” Mia pointed at the fortress hologram. “This is the last base of the Pluribus Draconis Protocol. With the release of the truth to the galaxy, loyal elements of the KCAP government have begun making their move. The news feeds are trying to cover it up with misleading stories about smuggling sweeps or industrial accidents.”

Heads bobbed in the crowd in agreement. Ghallia wasn't scowling for once. She watched Mia with a focused intensity.

Mia walked to the other side of the hologram. "With the pressure on, we have a window of opportunity to kill the monster at the heart of the entire operation." She waited as an image of Dr. Icaryus appeared. "This fortress is as powerful as the heavy mountain rock it's built into. This isn't just about it being tough, though."

She waved, and the hologram zoomed in toward a turret emplacement. "Our intel indicates that a combination of minerals and special tech throughout the station disrupts standard target systems. Think of it this way. It's as if this entire base has an Obfuscate System combined with specialized energy-dispersal field emitters. Standard warship weapons won't be as effective against it."

Whispers and groans passed through the crowd. Everyone preferred a straightforward fight. The smugglers exchanged worried looks, perhaps wondering what they'd gotten themselves into.

"Who cares?" Ortiz shouted. "You don't have to be a good shot to hit something that big." He finished with a laugh.

Others joined in his laughter. All the concerned expressions vanished, replaced by smug certitude. No one wanted to look weaker than anyone else in the alliance.

Confidence was fine. Arrogance could derail the whole mission. They needed to understand the full scope of what they were facing.

"Punching through the space defenses and breaching the outer wall will be the easy part of the mission," Mia explained. "There's a reason they built this base in this exact location on that mountain. It might as well have been carved for them by the God of Passive Defense."

Grumbles filtered through the crowd. No one was laughing or smiling now.

Another wave brought a wireframe diagram of a complicated corridor system. "That means we open it, and we

send our ground teams in where they'll be engaged in brutal close-range fighting in this maze. That'll take us to reinforced lower levels where our primary target, Dr. Icarus, has stored his databanks with the key information necessary to continue the PDP's research. He knows that if he doesn't control this information, he loses his ability to control his various allies and stooges. That's one of the reasons he doesn't have backups at another location."

Ortiz raised a hand. "Wait a second. I get that the man we met during Top Gun was a clone or something like that, but are you saying this is the real deal? The original man?"

"All intel we have indicates this is the final target and the true center of the PDP. I wouldn't risk putting together this alliance and going after him otherwise. Whether he has the original body or a new body with copied memories, who knows? The important part is that if we kill him and take out his databanks, we take down the PDP permanently."

Ghalla folded her arms. "Aren't you ignoring a useful opportunity?"

"What's that?" Mia asked.

"Why not kill him and seize his information?" Ghalla replied. "Information is power."

Mia shook her head. "I'm not going to let the technology and knowledge behind the PDP spread through the KCAP. If we're going to do that, we might as well let Icarus live. It took a twisted conspiracy decades to collect all of this. We burn it away, which means everyone can sleep a little easier."

Ghalla sighed. "If you say so. It's a shame to set aside the chance at profit, but if I can't have it, there's no reason anyone else should either."

"I'm glad we agree."

Captain Mausser squinted at the diagram. "We could establish space superiority and bombard it."

"It's too deep. Remember the God of Passive Defense?" Mia shook her head. "We couldn't be sure to take out the databanks without guaranteeing we're digging out an entire

mountain. If we don't have boots on the ground, they can extract at least some of the databanks and escape. Right now, we've given Icaryus every indication that we don't know where his stronghold is."

Confusing the crowd by mentioning Jon Senior's suspicions was unnecessary and dangerous.

Kimson called from where he stood against a far wall, "How did you manage that?"

"Because when we released the data, we released portions of it with the original encryption intact to give the impression we hadn't learned all the secrets. Icaryus might believe it's a matter of time before we get this information, but the data circulating the galaxy doesn't include unencrypted and easy-to-access information about this fortress."

She allowed a cold smile. "His obsession with personal control forced him to centralize his most important resources. All his eggs are in one basket. It'll make it easy to smash them as long as we're quick."

"That's a good, high-level overview, but we both know it's all about operational details," Captain Mausser complained. "I assume you have tasking and unit assignments?"

Mia nodded. "I'll send specific details to different groups of leaders. We'll depend on the pilots, fighters, and other warships to clear a path in space for the shuttles to deliver the ground teams, including me, Charlie, and the mercs being loaned to us. We'll defend the combined consortium forces to get them to the fortress' outer walls."

"Then what?" Adi asked. "You told us it'd be hard to target. How are we supposed to beat the God of Passive Defense to get those forces in there?"

"The consortium has sent along orbital mining ships with powerful mining lasers. They aren't designed for anything but power. They're worthless in fleet engagements because they take too long to spin up, and the ships have to maintain their relative positions when firing them. They're perfect for our mission."

She grinned. “They’ll crack the mountain like an egg and open it to further invasion. My ground team and Cailan’s and Erden’s people will lead since they’re used to mapping and navigating tunnel systems. Once we’ve reached the databanks, we’ll set up a series of custom EMPs provided by Vorhees and another custom toy to glass everything left in there. The explosion will be timed and contained. We won’t have to clear the entire mountain, only get away from the room for that part.”

There were satisfied nods around the room. Cailan and Erden looked eager. Captain Mausser appeared far more satisfied now that he’d gotten an overview.

“This is the decisive strike, team,” Mia declared. “This mission will ensure that Icaryus and all his twisted work are erased from history. We will make sure they won’t come back from the dead to haunt the rest of humanity. We might be a ragtag mix of deserters, mercs, and miners, but we will be the heroes who will save the KCAP from an infection it allowed to fester and take root.”

Cheers filled the room. About the only person not cheering was a disgusted-looking Natalie Ghallia. She’d somehow found one of the few chairs in the entire room to sit in near the back. Mia didn’t care if she was happy or didn’t see the profit in the mission, only that she’d supplied forces.

Mia looked around the room, taking in the faces of all the men and women who’d volunteered to put their lives on the line in a mission against a terrible enemy. Some of them had once been her enemies. Now all were her comrades in arms. They would fight together, maybe die together.

Mia smiled and let the joyous din wash over her. The raucous cheering continued, but something was wrong. After a moment, she figured it out. Breen wasn’t there anymore.

His presence wasn’t strictly necessary since he wasn’t participating in the next step of the mission, but she was surprised he’d left in the middle of the briefing without saying anything.

Shrill alarms cut through the cheers. The machine room started to shut with a bone-shaking grinding noise.

“Warning, warning,” a soft female voice called from the intercom. “A Class Four chemical leak has been detected. Air cycling halted to and from station compartment 24-F. Please finish evacuation before thermobaric purging procedures.”

Mia glared at the closing doors. The purge would leave nothing but ash. She ground her teeth. There was no way there was a chemical leak that her enhanced senses didn’t pick up.

“Breen, you son of a bitch, you betrayed us!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Escape was their only option. The alliance would fall if all their leaders were killed. All the bodies packing the room gave Mia nowhere to go.

Overlapping shouts threaded with the cacophony of the alarms. People turned to stampede toward the closing door. Jon Junior made it there first. She had barely noticed him in the back of the crowd.

He braced himself against the doors and grunted, his face red with exertion as he pushed against the doors, propping them open wide enough to allow single-file escape. A miner rushed through the opening, followed by a mercenary.

The open door stopped the immediate thronging panic. Evacuees settled into a natural rhythm, heading toward the doors with people alternating from converging lines. The shouts died down. Their nervous looks remained.

The computerized warnings and alarm continued, alerting everyone in the room of their impending death.

“We need to get out of here!” a mercenary shouted.

“The purge procedure can’t initiate with the doors open,” Ortiz called.

“How do you know?”

“Because we’d all be dead already. Keep calm and continue the evacuation. We’ll be fine.”

“You stuck-up navy prick, don’t you get it?” The mercenary sneered. “We’ve been betrayed. We need to get out

of here before this whole station goes up.”

“He’s right,” Kimson commented, looking around. “Breen’s not here. He set us up.”

“Everyone keep calm,” Mia thundered. “Keep the evacuation going and return to your ships in an orderly manner.”

As a child, Mia had been fascinated by accounts of ancient warfare. Soldiers and warriors faced off against each other, forced to hear the screams of the dying as they slew them with their axes, swords, and spears. The discipline required to maintain formation while one’s force brawled with thousands of others was staggering.

What she found more interesting was that for the average ancient battle, the actual fighting produced a lower percentage of the total casualties. It wasn’t until one side’s morale collapsed and they broke and ran that the true slaughter began.

Fear replaced determination in the crowd, spreading and ready to turn into full-blown panic. The loud alarms and the groan of the doors straining against Jon Junior all sang a song of defeat.

Jon Junior’s grunts turned to yells. Sweat poured down the sides of his reddened face.

A woman pushed a man down to rush through the open doors. Other people hurried after her. The orderly alternating movement of before collapsed into a mob crush descending on the small opening provided by Jon Junior’s effort against the thick doors trying to seal the crowd in for death.

The trickle of fleeing people became a flood. More people paid less attention to avoiding the man holding the door open. A large mercenary’s elbow bumped Jon. Another man’s backpack scraped his face.

Jon hissed. His knees buckled.

“Charlie, help him!” Mia called. She pushed through the crowd. She was too far away to do anything.

Charlie waded through the crowd toward the door. He gave up on being nice after the first couple of meters. No one dared challenge him after a hard shove.

Jon Senior tried to bypass the crowd, but he was too close to the front like Mia. The wall of flesh and bone forced him back.

These weren't enemies they could kill and step over. The men and women fleeing were key players in the alliance. They had to survive for the mission.

Mia looked around. There had to be other exits. In their panic, they'd all focused only on the main doors.

Her quick survey killed her remaining hope. All the vents were sealed. None were big enough for a human to get through. The door was their only chance.

She drew a deep breath and pushed through the crowd. Jon Junior was as strong as she was, if not stronger. All he needed to do was hold out until Charlie got there. Then they could swap between both Smiths, Charlie, and Mia to hold the door until the evacuation was complete. No one had to die.

Whatever other trap Breen had for them could be handled. There was no way he had enough security guards to fight off all the people in the alliance. She hadn't heard any gunfire or explosions from outside.

A panicked group of miners shoved through the door at the same time. They pushed hard enough to knock Jon Junior loose from his rigid hold. He slipped to the floor. With a brief wider opening, people surged through the door. They trampled him without a second thought, desperate to escape the room before it sealed.

Reinforced safety doors were more than a match for a supersoldier's body when he couldn't rally his full strength. Crunching bones joined with the harsh snaps of Jon Junior's spine and screams that cut through the din of the room.

The horrible sight and noise halted the rush. That gave everyone time to realize they could no longer make it through the doors.

Mia shouted and shoved people aside, desperate to get to Jon Junior, but the crowd slowed her. The momentary focus on the door gave way to another flare of panic as people pushed each other and waded through the crowd to find another exit.

Charlie's roar ripped through the crowd. He flung his log-like arms back and forth, knocking people away on his charge toward the front. He plowed through everyone and reached the door, leaving a trail of groaning people. With another roar, he pulled the doors open and pushed Jon aside with his leg to save him from more trampling.

Their escape path restored, the crowd rushed toward the door. Mia helped a limping miner off the floor. Another consortium member draped the man's arm over his shoulder and helped him toward the front.

The crowd continued flowing out of the room, this time more careful to avoid jarring the man holding open the door, although Charlie might as well have been a metal statue. Jon Senior made it to the front and scooped up his son.

"Get him to the infirmary on the *Erinyes*!" Mia bellowed over the crowd. "I'll follow up here."

Jon Senior sprinted away with his son in his arms and disappeared into the river of fleeing humanity heading toward the docks. Mia made her way toward the front. The crowd was now a raging torrent.

Charlie growled and kept his arms pressed against the doors. Despite the panic and people getting hurt, the purge system hadn't been activated. Wounded men and women were picked up off the floor and carried toward the front. Breen's plan had failed.

"Can you hold this long enough to get everyone else out?" Mia shouted as she pushed closer to the door.

He nodded. "Yes."

"Get back to the ship once the room's clear," Mia ordered as she approached the door. "This was no accident, and it deserves punishment."

"You need to survive," Charlie reminded her.

“Don’t worry. I’m not planning to die. I’m planning to make sure somebody else does.”

She nodded before she charged through the doorway. The alliance members who’d escaped all ran in the same direction. Distant shouts echoed through the hallways.

Mia listened for a moment, trying to use her enhanced hearing to pick out any gunfire. She still didn’t hear any.

“Breen, you idiot,” Mia muttered. “You assumed your first plan would work. Now you’re going to pay for your lack of imagination.”

Mia turned and ran in the opposite direction of everyone else. She’d been to Breen’s station many times and had invaded it once before. She knew exactly where she needed to go.

Breen had betrayed them. That much was obvious. The safest place for the traitor would be secure in his office, far from the docks where angry alliance members would be happy to kill him.

The traitorous manager had made a fatal mistake in assuming he could seal them all up and finish them off. She would have put guards outside the door to pick people off as they fled. The lack of guards near the machine shop and surrounding area meant they’d all been sent elsewhere for reinforcement.

Given that she didn’t hear any gunfire or receive reports about people getting shot in the docks, Breen hadn’t sent anyone there. The alliance members needed to get to their ships, and they’d be fine.

She yanked out her pistol. Restraint wasn’t a concern. Breen had cleared the station of anyone but the alliance and his people. Anyone stupid enough to help Breen try to fry an entire room filled with people deserved death. Not only that, but anyone who got in her way was a traitor to humanity. She didn’t have mercy for traitors.

Being an angry supersoldier sprinting at full speed with exact knowledge of her route made it easy for Mia to rip

through the station. She skidded to a stop at a lift with a frown before pulling a panel off an emergency ladder access.

Mia crawled through the opening and jumped onto the ladder. She channeled her inner monkey until she'd reached the command deck.

Her powerful kick knocked open the access to the deck. The panel clattered against the door. She didn't care about stealth. She wanted Breen to know she was coming.

Mia rolled into the hallway and hopped to her feet with her gun in hand. No one was there. She was close to the intersection leading to the station manager's office.

Murmurs and the heavy breathing of guards came from around the corner in the hallway leading to Breen's office. It was hard to estimate how many enemies there were with that limited intel. Shadows fell into the intersection.

Not that it mattered. She'd go through an entire army of Reapers to get to Breen.

Mia spun around the corner. Security guards choked the hallway. She put a bullet through the closest guard's eye and rushed forward to grab his body before it fell. She shot a man through the neck at the same time.

The guards near the front panicked. One pulled out his stun baton. Mia shot him in the face. Her dead human shield took the shots from guards opening fire.

Screaming in rage, Mia charged into a guard and knocked him down with the body of his friend. His vest saved him from her first shot into the heart. His exposed face didn't fare as well.

The deafening gunfire from the guards farther down the hallway riddled her shield with bullets. Blood splattered all over the hallway.

She shoved her empty gun into her holster and kicked a dead guard's gun into her hand. Advancing slowly, she swept from left to right, taking careful, methodical shots to slice away at the ranks of guards. Fire blossomed in her chest. A bullet had ripped through her shield and hit her.

Mia yelled and flung the body into the surviving guards and charged. She leaped into the crowd with her fists and feet flying. She smashed a guard's head against the wall. A palm strike to the neck left a woman gasping for breath.

The chest wound throbbed. Mia fed on the pain and flowed into more blows. She whipped behind a man, snapped his neck, and held him as a new shield. After snagging his gun, she emptied the magazine into the remaining guards. Her last two bullets went into a guard in front of the station manager's office. The guard collapsed face-first, gurgling blood.

Mia growled and strode toward the door. Her arm and chest throbbed. She'd been grazed in two spots on her left arm in the last exchange.

She stopped in front of the door to check the hallway and listen for reinforcements. The piles of dead, dying, and disabled guards convinced her she was fine with finishing off her current mission.

Mia shoved a new magazine into her pistol and approached the locked door. "Debbie II—"

The door clicked open.

"I figured you'd need that, love."

Mia kicked a body out of the way and threw open the door. Breen sat behind his desk. His eyes widened, and he threw up his hands.

"Oh." Mia sounded disappointed. "I half-expected a combat drone or for you to have a big gun."

"I'm not much of a fighter," Breen insisted. "My guards were all offered bonuses. It's over. You should leave."

"I should leave? That's all you have to say to me?"

Mia vaulted over the desk and shoved the gun under his chin. "Choose your next words carefully. They're likely to be your last. Why the hell would you betray us? You know everything that was at stake, and you knew we had a real chance, so why, damn it, why?"

Tears streamed down Breen's cheeks. "Immortality." He laughed nervously. "Whatever happened before, whatever way it was achieved, whatever the sacrifices, it's real. That vid you pushed around said so. Icaryus is immortal."

"He's a monster," Mia snarled. "He'd kill and torture anyone to help his sick research."

"Don't you get it? He's achieved it. We can't pretend it hasn't happened. Isn't living forever worth anything and everything? Think about it! Immortality!"

Breen laughed hysterically, the tears flowing harder. "I knew a person like me would never be offered it without something big to offer. You can't say you wouldn't do the same thing in my place. You would choose immortality."

"You don't think they've tried to recruit me before?" Mia pulled the trigger. She let the body drop and wiped the blood splatter off her face. "It's hard to live forever when you get shot in the head."

"I'm sorry to press you, love. Multiple warships are emerging from side-space envelopes."

"That tracks." Mia put two more bullets into Breen's body and sprinted out of the room. "I'll be right there."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Get us into space,” Mia barked as she stepped into the main fighter bay of the *Erinyes*. “Everyone launch once we’re clear.”

Paul, Ryoko, and Karin had suited up and were ready in their cockpits. They all nodded at Mia from their fighters.

“You need to go to the infirmary,” Debbie II intoned.

“I need to grab my helmet and get in my fighter,” Mia countered. “I was lucky I was in my suit as it is. That and tactics lowered the damage. No vital organs were hit. I’ll slap a couple of patches on it, and it’ll hold. Most of this blood isn’t mine.”

“You need to go to the infirmary,” Debbie II repeated. “This isn’t about you. It’s best if you see for yourself. I’m unsure how to express the issue to you nor if my doing so will result in unnecessary issues.”

Mia gasped and rushed out of the bay. She’d carved through the security guards and forgotten about how Jon Junior had risked his life to hold open the doors, only to end up crushed by the same doors because of the panicked crowd. If she held the alliance together, it would only be because of his sacrifice.

She’d also taken for granted that Jon Junior could survive once they got him treatment. Her body moved itself. She barely noticed the time between her leaving the bay and arriving at the infirmary.

Inside, a pallid Jon Junior lay his stomach on a bed, lines running into him and patches running up and down his arms, legs, and back. His vitals were stable on the readout.

Mia let out a sigh of relief before noticing the pool of blood on the other side of the infirmary. “What the hell?”

A wide-eyed Jon Senior stood at the edge of the blood, looking at his blood-soaked, trembling hands.

Mia grabbed a QuickHeal patch and slapped it over her chest wound. “What’s going on?”

“I didn’t mean to do it,” Jon Senior muttered.

She pulled another patch from a shelf to apply it to her arm. Analgesics dulled the throbbing pain. She needed to be in better condition if she was going to take out a supersoldier.

A few more steps into the infirmary confirmed the blood’s source. Vorhees lay on the floor with his throat slit. An overturned tray lay next to him, different medical tools lying in the blood. Mia didn’t care about the exact murder weapon. A man with Jon Senior’s strength could have used almost anything. For that matter, he could have finished Vorhees with his bare hands.

“I didn’t mean to,” Jon Senior whispered. He stumbled backward. “I tried not to, but the programming kicked in.”

“I tried to warn Vorhees,” Debbie II reported. “He ignored me. I don’t understand how I could have been clearer.”

“It’s not your fault, Debbie II,” Mia insisted.

“It’s mine,” Jon Senior interjected.

“No, it’s mine.” Mia sighed. “Damn it. We don’t have time for this.” Her jaw clenched. “I should have kept him in his room. That dumbass ignored Debbie II. On some level, he wanted to die.”

She shook her head. “He used the last of his resources to help supply the alliance. Who knows? Maybe he wanted to test himself.”

Mia faced Jon Senior. “I’m serious. We don’t have time for this. Your son is stable, which is good, but I believe Vorhees took himself out. You happen to have been his chosen method. Remember, he helped us with this mission, but he spent his entire life as an underworld arms dealer.”

“It’s not that.” Jon Senior shook his head. “He was scum. I know that, but I didn’t make the choice. The programming made the choice.”

He bowed his head. “You say I was nothing more than a suicide method. That makes it worse. He was so convinced I’d kill him that he could come up with a plan like that. I’ve been off their drugs for so long, yet I still did what they wanted.”

Jon Senior jerked his head toward his son. “He’s hurt badly.” He ran his hands through his hair, leaving streaks of blood. “My son...”

“He’s stable. He’ll recover. That won’t mean anything if we don’t escape the rest of the trap.”

The infirmary shook, rattling the beds and equipment with the takeoff of the *Erinyes*. Vorhees’ body twitched under the impetus.

Mia rushed to Jon Junior’s bed to secure his straps. “I need an update, flight.”

“We’ve got a detachment of KCAP heavy cruisers out here,” Paul reported. “The weird part is the squadrons didn’t come through the envelopes, and they slid in farther out than you’d expect. Fighters are launching now.”

In battle, the smallest detail could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Mia drew deep breaths and tried to remind herself of the available resources. “They planned on a decapitation strike. All the leaders were supposed to die in that room, which would make it easy for our friends to corral everyone else. Has everyone made it back to their ships?”

“Fighters are launching, and everyone is forming up,” Paul replied. “I think they’re waiting. No, wait, the *Alexandria* is moving forward. The *Amel* is joining them.”

“Support Mausser!” Mia ordered. “Ito, if you can fling any missiles, go ahead. I don’t care if they hit. Thanks to Vorhees, we have plenty of ammo.”

“Roger!” her crewmates called.

Another hard turn almost sent her off her feet. The patches reduced the pain of her injuries to a distant distraction. Rest would help prevent more damage, but the enemy fleet eliminated that option.

“I don’t know what to do,” Jon Senior whispered.

“Vorhees is dead. I want to make sure the rest of us don’t die.” Mia pointed at Jon Junior. “For now, watch over your son. I have work to do. I won’t let this alliance come apart before it’s done its job.”

The fleet of heavy cruisers brawled with Mia’s fleet around the station. Mia’s alliance had superior numbers, although among their entire fleet they technically only had two cruisers and two light cruisers and lacked the sheer firepower of a navy warship. Despite being a frigate, the *Alexandria* packed more punch than the *Erinyes*.

Crossfire from the *Alexandria* and a pair of agile mercenary corvettes with their fighters shredded the side of a cruiser. Missiles pounded the side of the ship until the vessel blew apart in a huge explosion, taking most of its close fighter escort with it.

Her breathing shallow, Mia pulled away from the *Erinyes* and pushed hard toward the consortium mining ships. Enemy fighters were closing in on them. A stream of turret fire from a corvette forced them into a wider approach. Alliance fighters swooped in from two sides to join the ship in blowing the enemy squadron apart.

IFF codes identified the corvette as the *Ölümsüz* captained by smuggler Trena. Her lightly armed ship’s small turrets

weren't delivering the pain of many in the alliance fleet, but they nailed fighter after fighter in rapid succession.

A flight of fighters escaped the net. They broke away from the other fighters and headed toward the smuggler's vessel. Their cannons blazed. The corvette traded turret fire with the fighters, losing shields on the port and taking a direct hit. Turret fire vaporized the fighters.

The smugglers pulled away to reinforce another squadron being overwhelmed. Other than a thin line of debris leaking from their ship, there was no evidence they were in danger. The hit proved that Mia's alliance couldn't assume they would survive unscathed.

"Good thing I didn't kill them," Mia mumbled before barking her next order to her crew. "Defend the mining ships. Those big, slow hunks aren't made for space combat."

"Roger!"

The *Erinyes* launched a volley of missiles toward the fighters. They broke formation and left a trail of decoys. Explosions rippled through space without hurting any of the fighters.

Mia headed toward Paul, Ryoko, and Karin. Explosions and energy blasts shone in all directions.

A squadron of mercenary fighters swept toward the mining ships and opened fire on the spread-out enemy fighters. The surprising ferocity of the resistance after the missile barrage caught them off-guard, and the enemy lost half their number before retreating, only to run into Mia and her friends. Their plasma cannon blasts burned through space and blew away the surviving fighters.

Another heavy cruiser exploded, the victim of *Eden*, *Alexandria*, and *Amel* concentrating fire. Mia entered a quick command to bring up the fleet command interface. The alliance had lost fighters and armed shuttles but no warships.

A vague sense of discomfort made her recheck the sensors. The enemy formation bothered her. They'd been sloppy and

left too many gaps in their lines, making it easy for alliance fighters and smaller, faster ships to harass them.

“They scraped together what they could,” Mia concluded. “They were depending on the trap. I don’t see any obvious Reapers. Debbie II, any enemy fighters performing at greater than expected levels?”

“A handful,” Debbie II reported. “Although the majority of those fighters have already been destroyed. In at least one case, Lt. Ortiz’s flight engaged one of the aforementioned elites and defeated them without too much trouble.”

No Reapers in the ambush meant more Reapers elsewhere, including the stronghold or preparing for terrorist missions. The alliance needed to get out of there. They didn’t have time for lengthy repairs.

“Form up on me, flight,” Mia ordered before launching another missile toward an enemy fighter. “Line formation with standard decoy distance.”

“Roger!”

Particle beams, plasma blasts, and missiles flew everywhere. Bright flashes never left the corner of Mia’s eye or her sensors. Besides the Bleaker Beacon battle, Mia hadn’t been in a fight involving so many fighters and ships.

Her heart pounded, her previous wounds aching again. She didn’t know what to feel. She was used to her team always being the center of everything, not having an entire fleet backing her up. This was real war, a collection of heroes working together toward a goal, not one woman and her tagalongs solving every problem themselves.

Mia pushed her flight into an arcing flank of an enemy flight. Her arm and chest screamed in pain over the maneuver. Her targets broke formation and tried to escape in all directions. All their experience working together paid off as Mia’s flight carved through the fighters, each volley of shots simultaneous despite Mia not saying anything.

The debris field forced her flight to break up or risk heavy damage. They reformed rapidly and pivoted toward an

approaching heavy cruiser. Smaller mercenary ships traded missiles and turret barrages with the cruiser, doing their best to stay clear of the main cannons.

Shields absorbed their initial punishment. The mercenaries kept rotating in and out to make passes at the same spots on the ship, punching holes in the shield coverage all over its length.

“Tall line formation,” she ordered.

Mia accelerated. She’d taken note of where the shields had fallen on the cruiser. Her friends fell in behind her in a staggered line. She dropped toward the ship. She wove and spun to avoid turret fire before strafing the cruiser and taking out the offending turrets.

She pulled away from the cruiser, allowing Karin, the next pilot in line, to dig deeper into her new wound. Paul repeated the process. By the time Ryoko in the rear strafed the cruiser, the main engines floated aimlessly through space away from the ship, whose turrets spun and tried to fend off the swarm of enemies picking the craft apart.

The *Eden* lined up with the wounded ship and opened fire with a forward particle cannon. The blast cut through the damaged heavy cruiser and cleaved it in half. Seconds later, the two large pieces exploded.

Wave after wave of alliance fighter strikes shredded the hull of a heavy cruiser coming from the opposite side of the mining ships. Two mercenary fighters skimmed the surface with such grace that it almost felt like a performance, the unheard music punctuated by combined cannon fire shearing off a turret and missile launcher.

The enemy’s heavy cruisers had responded to the holes in their formation by clustering together while the alliance ships had spread out to encircle the would-be hunters. A twinge of pity sneaked into Mia’s heart for the outmaneuvered enemy.

Clouds of missiles ripped from the cruisers along with near-constant turret fire. The defensive suppression fire forced

the alliance fighters and ships into continual evasion and decoy maneuvers.

Mia ignored the glory of going after the closest cruiser to stay near the mining ships. Enemy fighters kept breaking away from the more heavily armed ships to make a run at the mining vessels.

That made her uncomfortable. An obsession with going after the mining ships had cost the ambush fleet. Without taking out any of the mining vessels, they'd lost enough ships that the tide was turning.

The depth of Breen's betrayal sank in. Mia hadn't explained the entire plan before the briefing, but Breen knew mining ships were coming. The enemy fleet's focus on taking out the mining ships meant they might have figured out the broad strokes of Mia's plan to open the mountain.

A flight of fighters broke through the defensive line and charged a mining ship that drifted away from the rest. Mia's flight moved to intercept. Both flights broke apart into a series of one-on-one duels. Twisting, spinning, and stomach-churning maneuvers followed as the pilots tried to line up a shot.

Mia's entire side was on fire now, her wounded body protesting her high-g maneuvers. She sucked in a breath and pushed the pain out of her mind.

She pulsed her reverse thrusters, the sudden deceleration dropping her behind the enemy trailing her. He tried to spin but wasn't fast enough. She cut through him with a single shot from her cannon.

She turned to help the closest friendly pilot, Ryoko. She didn't need the aid. A spin snipe followed by a counterthrust destroyed Ryoko's opponent while keeping her flying forward. Karin and Paul finished off their challenges only seconds later.

The heavy cruisers had widened their formation, attempting to encircle the numerically superior alliance fleet. Mia's allies were trying to surround them in turn, resulting in

an Ouroboros of stretched-out fleets nipping at each other's heels.

Mia led her flight toward a squadron of enemy fighters trying to make a run toward one of the larger mining vessels. A missile barrage forced the enemy fighters to charge in front of the mining vessel and leave a string of decoys.

The squadron broke into three flights with two heading toward the mining vessel and one turning to face Mia and her team. A wave of pulsed cannon fire annihilated the vanguard flight, leaving the others open to a rear attack.

The enemy fighters strafed the mining vessel. Plasma and laser fire tore into the hull and ripped large chunks from the ship. Although the craft didn't explode, Mia doubted its mining lasers remained operational. She had built redundancy into the plan with several mining vessels, but another loss like that would complicate things. Every delay at any stage in the mission gave Icaryus more chances.

Mia's flight tore through and scattered the strafing fighters. The survivors from the first pass got caught between Mia's fighters and two mercenary flights until nothing remained but debris clouds.

A heavy cruiser broke away from the stalemate in the circular scuffle and accelerated toward a mining vessel. A turret barrage from passing corvettes and a destroyer took down most of its shields. They paid the price of withering counterfire.

Blackened holes covered the front of the approaching cruiser, the wounds running deep into the main cannon assembly. The ship accelerated toward its mining vessel prey and swung its turrets around.

The *Erinyes* and Mia's flight were halfway across the battlespace. The closest ships, the two corvettes and the destroyer, were turning but were penned in by a nearby fighter squadron.

The cruiser pushed more power into its engines. A small contact on the sensors whipped through the area, a shuttle

heading toward the cruiser. Mia's HUD lit up with an encrypted message notice from the shuttle.

“Huh?”

The IFF code confused her until she realized it was the shuttle she'd stolen from Ice.

Turret fire erupted from the cruiser. Blast after blast sought the shuttle. The shuttle spun and wove through the stream of death. With a final turn, the shuttle dove into the cruiser's engines and exploded.

The blast tore off the cruiser's aft engine assembly. Secondary explosions ripped through and blew the entire ship apart.

Mia narrowed her eyes and checked her sensor readings. Someone had loaded that shuttle with a bomb from one of Vorhees' new supply caches. The list of people who could do that while putting it on a shuttle aboard the *Erinyes* was small.

She checked the encrypted message. A recording of a pale Jon Senior played.

“Oh no,” Mia began. She hated being right when she was paranoid.

“I can't ever really be fixed, and I can't run the risk of losing control when facing Icaryus,” he explained. “What I did to Vorhees proves I'm another killer doll for the Protocol. You were always right to be afraid of me. It's been so long away from them, and it didn't make a difference. I can do this. I can help now.”

He drew a deep breath. “Tell my son I loved him more than I ever thought possible, and I'm sorry for everything.”

“No, no, no!” Mia screamed. She pounded her fist on her control panel.

He'd sent a recording to stop her from talking him out of it. The more she thought about it, the less difference she believed it would have made. Jon had been like Vorhees. Both men were looking for their way to die.

Mia turned her fighter to find a new target, eager to punish them for what happened to Jon since there was no point screaming at a dead man. The small number of surviving enemy fighters headed back to their motherships, all of which had broken out of the sprawling melee and were retreating from the alliance fleet.

A heavy cruiser opened a side-space envelope to escape. The *Erinyes* and a group of mercenary corvettes collapsed the window with a missile barrage. Their turrets and cannons sliced the cruiser into ribbons.

The destruction of another cruiser reminded Mia of the ancient armies she'd thought about recently. A collapse of morale preceded a massacre.

The other enemy cruisers proved more fortunate. They rushed through newly opened envelopes with their fighter squadrons close behind.

Mia stared at her sensors, desperate to find a final target before accepting the near impossible. They'd been ambushed and won with substantial losses to the enemy force.

"Fleet sitrep, Debbie II," she ordered, uninterested in poring over data readouts.

"Minor damage to most vessels," Debbie II reported. "Minor fighter and shuttle losses, those include the deaths of the pilots. They're not offering reports yet, but there were no complete losses of any vessel above the shuttle or fighter level."

Mia's entire body burned from the strain on her wounds. She needed a day in the infirmary. "This isn't over. They'll be smarter when they come back. I'm assuming heavy carrier and anchor ships."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"We have a little breathing room before reinforcements arrive. That doesn't mean we should stick around. Send the coordinates for Fallback Point Alpha to the fleet. We'll figure things out from there."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two slides and a half-day later, Mia headed toward the infirmary to check on Jon Junior. He'd been unconscious during the time she'd treated her injuries. They hadn't talked face-to-face since the battle, only a brief comms discussion where she informed him about his father's death.

Mia hadn't meant to be cold and gruff. She had too many things going on. Another dose of meds sent him back to sleep so he didn't have to dwell on his father's death.

After caring for her wounds, she had Charlie help her remove Vorhees' body and clean up the infirmary. She'd rested in her quarters after that, trying to kill time until the next talk with the alliance leaders.

Mia had scheduled a meeting to discuss the next steps with the alliance. They'd confirmed minor damage, along with lost fighter pilots, plus deaths and injuries among the crews. Cailan confirmed the loss of the mining lasers in the damaged vessel and had it sent back home since it was no longer anything but a giant target.

Their mission would have ended in that machine shop if it hadn't been for Jon Junior's quick and selfless action. He didn't have to block the door. He could have saved his own life. Instead, he acted to protect everyone in the room. He pushed his body to the limits and had paid the price because of panicky idiots.

Jon Junior had saved the alliance. His sacrifice allowed the leaders to escape and get to or contact their ships. Their ragtag

fleet shouldn't have been able to stand toe-to-toe against a fleet of heavy cruisers, even with superior numbers, let alone triumph without major losses.

They'd torn apart the enemy fleet. They'd proven they could fight together and win even under the worst circumstances.

Mia wanted to take hope from that victory. She was desperate for it. It would be easy to compare the relative losses on both sides and claim that guaranteed victory.

She kept circling back to morale. In war, morale was everything. Getting betrayed and ambushed would fray the nerves of even a hardened soldier. Pretending that losing people in a battle wouldn't frighten anyone was naïve.

Mia claimed to the other leaders she didn't want an immediate meeting because she wanted to give everyone a chance to catalog their losses. In truth, she was stalling, afraid that now the Protocol had punched the alliance in the nose, her members would leave.

She stopped in front of the infirmary door and drew a deep breath. She'd worry about everything else later during their meeting. Debbie II had informed her that Jon Junior was awake. This was as good a time as any to check in with him.

When Mia entered the infirmary, Ito stood near the edge of Jon's bed. Jon's appearance was deceptive. He wasn't covered in patches like after a firefight, but his rigid position and the red sections on a nervous system diagram on the monitor told the horrific truth.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Ito," Mia admitted.

Ito glanced over her shoulder. "Is it so weird to visit a friend who's been hurt and lost someone?"

"No." Mia sighed. "Just not your style. I don't have a problem with it."

"I'm helping the best way I know how, with my skills." Ito held up a datapad with an image of an exoskeleton. "I've been working on those SHKs with Jon for a while. His interface rig gave me an idea. It'll take work, but I can rig up what I'm

calling a motivator harness to help him move. It'll be difficult to achieve full nervous system integration aboard the *Erinyes*, but we can figure something out later, assuming we don't all die here in the next couple of days."

"Thanks, Ito," Jon offered weakly. "I appreciate it."

His pale face and quiet near-whisper pained Mia. His strength had saved the alliance leaders. That same strength might have cost him control over his body.

Ito waved. "I'll let you know when I'm ready to test it. I'm still patching up stuff from the battles, so hard to say."

"We're going to be busy for a while." Jon cracked a pained smile. "I get it. Don't worry about me."

"Yeah, we're going to be busy. You don't worry about a thing. We all know you've sacrificed enough as is." Ito nodded at Mia and left the infirmary.

Jon sighed. "It's weird not being able to move my arms and legs. At least I can talk and move my head."

Mia pulled a stool up to the bed and sat. "That harness sounds like it'll help until you can heal up."

Jon turned his head away. "You don't have to lie to me, Mia. I'm a big boy. I can take it."

"Why do you think I'm lying to you?" Mia frowned. "I know I've kept things from you before, but that's all in the past."

"Because this is a serious injury. We both know I might never be able to walk again."

"Who told you that?" Mia demanded.

"Debbie II. I asked her to show me everything she could about this type of injury."

"She should learn to keep her mouth shut if she ever wants to see Izzy again," Mia muttered. When Debbie II didn't respond, she continued. "Sure, the injury's more than we can fix aboard the ship. That doesn't mean a real hospital with

cutting-edge equipment can't help. Even if they can't regenerate your spine, there are implant and nerve relays."

She patted his hand. "You're not a normal human. Keep that in mind. Medical research and studies aren't based on supersoldier genetics. I know I recover quicker from injury than I should, and Charlie can all but shrug off small-arms fire."

"I'm not going to walk again." Jon stared up at the ceiling. "I know it. I'm not Charlie. I'll need exoskeletons and harnesses for the rest of my life."

Mia took his hand in hers and squeezed lightly. "If anyone can come back from this, you can. You're stronger than this. I won't let you be another sacrifice. Your brave act will go down in history as the key moment that saved the alliance that defeated the Protocol. I'm going to make sure of it."

Jon chuckled. "I blocked a door. It crushed me. That's not the stuff of legends. I can't even say, 'You should see the other guy.' I don't think smashing my spine hurt the door."

"The simplest acts of bravery are the most impressive. I'm not the only one who appreciates what you did in there." Mia squeezed his hand again, unsure if he could feel it. "You've grown and proven you're ready to take the fight to the Protocol, and not only with drones."

She looked away. "I'm glad I found you, and I'm glad I took a chance with you, even when you tried to push me away. I would have regretted it if I had let you go."

Jon stared at her with uncertainty in his eyes. "Thank you, Mia. I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I know I caused so much trouble for you from the beginning. It would have been easier for you to leave me on that base or leave me behind when I was being a cocky asshole. You didn't, and because of that I was able to spend time with my father again before he died."

Mia's breath caught. "I'm sorry about your father, Jon. I know how much it hurts to lose a parent. If there was anything I could have done, I would have done it."

Jon shook his head. “You couldn’t have stopped him in the middle of a battle even if you’d figured out right away what he was up to. He knew what he was doing.”

He sniffled. “I’ve been trying to ignore it and pretend it didn’t happen. It’s too raw. It’s not like before when they grabbed him. This time there’s no question about what happened to him. He’s dead, and I’ll never see him again.”

Tears ran down his eyes. Mia reached over to wipe them away.

“His last act in this life helped take out an enemy heavy cruiser,” Mia reminded Jon. “That alone means he’s already played a major role in helping us take down the Protocol. His last words were about how much he loved you. That shows what a great father he was.”

“When he got taken, I thought I’d never see him again. We went through all that and found him. We were just getting back to the way things were, and...”

He closed his eyes. “It’s not fair. It’s not damned fair at all.” He let out a pained laugh. “I want to smash things, but I can’t move my arms to do it.”

“No, it’s not fair.” Mia held his hand with both of hers. “It’s not your fault or his fault. It’s the Protocol’s. It’s always been them.

“My mission is also your mission. I can’t bring your father back, just like I can’t bring my father back. What I can do is avenge them both by taking down the bastards who hurt them.”

“Will the alliance stay together?” Jon asked. “After we got betrayed like that? I asked Ito, and you know her, she said that’s above her pay grade. She also said the alliance ships are sticking around.”

“I’m not sure.” Mia shrugged. “Kimson got hurt, so he headed back to his station, but his merc friends are sticking around. Trena and her smugglers took off. Their ship is about to fall apart anyway. I thanked them for their help at the station.”

She shrugged again. “Galik got hurt. Nothing serious, but enough to spook Carana, and she’s left with him to ensure he gets quality medical care. Like Kimson, her merc friends are sticking around. I’ll talk to the leaders soon.”

She sighed. “They’re still here when they could have run. That has to mean something.”

“They might want to tell you to your face before they leave. They might figure they owe you that much. I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

Mia grimaced. “I’ve thought of that, but hope’s all we have left.”

The infirmary door opened. Charlie entered.

“It’s time,” he intoned. “The first shuttle landed.”

“Already?” Mia smiled at Jon. “This time, the key players are coming over here in person. Let’s hope you’re wrong about them wanting to turn me down face-to-face.”

The alliance leaders gathered around the briefing room table, this time as flesh-and-blood bodies rather than flickering holograms. Breen’s absence was conspicuous, although no one pointed it out. Mia waited until the smug-looking Natalie Ghallia entered and sat to begin.

“I’ve reviewed the losses from the previous battle. Given the complete surprise and the enemy’s strength, losses were within acceptable parameters. There’s no standard method of after-action battlefield analysis that would declare that battle anything but a rousing success for our side despite us starting in a defensive posture after being ambushed.”

Ghallia smirked. “My, my. You’re as cold as I remember. People died, and all you have to say is, ‘Losses were acceptable.’ You should have stayed on the Gate and worked for me. You’re far less of a bleeding heart than I believed.”

“She’s right.” Cailan narrowed his eyes. “We didn’t lose any ships, but we lost good men and women aboard the mining vessel that got hit.” He clenched his fists. “Adria was aboard that ship. She died trying to evacuate crewmembers from a damaged compartment. The worst part is she got them out, and an explosion killed her.”

Mia’s eyes widened. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I only went over the numbers.”

Erden frowned. “People are more than numbers, Mia.”

Mausser looked around the table with a stern expression. “We were hit worse than we thought. The *Alexandria*’s still in the fight, but we won’t have all our weapons back online anytime soon. Shield generators are weaker in many places.”

He looked at Mia. “You should know we lost Lt. Ortiz in the battle. He was a good man, even if he was too cocky for his own good. He took down way more than his number. As much as I knew him, I think he died proud and happy to do his part to defend the KCAP against the Protocol.”

Debbie II had failed to inform Mia of his death. Mia couldn’t blame her. She hadn’t ordered the AI to keep track of every individual loss to pass along.

“I see,” Mia replied. “He was a good pilot. It’s a sad loss.”

Mia’s jaw tightened. Ghallia was right about her. She’d been so obsessed with combat readiness she’d forgotten that the alliance members weren’t soulless drones offered to her to throw at the enemy. Every person who’d died in that battle had friends and family who cared about them, like Jon.

This wasn’t her doing hit-and-run raids. This was war. People died, and more would when they attacked the base. The death of every single man and woman in that fleet could be laid at her feet. This was her plan and her alliance.

The hard looks on everyone’s faces quieted Mia. She’d given them a big speech about how they were going to free the galaxy from a threat and led them into an ambush where people had died.

Jon Senior had warned her. Had he sensed something about Breen in particular? She'd never know.

Personal motivations fueled her mission. She couldn't expect the rest of the alliance to tolerate as much risk. Jon Junior was right. They wanted to tell her to her face that they were done. She needed to salvage what she could before she lost more than one smuggler corvette and a mining ship.

Mia cleared her throat. "I lost one of my crew, the shuttle pilot who collided with the cruiser. Another member of my crew might be paralyzed permanently. He was the one who first blocked open the doors on the station and allowed us to evacuate. He was the son of the pilot, by the way."

Ghalla's expression turned ice cold. "Is that what you're expecting of us, Miss Verick? Suicide tactics? We have to be willing to paralyze ourselves at a moment's notice if a member of the alliance betrays us?"

"I didn't order him to do that. He had personal circumstances that led to it. He wanted to do his best against the Protocol in what time he had left."

"What about the traitor, Breen?" Ghalla asked.

"I shot him in the head," she replied matter-of-factly.

Ghalla's brow lifted. "Oh. I won't criticize that action. That doesn't mean I'll tolerate suicide missions."

"This isn't a suicide mission," Mia insisted.

"How *isn't* it a suicide mission?" Erden scowled at her. "They know we're coming now. They were trying to attack the mining vessels. That means they'll be ready for us at the base. How can you be so sure we can win anymore?"

Everyone focused on her. Mia's heart thundered. They weren't wrong. For the mission to succeed, they couldn't wait much longer and risk Icaryus relocating until Mia's alliance fell in battle or to the simple passage of time. They had to strike soon or not at all.

Mia drew a deep breath and straightened her back. She wouldn't let either of the Smiths' sacrifices be in vain. She

wouldn't let the Protocol win because she was a poor leader who'd let traitors take advantage of her arrogance and pride.

"I'll take on difficult missions, but I don't lead suicide missions." She swept the room with her hard gaze. "I'm sorry for your losses, and I hope everyone who dies during this mission is honored in the future, but this mission goes beyond us. I can't let losses stop us. There's no such thing as a battle where I can guarantee no one on my side will die."

Ghalla smirked. "You're admitting that we're nothing more than expendable tools to you?"

"No." Mia shot out of her seat. "I've fought the Protocol in one way or another for years. I've always been at the forefront of that fight, risking my life. I'm not asking anyone to do anything I'm not willing to do, and I'm not doing this to secure power, money, or influence.

"I'm doing this because if these people win, freedom's gone from the galaxy, along with millions of innocent lives, maybe billions." She looked around the table. "The harsh reality is that this is a war. I accepted that a long time ago, and you can't fight a war without people getting hurt.

"I might die in this next battle, and I'll be with the vanguard. None of that matters as long as we take out that data. I don't plan to die, but I can't guarantee I won't, and I won't insult anyone in this room by pretending I can make you that promise. The only promise I can offer is I'll do my best to my dying breath to make sure that none of those sacrifices were in vain."

Mausser smiled. "You left the navy, but the navy's still in you. Ortiz was proud to help you, and my crew is dedicated to this mission. We're not quitting now, not when the enemy's still out there."

Cailan drew a deep breath. "Quitting now would mean Adria and everyone else died for nothing."

"I won't become a refugee again," Erden insisted. "I'll fight whatever monsters to make sure that happens."

Ghalla folded her arms. “When this is all over, I’m going to use my involvement in this to bolster my position with the KCAP government.” She smirked at Mia. “I’ll be more powerful than ever. Just so you know. You won’t be able to dismiss me as a criminal when I played a key role in saving the KCAP.”

Mia shrugged. “Whatever gets your forces to stay involved.”

Breen had called it a dragon-slaying alliance. She didn’t want to invoke anything associated with him. The cruelest fate she could think of was killing him and writing him out of the event’s history.

“Remember what we’re here for. This is about our freedom, and that’s what this is, Operation Future Freedom. I’m sure you’re tired of letting the Protocol push fear through the galaxy. It’s our turn to make them afraid!”

An upright, walking Jon wrapped in the exoskeleton-like harness greeted Mia when she entered the infirmary. When Ito mentioned the harness, Mia had assumed it’d take weeks rather than be something she whipped up on the fleet’s way to Icarus’ last stronghold.

Jon’s jerky walk almost sent him to the deck. He caught himself and slowly turned his head toward Mia. “Too bad you had to see that. I was doing so good until you came in.”

“Should you be working on that without Ito around?” Mia asked. “I understand why you’re eager, but something could go wrong.”

“She has more important things to do than babysit me in this thing all day.” Jon grunted and walked across the room. Sweat poured down his face.

“It’s not like I want someone watching me when I’m trying to get used to this thing. She told me it was fine. She can calibrate it based on the data from my practice. If something

goes wrong, Debbie II can override the interface system and call for help.”

Mia patted the side of the bed. “You don’t have to push it. Nobody expects you to recover quickly from that injury.”

Jon toddled over to the bed and sat with visible relief. “I’m determined to work out the kinks so I can at least help with the SHKs.”

“It’d be great if you could, but the plan doesn’t strictly require them. Don’t worry about it. This might be the only mission since my flight teamed up with Raynier where the success doesn’t depend only on my crew.”

Jon clenched his jaw. “I want to help on the mission. I *need* to help on the mission. I need to keep busy.”

Mia put her hand on his shoulder. “I understand where you’re coming from. If you’re up to it, I’ll gladly take your help. I also don’t want you hurting yourself more over this. You’ve already played a key role in this mission by saving the alliance leadership.”

“I want to. I need to help end the people who are responsible for my father’s death. We were happy together. Then they came back and took him. Even after I found him again, they destroyed him.”

Mia nodded. “I understand what you’re feeling. I left home because I needed to know the truth about my father. More importantly, I needed to do something about it. We’re the same that way. We both can’t sit around just thinking.” She smiled. “It’s the same reason you were so obsessed with those SHKs.”

“What if I can’t fight when the time comes?” Jon’s eyes filled with pain.

“Then you can’t fight.” Mia shrugged. “Soldiers get hurt in battle. When that happens, it’s up to the rest of the unit to cover for them. That’s what it means to have comrades in arms. I promise you we’ll punish the Protocol.”

“I just want to live up to his expectations,” Jon whispered.

“This mission wasn’t part of his expectations. He never wanted you to be a soldier. He fled from all that. He just wanted you to be happy. The best way you can live up to his expectations is by living a long and happy life. That’ll ensure his sacrifice wasn’t in vain.”

“Don’t you think your father would have wanted that for you?”

Mia shrugged. “I wasn’t raised the same way. My father raised me to be a soldier. I have a hard time thinking he’d be surprised that my solution to his suspicious death was to approach it as a soldier.”

She’d never seriously entertained the notion that her father would have wanted her not to investigate the Protocol. Setting aside that they’d killed him, he’d spent years drilling skills and tactics into her. There had to be a reason for that.

Had he been raising her as a weapon against the Protocol?

Mia would never know for certain. Her father had loved her. She knew that, and whatever his final plans, the only way she could repay his love was by destroying the people responsible for his death.

“Do you resent your father for raising you the way he did?” Jon asked.

“Why do you ask that?”

“There was a look in your eye just now. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“You’re getting good at reading me.” Mia smiled. “He was trying his best. He had his limits, but everything he did only made me stronger. If it weren’t for all that training, I wouldn’t have been able to pursue the Protocol. Given what happened with you, it was only a matter of time before they found out about it and came for me.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Yes.” Mia looked away. “Every day. He’s never far from my thoughts.”

She sighed. “I know it’s hard for most people to understand the strange way I was raised, but he was my dad, and I loved him. I only wish I had more time with him. He was gone so often on missions that it’s like we had half a life together.” She faced Jon. “Do you wonder if there are more like us out there? Second gens?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought much about it.” Jon cupped his chin. “My instinct is to say no, but there are a lot of Reapers. Is it possible that the only ones who got the idea to have kids and pulled it off were our dads?” He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“I doubt it myself,” Mia admitted. “I believed there might be up until we recovered those files. Debbie II found brief references to our families in them, including watch notices for you before your capture. There are some comments about looking for others like us, but no evidence they’re watching anyone else.”

“That makes us special.” Jon smiled. “I don’t know if that’s a bad thing. I like the idea of being special. Don’t you like being special?”

“It’s just we have so much in common. We have similar backgrounds, and our fathers gave their lives in the fight against the Protocol. I suppose that’s why I feel so close to you even though we haven’t known each other that long.” She shrugged. “Maybe that’s crazy. I don’t know.”

“You feel close to me?” Jon smiled.

“Yes. I feel almost closer to you than anyone on this ship, and I’ve known you the shortest time.”

Jon’s smile turned into a grin. “Is that why you beat the shit out of me to stop me from leaving? Because you couldn’t bear seeing me leave?”

“Sure, but in a strange way.” Mia laughed. “I beat the shit out of you because you needed it at the time.” She caressed his hand. “I’m sorry for everything that’s happened. I’d understand if you regret meeting me. Death and destruction follow me, and it’s not like I can pretend it’s not my fault.”

Jon shook his head. “I could never feel that way about you. You saved me. If you hadn’t found me, I would have been warped into enslavement to the Protocol like my father, and even after you found me, you didn’t have to keep looking after me.”

He squeezed her hand, his pressure control uneven with the harness. “I’ve been an asshole from the beginning. I made things harder for you and you took care of me anyway. It would have made sense for you to toss me out.”

“Of course, I’m going to take care of someone I care so much about, even if they’re being an idiot.” Mia blinked and jerked her hand away. Her heart thundered. “I just remembered something I needed to take care of,” she lied. “I’ll see you later.”

Jon looked disappointed. “Okay.” He managed a stiff wave. “I’ll keep practicing with this thing. I’d love to talk to you again soon, whenever. I know you’re busy with the final preparations.”

“We’ll have plenty of time to talk once this is over.”

Mia hurried out of the infirmary hoping her feelings didn’t show despite her burning face. She didn’t know how to handle them. She couldn’t deny that there’d been attraction between her and Jon for a while, but it’d been easy to push aside and ignore with the mission always there.

A pure physical attraction between second-generation supersoldiers might have been a byproduct of their genetic enhancements. It wasn’t like Cadmus and the Protocol put much thought into their supersoldiers having families and raising children. Maybe Icaryus thought the technical difficulties involved with stable procreation between a Cadmus product and a normal human would preclude it from ever being a problem.

Parents always found a way. Her mother and father proved that. Love pushed them to overcome everything to have a child together.

They could have been happy together. She could have lived a life surrounded by a caring mother and father.

The Protocol took them both from her. Her parents' murders stopped Mia from being whole. There was only one way to repay the Protocol for their actions.

When that revenge was out of the way, she had a chance to think about something other than her hatred. A future with someone who cared for her wasn't out of the question. Her parents had their issues, but that was also because of the influence of the Protocol in their lives.

Things would be difficult after they destroyed Icaryus. There would be no threat to tear apart Mia's future.

Why did accepting that she had feelings for Jon feel so uncomfortable?

Her final revenge and the destruction of the Protocol loomed before her. Was it so wrong to think about the future?

"I should have spent more time studying psychology and less time studying ways to kill people."

Mia was finishing a run on a treadmill in the gym when Charlie entered. She nodded at him, sprinted her final minute, and hopped off the treadmill.

"This place is too small for both of us to go full tilt." She wiped the sweat off her face.

"I've wanted to talk to you." Charlie closed the door. "This is as good a time as any."

She frowned. She didn't like his serious expression. "Talk to me about what?"

"I overheard you with Jon earlier." Charlie shrugged.

Mia winced. Charlie's superior senses made things difficult. She'd had the same trouble trying not to eavesdrop

on people. For all she knew, Charlie had picked up on her and Jon's growing attraction long ago.

She felt close to Charlie but in a different way. He'd become like an older brother to her. While she always assumed he felt the same way, maybe she'd been wrong. Her expertise in romantic matters was about as advanced as her expertise in dancing. The last thing she needed before the big mission was dealing with a jealous man.

"What about us?" Mia probed.

"It's obvious you should be together, and it's obvious you have feelings for one another."

"I..." Mia shrugged. She didn't want to lie and claim she didn't. She also didn't know where the conversation was going. "Yes, we do. I don't know what that means after this is all over. The mission comes first."

"I'm glad you have someone." Charlie smiled. His bestial features always gave the expression a sinister, predatory air. "I've supported you this whole time, but we both knew the battle would end someday with us standing over the corpse of our enemy. Having someone like that is a good reason to live after revenge. You needed one."

"I don't know if I have someone." Mia frowned.

"You do. I know what it's like not to have a reason to live anymore. In a sense, I did die. I let the beast control me for decades and let the man die until you brought him back to life."

Charlie gestured at her. "I saw the same emptiness in your eyes when we first met. You didn't have a reason to live. You only had a reason to hunt and kill. Now you have a reason to live."

He wasn't wrong. Ever since her father had died, her mission had been all-consuming. She'd made friends along the way, but she'd never chosen to waver from her path of bloody vengeance. Now that the end was so near, it left her uneasy and vulnerable to emotions she'd suppressed.

“Are you sure that’s what I should be living for? I’m not sure.”

Charlie shook his head. “Seeing the two of you around each other, it’s obvious that you want to be together. Don’t try to overcomplicate it. Not every situation can be conquered by training and preparation. Some things, like love, have to be experienced.”

Mia sighed. “You’re right, but what about you? Do you have someone? I took you away from Ice and recruited you into my mission.”

“I have someone, but not in the same way. I have you to protect and Icaryus to hate.”

“How is that different than what you accused me of?”

“He’ll be dead soon, but you won’t. I’ll always be there to protect you.”

“What if I don’t need your protection anymore?”

Charlie shrugged. His calm expression didn’t change. “That would be the end of me, if not in body, then in spirit.”

She frowned. “You told me I needed a reason to live. I don’t understand why that doesn’t apply to you. You need something more to live for than my sake. I’ve dragged you along on this mission, and I love you like a brother, but that doesn’t mean you have to live as my tool until you die.”

“It’s not that.” He smiled again, this time the warmth coming more naturally. “For a long time, hating Icaryus was the only thing keeping me alive. When you came into my life you gave me something positive to care about. That was already more than I ever thought possible.

“It’s like I told you. I was dead already, and you brought me back to life. What I’m living now is nothing more than a borrowed life.”

“Your life shouldn’t revolve around me. You’re making it sound like you’d welcome death.”

“I would.”

“How can you say that?”

“On some level, simply because it feels like the ultimate way to defy Icaryus’ perverse designs.” Charlie’s smile disappeared into a fierce scowl, and he growled. “He who would be my father wanted me to be part of the stepping stone to immortality. That I’m ready to die is the best way to thwart his poisoned legacy.”

“You don’t have to die to deny him anything.” Mia glared at Charlie. “Don’t throw away your life to spite that bastard. We’re going to destroy his legacy and end him.”

“I’ve lived more than I deserve.” Charlie turned toward the door. “I won’t live longer than necessary. There’s nothing more human than that.”

Mia tried to come up with another argument. She didn’t manage anything else before Charlie left. She didn’t like what she’d heard. It was too much like Jon Senior’s last words. She was tired of Icaryus’ manipulations destroying good men.

“Don’t throw your life away, Charlie,” Mia whispered. “Not because of that monster. You need to live and be happy. That’s the best revenge.”

She slapped her cheeks. It was time to focus. Tomorrow, they’d hit the Protocol’s last fortress. Everyone needed to survive that before she could worry about the future.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mia flew her fighter in a tight formation with her flight positioned in front of the *Erinyes* and the alliance fleet arrayed behind her ship. The alliance assumed Icaryus knew they were coming because of Breen's betrayal and the ambush's failure to inflict major damage. Trickle in faction by faction would get them killed. They needed to slide in simultaneously, hit hard, and reach the surface to initiate the plan.

"Preparing for final slide in five, four, three, two, one," she counted, her voice being carried to every ship and fighter in the fleet.

Bright walls of white windows ripped open space, including in front of Mia. She pushed forward into the *Erinyes*' envelope, trying to will her heart to slow. This was it, the final battle.

Their short-range slide was over in seconds. Mia's flight and the *Erinyes* emerged from side-space along with the remaining vessels of the alliance, an impressive show of force that should intimidate the enemy.

Icaryus wouldn't surrender. His other servants and guards were a different issue.

Mia's smile vanished as her sensors lit up with new contacts. "No, no, no!"

She'd expected a fleet ready to fight and hoped for a half-assed garrison prepared to surrender. Instead, an armada stood before them, including battleships, heavy carriers, heavy

cruisers, and what could only be classified as a swarm of fighters.

“Is this for real?” Paul transmitted. “The Bleakers would need a bunch of Beacons to break through this!”

“Keep the chatter down,” Mia barked, glad he was only keyed into her flight and the *Erinyes*. “It’s only ships. We’ve fought plenty of ships.”

She concentrated on the mission dynamics. She hadn’t promised zero casualties. The destruction of Icarus and the Protocol’s data was too important. The only good thing she could come up with about the situation was that the presence of the massive fleet proved Icarus hadn’t run. Otherwise, he would have abandoned the base.

“This is madness,” Ghallia observed. Being snug in her cruiser wouldn’t save her against a capital ship armada. “Throwing ourselves into a battle we can’t win is pointless. I didn’t come here to die a noble death. I came here to destroy the men and women who’d dare to control me.”

The armada stayed in position. That worked for the alliance fleet, but combined with the ambush fleet’s focus on the mining ships, it suggested the enemy understood the broad outline of the operational plan. This would make it harder to pull off a feint that would open the surface to bombardment.

Unlike Paul, Ghallia was on the primary command frequency. She risked inciting panic among the other leaders.

“We don’t have to win the space battle,” Mia insisted. “All we need to do is get our ground teams through and the mining ships close enough to crack open the mountain.”

Ghallia laughed. “Captain Mausser, in your professional opinion, is that even possible?”

“Unlikely,” he replied, his voice quiet over comms in stark contrast to his normal demeanor. “We’re going to need a solid period where they can dig into the mountain. They’re big, easy targets. The cap ships will light them up, and we don’t have the forces to keep that armada off them long enough, even if we were willing to sacrifice the entire fleet.”

Mia ground her teeth. There had to be a way. There was always a way.

“We’ve come too far to quit,” Mia insisted.

“They aren’t attacking,” Ghallia noted. “They’re giving us a chance to run away. I suggest we take it.”

“We leave now, then it’s all over. They’ll relocate the databanks. We’ll lose our chance.”

“You said you weren’t going to lead us into a suicide mission,” Erden reminded her. “You heard what the captain said. We can’t get past that fleet even if the rest of the ships sacrifice themselves. This has become a suicide mission.”

“I’m going forward, no matter what,” Mia replied. “I know it looks bad, and the odds are stacked against us, but this is the only chance we have. You can run now, but it won’t do any good. The Protocol will escape, and they’ll come for you before they’re destroyed. At least this way, there’s a chance, however small, that we can win. Fight now and die, or fight later and die. At least here, we can make our deaths mean something.”

Her comms remained quiet over her agonizing wait. The enemy fleet still hadn’t advanced.

“I’m with you,” Paul transmitted.

“Me, too,” Karin added.

“Until the end,” Ryoko insisted.

Ito chuckled. “I’ve got nothing better to do. I know Jon and Charlie feel the same way.”

Mia smiled. At least she could die with her friends. The least they could do was try to take down a ship with them.

Her command frequencies remained frustratingly quiet. The rest of the fleet weren’t her friends. They wouldn’t die out of loyalty to her.

Ghallia broke the command silence with a raucous laugh.

Mia held her breath.

“Your insanity is infectious,” Ghallia added. “I should have known that from your work on the Gate. Now your insanity has spread to me.”

“The *Alexandria* is with you,” Mausser declared. “We won’t betray the KCAP by allowing the Protocol’s masters to live.”

“The consortium isn’t running,” Cailan added.

Go codes from different mercenary units filled Mia’s HUD. No one opened a side-space envelope. Everyone was ready to fight.

“Thank you all,” Mia transmitted. “Today, many of us will die, but none of us will die in vain.”

A great many side-space envelopes opened between Mia’s fleet and the Protocol armada. Navy ships poured out, corvettes, destroyers, frigates, cruisers, heavy cruisers, battleships, and heavy carriers. Another armada.

“No!” Mia stared at her sensors, refusing to believe what she was seeing. “Debbie II, can you confirm this isn’t a trick? This must be some type of sensor spoofing.”

She kept her eyes down to ignore the bright lights in the distance marking the envelopes. It was the only way she could maintain her hope.

“Side-space envelope openings confirmed independently,” Debbie II reported. “I cross-checked using the sensors from all four fighters and the *Erinyes*. Unless the Protocol has invented an advanced new technology, a new enemy fleet has arrived.”

The alliance couldn’t win. Despite her big speech, she hadn’t been planning a suicide charge. She planned to seize victory from the tiniest opening.

Mia growled at the transponder code accompanying a vid-comm hail from one of the new heavy carriers. It was the *Centurion*, the same carrier she’d trained on during Top Gun and where her mother had died. The Protocol was mocking her now.

The carrier broadcasted a general vid-comm transmission. They wanted to reach the entire alliance fleet.

Mia gasped as her feed lit up. The appearance of the second armada was bad enough, but she'd never expected to see a dead woman, Wing Commander Sula.

"This is Wing Commander Sula representing a loyalist fleet of the KCAP Navy," she declared. "This volunteer fleet is under my command. Attention, Protocol garrison forces, you are supporting traitors and murderers. You will immediately stand down, or you will be considered enemies of the KCAP and destroyed. There will be no negotiations. Sula out."

The Protocol armada hadn't reacted to the appearance of Mia's fleet. They now shifted, with their ships forming into battle ranks and fighters into attack squadrons. The bulk of the garrison fleet arrayed itself to face Sula's fleet.

"That works," Mia declared. She hailed the *Centurion*. "This is Mia Verick. I'm in command of this anti-Protocol alliance fleet. It's good to see you, Wing Commander."

"It's been a long time, former Lieutenant Verick," Sula transmitted directly to Mia. "It's good to see you, too."

"I heard you were dead. Now you're here reinforcing me. I didn't realize my vid reached the afterlife."

Sula chuckled. "It's harder than you'd think to fake your own death, but it was necessary. You and your friends had it easy cutting and running, hiding in the Fringe. I remembered the little speech you gave before you left and how you challenged us to do the right thing. We're not here to catch up."

Her smile turned predatory. "Attention fleet, I have received direct confirmation of their intent to resist and confirmation the other fleet is a loyalist fleet under the command of Mia Verick. Prepare to engage the Protocol armada. We're taking our confederacy back from these monsters."

The loyalist ships turned toward the planetary fleet and slipped into their ship and fighter formations. Mia accelerated

in a gentle increase rather than a hard-burning charge. The alliance fleet matched her movement.

Quick pulsed transponder codes flowed over Mia's HUD, people pinging her without full hails, familiar names including McCullough, Sidorov, and Chen, all fellow pilots in her Top Gun class.

"How?" Mia tried to hold back tears of joy. "Did someone call the reinforcements?" she transmitted.

"Yes," Captain Mausser replied. "I had a few back channels left. It was a risk, but I sent word to those back channels after the ambush. I didn't bring it up with the rest of the alliance because I didn't want them to back out, worried about another ambush. I'm as surprised as you, Verick. I didn't know Sula was still alive."

"I'd been quietly recruiting for my strike," Sula explained. "I only needed to know where to hit to make it effective. At the same time, Mausser whipped up a frenzy among many of the Top Gun graduates. Several of them convinced their commanding officers to join the reinforcement fleet. We might not have half this fleet without them convincing their COs and XOs."

"I never liked you, Verick," Sidorov transmitted, disdain thick in his voice. "You thought I was a sore loser at Top Gun, but you were cheating. Your vid proved it. I didn't have genetic enhancement. That doesn't matter now because I'm going to show you up by taking out more Protocol enemies than you."

Mia laughed. "I'd love for all of you to outperform me."

McCullough spoke next. "I punched out my CO to get him to go. They stuck me in the brig, then the XO stuck the CO in the brig and pulled me out. I didn't join the navy to do the bidding of monsters who treat people worse than animals."

"Everything's chaotic now in the KCAP," Sula added. "The only thing we can all agree on is the Protocol is the reason, and if the finest pilot in all of Top Gun history is leading the charge, how can we not follow her?"

Mia grinned. “Alliance fleet, join up with the reinforcements. It’s time to rip out the heart of those Protocol bastards.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Alliance, keep the transports and shuttles behind the front lines until we have a secured landing channel,” Mia ordered. “Navy fleet, please reinforce the mining ship security. We need them, or the enemy commanders will escape, and we’ll have to repeat this entire fun trip in a couple of years.”

The sensor readout stunned Mia. She was used to thinking in terms of fighters and flights, squadrons at the most, not flotillas and battle groups forming armadas. Even her most complicated training scenarios at Top Gun only assumed a modest amount of warship support.

A deep truth struck her soul. She thought she understood war. After countless battles, she was a seasoned veteran who understood what it was to put her life on the line.

The last part was true, not the former. She’d trained in the navy and became a privateer. Except for the Bleaker Beacon encounter, her missions had been modest in scope and range. She understood battle, but she hadn’t experienced true war.

Mia drew a deep breath. To her surprise, her heart beat in a steady, calm rhythm. Icaryus waited on the planet, the final target of a revenge mission that had taken her from her home planet of Kordell.

“This is it, Dad,” she whispered. “You put me on the path with your training. Abigail, the navy, and experience gave me the rest. I’m going to use it all today to take down the bastards who killed you. This ends, no matter what.”

The *Centurion* shifted toward the front of the battleship vanguard, flanked by escort destroyers and frigates. Fighter squadron after squadron poured out of the ships from both sides. No matter who won today, many pilots would die.

“Ito, stay with the mining ships,” Mia ordered. “I want to fight with some old friends and rivals. Nothing wrong with showing off when we all have the same goal.”

“Roger,” Ito replied.

“You’re not leaving us behind, are you?” Paul asked. “I’d like to show up those guys myself. I bet you we have more real-world experience by now.”

“Fall in, flight,” Mia encouraged. “Paul’s right. I think it’s time to show Sidorov and McCullough that the sword and shield still works.”

“Roger!” her flight shouted.

Ryoko, Paul, and Karin deserved this victory as much as Mia. She’d given herself over to revenge because she had nothing left to lose. Her flight had to leave behind their friends and family. Defeating the Protocol would mean she could keep the promise she made to herself long ago that she would get them back home.

The *Eden*, *Amel*, and *Alexandria* pushed hard to join the *Centurion’s* carrier group. Mia laughed at the sight of Natalie Ghallia up front. The woman must have realized they had a strong chance of victory and wanted to ensure she was at the front and could claim glory.

Wealth, power, influence, glory, honor, revenge, Mia didn’t care why anyone was fighting, only that they would give it their all. Battles didn’t care about a warrior’s reasons. They only responded to skill and power.

The mercenary forces formed into a tight formation on the far flank of the navy fleet. They were protecting the mining ships. Navy destroyers and corvettes broke away from their flotillas to supplement the mining defense flotilla. Mia led her flight to join the *Centurion*.

Their repositioning completed, both fleets picked up speed and powered their shields. Only minutes separated them from one of the largest fleet battles in recent decades. It wasn't often that someone could say they knew they were participating in a historic event.

"I just want to say that I appreciate you coming and staying with me this entire time," Mia transmitted to her flight. "It's been an honor to fight beside you."

"The honor's all mine," Karin replied.

"You've made me a better pilot and person," Ryoko added.

"I had nothing better to do," Paul joked. "You better not let yourself get taken out, Mia. It'd be embarrassing if you died and I survived."

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to have to deal with anything embarrassing," Mia replied. "Okay, ready up, flight. We'll be in engagement distance soon. We've flown together for years. You all know what you need to do."

"Roger!"

The two walls of ships and fighters barreled toward one another. They lacked the hypnotic flow of the Beacon drones. This would be a good, old-fashioned human-on-human slugfest. Although this would end with Icaryus' death, there was no guarantee losing any one ship would end this.

Mia armed two missiles. "Once we crack open the mountain, you should patrol the area to ensure no one cancels our departure."

"I'd love to say I want to go in there with you," Paul transmitted. "Charlie will be worth way more than I would. I'd end up tripping over myself."

Paul reminded her of Jon's haunting complaints. It was a cruel fate that wouldn't let him help in the final battle after his father's sacrifice.

"I wouldn't have wanted to go down there even with Charlie," Karin admitted. "This is the last Protocol base, right? There must be awful things."

“There will be,” Mia admitted. “We’re going to kill them all. Now, enough with the emotions and jokes. Focus. If any of you get yourself killed, I’ll find a way to bring you back to life and kill you myself.”

“Roger!”

Her calm façade vanished. Her heart thundered. She and her friends could all survive the battle, or they might all die in the first few minutes. Battles of this scale offered few guarantees, regardless of training. There were too many variables.

The opening barrages of particle beams and plasma cannon fire allowed nothing less than awe. The joint fleet landed the first blow, attacking seconds before the enemy. Thousands of years of human ingenuity manifested in powerful energy beams tearing through armored and shielded ships like they were gossamer strands.

Two escort destroyers near the *Centurion* earned the dark honor of being the first allied casualties. The faster beams knocked out their shields, setting them up for the plasma blasts that blew them apart.

The *Centurion* took a glancing port hit from twin particle beams. A fast turn after initial shield failure saved it from the same fate as the escort destroyers.

Curtains of missiles streamed in both directions. Decoys and turret fire flooded space. Constant flashes marked explosions that resembled twinkling stars.

Mia cycled between her sensor readouts. She couldn’t control a battle of this magnitude. That didn’t mean she didn’t plan to react if their strategy fell apart. She’d gathered the intel and half the fleet. She had a responsibility that went beyond fighting in the battle.

“Almost there,” she murmured.

With the initial main weapons test exchanges over, friendly and enemy flotillas changed directions and abandoned their direct charges to earn superior firing angles. The fighter

swarms reached engagement distance and filled space with another missile cloud.

Turret blasts flew everywhere. Mia resisted the urge to use hyper-focus. She'd save her best weapon until she had no other choice. This was the first part of a two-part engagement. She needed to be careful.

An enemy squadron found a hole in the turret line to dive toward the *Centurion*. The carrier's decoys and turrets only stopped half the incoming missiles. The coordinated blasts tore down the shields protecting that part of the ship.

"Sword and shield!" Mia barked. She wouldn't let Wing Commander Sula come this far only to die right away.

Ryoko, Karin, and Paul surrounded Mia's fighter. They laid down suppressive cannon fire as she twisted and spun her fighter, seeking any vulnerable spot on the approaching enemies. She doubted they'd ever seen anything like the formation before.

Mia blasted through the enemy squadron's front fighter. She'd blown away two more fighters before the rest of the squadron broke formation.

That was all she needed. Her delay allowed two friendly flights to box in the fighters and shred them without mercy. Mia smiled when she recognized the ID codes from some of the fighters.

"I'm just getting started," Sidorov transmitted.

"So am I."

"By the time this is over, I will have personally taken down a battleship."

"You do that, I'll buy you a drink. If you take down a battleship, I'll take down two."

"You realize we're not in the program anymore, right, Mia?" Paul asked. "You don't have to prove you're better than everyone else."

"Not being in training is a poor reason not to do our best."

Sidorov nailed another fighter and laughed. “When she’s right, she’s right.”

A sweeping arc of cannon fire sent an enemy flight spiraling toward the *Centurion*, easy prey for turrets. Missiles streamed toward the formation and incinerated two nearby wingmen, a cruel reminder that no one’s survival was guaranteed.

Barrages from Mia’s flight joined with the carrier’s turret to make short work of an aggressive squadron trying for a high-speed strafing pass. Mia had already lost count of how many fighters had been destroyed near the *Centurion* alone.

She had Debbie II relay command and control information to a display. However, she depended on everyone in the alliance fleet knowing their basic jobs and executing them without too many orders. The mercenaries and privateers forming the bulk of the forces Mia brought were all skilled individuals. That didn’t mean they were good at taking orders from people they didn’t know well.

The enemy fleet had broken into six major groups to push through the alliance fleet. Unlike at the station, they hadn’t thrown all their attention toward the mining ships. Their initial linear deployment had given way to larger, dense flotillas with overlapping engagement zones.

From what Mia could see, they weren’t maximizing their fields of fire. The formations provided better protection against fighters than warships. This provided openings for skilled commanders.

While the alliance fleet was filled with irregulars looking for the nearest enemy and not caring about much else, the loyalist navy fleet relied on smaller, more mobile flotilla elements. They weren’t bringing as much firepower to bear on any one target, but the constant harassment and raking of the enemy’s heavy ships kept them from bashing through the friendly lines. The Protocol couldn’t maintain its current strategy long without lopsided losses.

“Mia,” Debbie II greeted, her comms message static-filled. “I’d be chuffed if you could offer reinforcements near the

mining ships.”

Ito must have been busy trying to stay alive to leave the comms to Debbie II. An explosion of a mercenary destroyer highlighted her message. To Mia’s surprise, enemy warships were sparser in that area. Instead, they were relying on fighters to break through the defensive blockade.

“Sitrep,” Mia ordered.

Debbie II wouldn’t have contacted her without a good reason, but the sensors and relayed C&C data didn’t support the need for reinforcements. The forces forming the defensive line could handle that number of fighters.

“The pilots here are demonstrating unusual ability,” Debbie II reported. “Initial losses aren’t so bad, but analysis suggests a cascade effect.”

“*Centurion*,” Mia transmitted. “We have likely Reaper pilots near the mining vessels. I’m heading there and requesting reinforcements.”

“Lead the way,” Sula replied. “We have squadrons filled with Top Gun graduates who’d love to have a showdown with Reapers.”

“We’ll back you up, too,” Mausser offered.

“Thank you,” Mia answered. “We need to keep those ships intact no matter what.”

Mia spun her fighter and put full power into the engines. Her flight and the trailing squadrons wove and juked through the explosions and turret fire everywhere. A chance particle beam cut through a fighter on its way to bisect a corvette.

The close explosion rattled Mia’s fighter. She grimaced, trying not to think about the lost crew.

The *Alexandria* came about, turrets pounding away at the aggressive Protocol fighters. Mausser’s crew let loose with another missile salvo into an enemy cruiser. The target exploded as the frigate finished the turn, highlighting the ship.

Zooming across the battlespace reminded Mia of navigating the mortistellar cloud. Enemy fire, the ships

themselves, and the debris from the damaged and destroyed threatened a fatal collision for any pilot not good enough. Hyper-focus tempted her again until she realized no one else needed it to avoid crashing.

The galaxy's unluckiest Protocol pilot flew in front of Mia. She sheared off his main engines with a cannon burst before passing him. Her flight didn't bother to finish the fighter barreling out of control. A battleship turret put him out of his misery.

"Keeping up, Sidorov?" Mia transmitted. "You want to impress me? Make sure no one touches those mining ships."

"This is where I earn my battleship kill," he replied.

"I'll believe it when I see it."

Mia and the reinforcements made it to their destination in time to witness a squadron of enemy fighters filleting a privateer destroyer. The ship's explosion opened a path to one of the mining vessels. The fighters swooped around the spreading remains of the destroyer to make a pass on the mining vessels.

The *Alexandria* launched a salvo at the squadron. Mia's flight, surrounded by the Top Gun elite pilots, took the chance to charge the enemy squadron when it broke formation to avoid the missiles. Their cannons flashed.

"Breaking sword and shield for single coverage," Mia told her flight. "Don't be a hero. Call if you need help."

"Roger!" her flight replied.

Mia banked and accelerated toward an enemy fighter. He spun toward her and fired with impressive speed. Her spin saved her from taking a hit but threw off her aim when she returned fire.

She tried to circle him. He cut across toward her and took another shot. Her abrupt dive left her stomach complaining but stopped the cannon fire from nailing her cockpit.

The pilot was good, very good. It'd been a long time since she'd flown against someone with those reflexes.

Paul, Karin, and Ryoko opted for a less aggressive charge. The first two danced with their enemy partners with quick bursts of lateral thrusters and pivots in an attempt to land one solid shot.

Ryoko took advantage of the busy melee to keep her distance and snipe at her enemy. Her opponent tried to charge her, only for her to fall back behind a curtain of turret fire before pushing her fighter in a wide arc to come around for another pass.

A battered mercenary corvette missing half its engines collided with a Protocol destroyer who'd gotten too close. The explosion nailed several nearby ships with debris, including an alliance transport.

Mia's jaw tightened. They'd opted for shuttle entry for most of the troops, but not everyone had left their transports yet. A burst of cannon fire from her battle partner refocused her. She didn't have time to worry about anyone else while fighting a Reaper pilot.

Both sides' fighters descended on the wounded ships like vultures, slicing and tearing through them with their cannons. Another set of explosions added to the already dangerous level of debris in the area.

Mia ignored the warships to concentrate on her opponent. The enemy pilot moved the fighter like an extension of his body. Minute thruster adjustments, tight turns, and pivots threw off Mia's aim without the pilot losing control. She'd not seen anyone fly like that since Raynier. Whenever she tried to line up a shot, he changed direction as if he could read her mind before moving.

The Reaper turned and flared his thrusters, an attempt at abrupt deceleration. Mia mirrored his move before he fell behind her. That left his fighter so close she could have hit him with her pistol.

Mia raked the enemy fighter with cannon fire and tore it apart. She tried to sidestep the debris cloud with her lateral thrusters only to have chunks gouge her hull and tear off the thrusters.

She slapped her control panel, killing the damage alerts. Her fingers flew over the power allotment submenus until she balanced out the remaining thruster power.

Friendly fighter losses mounted. Mia and everyone else had underestimated how effective a skilled group of pilots could be, even in a large fleet action.

Mia baited her next target with a missile launch. She'd already taken into account two nearby warships. Her cannon was waiting when the fighter broke in the direction she anticipated. He avoided dying immediately, but her shot took a chunk out of him and sent him out of control for a second. Her next shot finished him.

Sidorov and McCullough appeared less interested in duels. Together, they chased an elusive Reaper pilot who'd demonstrated the same agility as Mia's target. He kept popping shots off at them, only missing because of the pressure of taking on two fighters at once. The measured return fire herded him into the *Alexandria's* turrets, which tore him apart.

After checking her sensors, Mia banked toward the closest member of her flight, Ryoko. She laid down suppressive fire against Ryoko's target, less interested in hitting him than forcing him into a narrower flight channel for her friend. It didn't take long before Ryoko clipped his cockpit. Out of control, the fighter pitched end over end until a Protocol destroyer vaporized it to avoid a collision.

Mia and Ryoko moved to join Paul and Karin. They'd both taken hits but maintained the upper hand in their battles. Ryoko matched Mia's strategy of laying down cover fire. They grazed the enemy fighters, allowing Paul and Karin to line up behind them and finish them.

The last few minutes had altered the local tactical situation. The joint alliance reinforcements had taken lopsided losses, but they'd thinned the number of Reapers.

Mia had no idea how many pilots were Reapers. The recovered intel didn't include a detailed accounting of enemy forces. She suspected the bulk of the Reapers were deployed in

the fortress where their physical capabilities would be a stronger force multiplier. Advanced reflexes and mental processing could only do so much when there was nothing but weapons fire and missiles everywhere.

A Protocol flotilla had broken through the joint alliance fleet line on the opposite side of the battlespace. Allied ships were coming about to avoid the encirclement. Concentrated enemy fire tore into them. Navy destroyers, frigates, and cruisers perished in the bombardment.

Her teeth clenched, Mia resisted the urge to be a hero. She focused on her primary mission of ensuring the mining ships opened the mountain. Protected by the alliance fleet and the Reaper push halted, the mining fleet had pushed closer to the planet. They were almost in range.

“Alliance fleet,” Mia transmitted. “Get your landing shuttles loaded and ready. We’ll be launching as the mining ships open the mountain. No reason to give the enemy ground forces extra time to rally. I could use a couple of squadrons to defend the landing teams.”

“Don’t worry,” Sula replied. “The pilots I loaned you will stay with you.”

Two battleships exchanged fire in the center of the battleline, surrounded by the mangled wrecks of smaller vessels and a thick cloud of fighter remnants. The blinding beams of their main weapons tore through space and carved through any unfortunate fighter not smart enough to get out of the way.

Withering volleys from a group of destroyers carved a loyalist carrier apart. Fighters, shuttles, and escape pods fled the carrier, but the shockwave from the ship’s explosion swallowed them.

There was no war without casualties. Mia had told herself that countless times. She’d told the alliance that too, but every disappearing friendly on her sensors stabbed her in the heart. So many lives were ending with each vanishing contact.

“Keep supporting the *Alexandria*,” Mia ordered her flight before dropping out of her formation.

She dove toward a wounded enemy destroyer that had finished vaporizing an approaching flight with brutal overlapping turret work. The destroyer opened fire on Mia. She spun her fighter to dodge the incoming fire and released a missile.

Decoys shot from the destroyer and met the missile. Mia dropped her nose until she was diving toward the destroyer and pounded away at the gaping hull with her cannon. All the while, she twisted her fighter and waggled back and forth with her overloaded thrusters.

Her strafing run had dug deep into the ship’s interior, exposing decks. Half-melted emergency bulkheads tried to seal the wounds. Her dive continued until she threw all her power into her bottom thrusters at the last moment and hit the emergency release on an armed missile. The fighter leveled and skimmed the destroyer’s surface.

Mia’s armed but not launched missile tumbled into the exposed guts of the ship where no decoys could distract it. Its explosion tore off the front of the ship. She rolled away from her victim, letting the corvette’s turret vaporize what was left.

Despite taking plenty of hits, the *Centurion* maintained a web of turrets that took out any enemy fighters too arrogant to stay clear. A long, deep wound ran up the side of the *Eden*, but it continued trading fire with an enemy destroyer. The *Amel* had been forced back with large pieces of the hull missing and most of its weapons destroyed.

The *Alexandria* pelted a heavy cruiser with turret fire. Return fire killed what little of the shields remained and fragged most of the navy frigate’s turrets. A missile barrage from an allied squadron, including Ryoko, Karin, and Paul blew apart the cruiser before it could finish the *Alexandria*.

“There’s not much more you can do, Captain,” Mia transmitted.

“I’ll decide when we’re done, Verick. We’re not done yet.”

The extended back-and-forth had made a mess of anything approaching formations and battle lines. Protocol and alliance ships now fought in smaller groups, firing at anyone close. Neither side could claim to be overwhelming the other with the mounting casualties.

A friendly flight spun away from an enemy frigate in a desperate run from its turrets. They passed through a debris cloud, the remnants of a destroyed cruiser. High-speed impacts tore apart three of the fighters.

Wave after wave of battle ran together. Mia was so focused on slaying enemies that she hadn't realized how far the mining fleet had advanced toward the planet. The slugfest continued for the rest of the ships.

Packs of corvettes, destroyers, and their accompanying fighters reformed their defensive line to protect the mining ships as they settled into high orbit over the target. A deep charge by the Protocol forces left them vulnerable to alliance ships on all sides.

"Flight, return to me," Mia ordered. She headed toward the mining ships. "All shuttles should be prepped. Launch and stay on either side of the mining ships' firing line. I'm preparing to join the landing teams."

The *Erinyes* headed to join the defensive line. Mia had turned off direct ship telemetry and killed most of the secondary data feeds. She didn't have time to worry about everyone else in such a hectic battle. She had to trust in their skills.

Melted mounds of metal and jagged blackened remnants marked where turrets and launchers once defended her ship. The secondary docking bay was stuck open, not that it mattered since half the bay was missing.

"Ito, is everybody all right?" Mia transmitted. She tried to keep her voice steady as she imagined Jon or Charlie floating out in space dead.

"Jon's safe and secure, and Charlie's raring to go on the shuttle," Ito replied, the comm link weak and the heavy static

overwhelming. “We lost the SHKs when we took a particle beam to the second bay. By the way, I’ve got one thing to say about all this.”

“What’s that?”

“You better not bitch at me if it takes more than a month to fix.”

Mia laughed. “I promise I won’t. See you soon.”

“Yeah, see you soon,” Ito replied wearily. “Don’t die until I have a chance to kill you for complaining.”

A Protocol flotilla tried to end-run the mining ships’ defensive wall. Their fighters pushed forward first, scattering missiles everywhere. Warships followed up with beam and cannon attacks. Alliance ships and fighters, already weary and wounded, exploded.

Mia rejoined her flight to follow squadrons of friendly fighters already on the way to flank the enemy fighter vanguard. Most fighters on both sides were out of missiles and needed to land and reload. The fighters charged into each other, cannon fire flying in every direction.

“Sword and shield,” Mia ordered, confident in her ability to win a basic dogfight.

“Roger!” her flight shouted.

Mia became a plasma tornado, her cannon fire nailing enemy after enemy and her friends’ suppressive fire catching the few who managed to survive her initial onslaught. Her flight annihilated an enemy squadron so fast that they carved a huge gap in the enemy formation.

Alliance fighters seized the opportunity and rushed through the gap to complete their flank against the disrupted Protocol forces. Missiles and cannon fire tore into exposed warships, the payback ending with them exploding.

Mia’s sword and shield arced toward a damaged cruiser. Volleys from her flight punctuated by bursts from her cannon peeled away the fighter cover. Her flight flew away and allowed mercenary corvettes to tear open the cruiser.

“The mining fleet is in position,” Cailan reported. “Charging and calibrating lasers. Keep us covered, and we’ll do what we do best, open up rocks.”

A heavily damaged enemy battleship closed in on the mining ships. Its particle beam cut through a mercenary destroyer. The limping *Alexandria* led a makeshift flotilla of destroyers and corvettes toward the battleship while their fighters helped maintain the rest of the line.

A hard-burning destroyer closer to Mia caught her attention. Their rear turrets laid down a line of deadly fire, stopping fighters from dealing with them.

“Flight, break for the mining ships, and prepare for the surface escort,” Mia ordered. “I’ll join you soon.”

“Roger!”

Her flight fell out of the sword and shield. They burst past the defensive line to join the burgeoning group of shuttles departing the mining ships and nearby transports.

Mia lined up her fighter with the destroyer. She drew a deep breath and let hyper-focus wash over her. She’d left her greatest weapon in its sheath, worried about its overuse. No one got stronger or won without risk.

The stream of turret fire from the destroyer was nothing compared to the angry strands of the mortistellar fungus. Turret blasts didn’t change direction or grow larger. She saw the path of every shot with ease.

Mia spun her fighter and fired. The first few turret shots missed her. A counter-twist saved her from the others. Getting this far had downed the destroyer’s shields.

A side thrust threw off the aim of another turret. Mia put a burst into the destroyer and dropped her fighter toward the hull. She pivoted to rake the hull with cannon fire before stabilizing her fighter and launching her last missile at point-blank range.

She rolled away from the impact. The missile shattered the cannon-weakened hull, leaving a drifting hunk of depressurizing metal.

“I’m proud of you, Verick,” Mausser transmitted while coughing. The signal was weak. “Finish what we started. Show them what proper naval training means.”

Mia released her hyper-focus, blinking. The *Alexandria*’s hull was sliced open, exposing most interior decks. The frigate barreled toward the battleship it had been dueling earlier. Relentless turret blasts shaved off more pieces of the ship.

The attacks weren’t enough to finish off the navy frigate. The *Alexandria* barreled into the battleship. Both ships ripped apart, the collision lasting only a moment before a rippling series of secondary explosions reduced them to another debris cloud.

Mia checked her sensors to confirm the *Centurion* was still intact. The carrier had pulled back from the center of battle, although fighters streamed in and out.

She held her breath as she flew to join the descending shuttles. Half of the IFF signals from the Top Gun graduates she’d known, including Sidorov and McCullough, had vanished. The *Eden* had been forced to the rear although she wasn’t destroyed.

“Always the survivor, huh, Ghallia?” Mia murmured to herself. “Good for you.”

Her fighter barreled toward the massive, ungainly mining ships. Squadrons of shuttles had formed ranks on the far sides of the mining fleet and headed toward the planet, flanked by fighter escorts.

Bright flashes forced her to squint. Thick beams of dull light erupted from the mining ships and converged into a single beam piercing the atmosphere.

Mia pushed her throttle to maximum. Her damaged fighter rattled, and her body pressed deeply into her seat. She caught up to the back of the landing fleet. The mining lasers died.

“Long-range imaging confirms we’ve cracked that bastard open,” Cailan reported. “Good luck, ground teams.”

Mia dove into the atmosphere and zoomed past the shuttles to rejoin her flight. Gunship contacts filled her sensors. She

scoffed. The Protocol should have left fighters on the planet.

The allied squadrons burst through the clouds and rained death onto the waiting gunships. Mia walked her cannon across a row of gunships, sending them spiraling and smoking to the ground if not outright blowing them up. The atmospheric craft didn't stand a chance against the elite space fighters tearing through them.

Paul transmitted, "Damn, look at that. Icaryus knows how to pick them."

A sprawling mountain stood beneath them. The solid gray-white wall covering the bottom now featured a gargantuan smoking hole that Mia suspected could have allowed passage for a corvette.

Mia picked off another group of gunships. Fighters broke away from the gunship target practice to strafe the exposed turrets on the base. Her flight went through a few passes to slag remaining turrets.

There weren't as many gun emplacements as Mia had expected. The Protocol had overestimated how safe they'd be locked behind their armor and rock.

Shuttles descended from above and headed toward the hole. Mia circled to join them.

"We're coming, Icaryus, you son of a bitch," Mia shouted. "We're coming!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“These damned hallways are endless, and they all look the same,” Mia muttered as she jogged.

“We expected this,” Charlie replied. His shotgun bobbed with his long, loping steps.

Mia and Charlie ran with a group of miners, mercenaries, and KCAP soldiers who formed the landing team. The ease of landing and entry disturbed Mia. Alliance and navy fighters remained on patrol outside after downing all the gunships. Her ground army had rushed into the bore tunnel that led to the hivelike passages in the deep base only to find them empty.

People wondered if they were all wasting time. Discontent had swept through the army until a miner using a scanner spotted major readings deeper into the complex. The enemy hadn't abandoned the base.

They found a stairwell leading to a lower passage. A man in a blue-gray uniform ran up the stairs with his arms up. He didn't have any weapons.

“I surrender!” he shouted. “I surrender. I'm not loyal to Icarus.”

Mia gritted her teeth. They didn't have people to spare to guard anyone. The summary execution of a low-level guard didn't sit well either.

“Let him run past!” she shouted. She turned to the man. “If you have a way to get off this planet, you better do it before we finish this up because I can't guarantee you're not getting executed at the end of this.”

“Thank you.” The man sprinted away with his arms still raised.

Gunfire echoed from below. She lifted her rifle and bounded down the stairs.

“Contact,” she shouted.

Men and women in the same uniform as the earlier man exchanged gunfire with other guards wearing the same uniforms.

A guard looked at Mia. “Pull back, let the intruders—”

Bullets cut her and her partner down. Other guards ran around the corner and sprayed their guns, forcing Mia back behind the wall.

“Death to all who betray or challenge the Protocol!” a guard screamed. “Death to those who oppose the future.”

Mia rolled around the corner and shut him up with a headshot. His squad tried to charge the stairs. Mia, Charlie, and nearby troops cut them down.

She jogged to the bottom of the stairs and swept back and forth to confirm there were no new forces in the passages. Screams and gunfire echoed from distant corners of the base, joined by roars and growls.

“Did you hear that, Charlie?” Mia hissed in frustration.

Charlie growled. “Yes. We expected it.”

A mercenary stepped forward with a frown. He looked around. “Expected what? Not everyone has superhearing.”

“Remember the threat warning we sent about potential enhanced nonhumanoid enemies?” Mia asked.

The mercenary grimaced. “You mean they’ve got monsters down here? Shit. I’ve gone this long in my career without dealing with Bleakers, and now I have to deal with alien-ass shit.”

“They aren’t aliens,” Charlie noted. “They are genetically engineered human creations.”

“Same difference. Monsters that ain’t human are aliens.”

“That’s the bad news.” Mia swept into an open doorway and found rows of overturned cots. “The good news is we’ve got deserters and rebels. That means the Protocol can’t throw its full forces at us here. It also means the fleet might get some relief.”

“Yeah, not their full forces, only the mutant creatures and the Reapers,” the mercenary replied. “I should do my happy dance.”

“Think of it this way.” Mia patted his shoulder. “The tougher the opposition we run into, the closer we are to finding Icarus. Now let’s move out!”

Mia ducked low. Bullets screamed past her. She fired a burst in response and clipped a guard. Another larger man in a green and black uniform anticipated her shot and leaped behind an antiballistic barrier deployed toward the intersection. He squeezed off two shots and downed mercenaries behind Mia.

The man rolled behind the corner and threw a grenade. Mia shot the grenade out of the air, squinting during the explosion. She glimpsed a knife featuring blue-colored inlaid lines on the large guard’s belt.

“Reaper!” Mia shouted, recognizing the skills and the uniform.

They’d run into their first Reaper not long after the first stairwell battle. He’d been arrogant and charged Mia and Charlie, perhaps not realizing who they were.

A miner pulled the groaning mercenaries back. “We need first aid!”

“Specials!” Mia shouted, having already developed and suggested a tactic for this situation.

Charlie laid down covering fire with his shotgun. The rounds dented the barrier without piercing it. They did the job

of keeping the Reaper pinned. Two KCAP soldiers rushed up with their grenade launchers and sent two grenades into the intersection with a *pop*.

The explosion knocked the Reaper through the air. Charlie and Mia emptied their weapons into him, not stopping until his body hit the ground.

Mia ejected her magazine and immediately reloaded. Jon Senior had proven how durable the Reapers could be.

Piles of dead guards crowded the hallway to the intersection, mixed with the bodies of soldiers and mercenaries. As much as Mia wanted to evacuate her wounded, they were deep in the bowels of the stronghold. Many mercenaries and soldiers had been killed instantly. Reapers appeared more often, and her team lost valuable time confirming who to engage and who to let pass.

Something bothered her about the latest Reaper encounter. There had been a limited number of obvious Reaper pilots in orbit. Her team had run into a small number in the base.

Icaryus didn't have thousands of them, but he should have more than Mia had encountered. Even if he'd sent teams around for more terrorist attacks, he would have recalled them as part of the defense. The Reaper gap could have been luck, or it might suggest huge supersoldiers were still waiting for them.

"Roll forward," Mia ordered, stepping through the dead field of corpses. "These people can't all be true believers." She stopped by the downed Reaper and put a bullet into his head. "Except these. We can't take the risk."

"A good paycheck is enough for some," Charlie reasoned. "Especially when they think the old order is going to fall. They are like Vorhees. They believed they were backing the winners."

"They backed evil." Mia lifted her rifle. "It's not any better that they backed evil for a paycheck." She shrugged. "They surrender, they live for now, and we can let the KCAP government sort them out. They fight, they die."

“No mercy?”

Mia shook her head. “No. There will be no mercy for anyone who’d fight for Icaryus for any reason.”

Deeper into the stronghold, the carefully crafted metal hallways gave way to sprawling, rudely dug tunnels running through the mountain. Dim strips of lighting and cables lined the walls. Bootprints covered the ground. These weren’t seldom-traveled side tunnels.

Mia slowed her army as they came to a corner. Loud gunfire and flashes from a chamber lit up the tunnel. Grunts and thuds joined with screams.

A guard’s body flew out of the chamber and smashed into the wall. He dropped to the ground. Someone had slit his throat.

Mia motioned for everyone to get ready and held up three fingers. She dropped her fingers and charged around the corner with the troops and Charlie behind her.

The tunnel opened to a sprawling cavern. Bodies littered the floor. A dozen Reapers were shooting and carving their way through the remnants of what appeared to have been a good-sized group of turncoat guards.

Mia opened fire without warning, willing to use paycheck minions as a distraction. She clipped a Reaper in the shoulder. Charlie whipped up his shotgun and blew the supersoldier’s arm off.

With a shout of triumph, the traitorous guards rallied and charged the Reapers. The attack distracted them long enough for Mia’s forces to push into the chamber.

A Reaper wielding a charged knife rushed through the guards stabbing and slicing. He killed four before somebody shot him. The bullet didn’t stop him. He cut off the shooter’s hand and stabbed him in the throat.

Another Reaper ran past a squad of guards. He fired with each step, the shots all into the head or heart of a different guard. He ejected his empty magazine before the bodies had finished falling.

Mia swept her fire across more exposed Reapers. Charlie, the mercenaries, and the soldiers laid down a river of gunfire. The Reapers grunted as bullets struck them, ignoring the first, second, and even third in some cases. Even the strongest enemy could only take so much. They fell to their knees and returned fire.

“Grenades!” a mercenary screamed before lobbing deadly explosives at the wounded Reapers. The room shook with the blasts.

Mia ejected her magazine and reloaded in one smooth motion. The Reaper who’d disappeared into the turncoats finished slicing them up. A mercenary squad shot at him. He ducked low and ran toward the wall near the squad.

He vaulted off the wall and landed a kick that knocked a mercenary over. Before landing, he sliced the ankle of another mercenary. The Reaper jumped to his feet and shoved his knife through the neck of the third squad member before snapping the neck of the last mercenary with his free arm. He smirked and held the body in front of him.

He sneered at Charlie. “The first-gen mistake.”

Charlie bared his teeth. “We’ll see who the mistake is.”

Mia nodded at Charlie. He growled and beat his chest. The Reaper threw the body down and gestured for Charlie to attack.

“Everyone else, keep going!” Mia ordered. “We’ll handle this asshole.”

Her troops rushed for the tunnel on the other side of the cavern. The Reaper watched them go with a smile.

“Verick’s daughter.” The Reaper spat on the ground. “Dr. Icaryus has blessed me. I’m allowed the glorious honor of killing you both.”

“Kill him quickly,” Mia ordered.

Charlie stomped up to the enemy. The Reaper stabbed him. Charlie let the blade sink into his arm and roared as it crackled with electricity.

He roared louder and headbutted the Reaper, who stumbled backward, his nose bleeding. Charlie yanked the knife out of his arm and tossed it aside. “One of you tried that before. It doesn’t work on me.”

He smashed his boot into the man’s chest and launched him into the wall. A sharp rock stabbed through the Reaper’s chest. He coughed up blood.

The Reaper looked incredulously down at the rock. He gritted his teeth and pushed against the wall.

“That’s not happening.” Mia pointed her rifle at his head and fired two bursts. “Better luck next life.” She pivoted at the sound of clapping. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m ever-so-impressed,” a familiar face in a lab coat greeted. Icaryus. “That was one of my best. Although I now understand how weak and pointless the Reapers were. The next-generation projects are the future. You see, there are no mistakes in research, only lessons to be learned.”

Heart thundering, Mia slung her rifle over her shoulder. She knelt and grabbed the Reaper’s blade. “You are beyond arrogant to come here and face me yourself. You should have stayed dead.”

“You hate me so much?” Icaryus spread his arms. “Look what you’ve accomplished. Look how my improvements have made you better.”

His breath caught. “Have you been using your abilities? Have you gained better control over them? Don’t you understand? I can help you achieve your ultimate potential. You need guidance to become the best possible version of you.”

“All I have to do is let the Protocol take over the KCAP?” Mia scoffed.

Charlie growled. “Don’t talk, Icaryus. You’ve talked enough for ten lives.”

Icaryus clucked his tongue. “No, no, no. The Protocol is finished. That much is clear, but I don’t need to fall with it, and you don’t need to make me fall.”

He smiled. “Pull back your people long enough to let me go. I know you’re monitoring the hole you dug with those ugly ships. Do that, and I can help you become more. I promise you.”

Mia narrowed her eyes and stared at his face. “You know what?” She walked toward him. “That almost sounds like a good deal.”

“Isn’t it, though?”

She lifted the knife. “These are nice. Do all Reapers have one or just the batches I’ve been killing lately?”

“Yes, they all do. They have for a while.”

“Did my father?”

“Yes.” Icaryus sighed. “An unfortunate loss, but his legacy lives on in you.”

Mia leaned over to whisper into his ear. “Tell me where the real Icaryus is and maybe I’ll let you go, clone.”

He frowned. “I’m the real Icaryus.”

“The asshole is too arrogant,” Mia explained. “He used an actual image of himself the last time we talked. Your hair is missing the same touch of gray. Not enough wrinkles. It matches what I remember from when I first met him.”

He stepped back and laughed before clapping again. “Not all brawn, but brain. You can’t win against an immortal man with a thousand bodies. Don’t you understand that?”

Mia shoved the knife through his neck and pushed him to the ground. “I’m getting tired of Protocol assholes telling me how we can’t win.” She looked at Charlie. “Did you know he wasn’t a clone?”

“He didn’t smell the same. I know his smell. I’ll never forget his smell as long as I live.”

“We don’t know if the true original Icaryus is alive,” Mia countered. “In the sense that it’s the same body.”

“I’ll know,” Charlie insisted. “The smell is about more than the body.”

Mia shrugged. “If we kill them all, it won’t make a difference either way.”

After another exchange with a cavern full of guards and a squad of Reapers, ammo was becoming a concern. Mia had given up on her rifle and taken a guard’s rifle to make it easier to loot enemy bodies to resupply. Her team hadn’t encountered significant opposition since the Reapers, but her army had suffered major casualties.

Her stomach turned as a noxious smell assaulted her, like a bad combination of rotting eggs and formaldehyde. Clicking and scratching noises sounded from ahead, along with soft crunching.

Mia advanced into the widening tunnel. “Why am I not surprised?”

Gray-skinned creatures with gangly clawed limbs feasted on dead guards with the help of large mandibles. Their yellow eyes reflected the dim illumination from the light strips. A smiling Dr. Icaryus stood in the center of the hallway.

Mia squinted at him and frowned. She couldn’t be sure. She looked at Charlie. He inhaled deeply and shook his head.

“What in the name of all things holy are those?” a soldier whispered.

“Hard to say,” Mia replied. “They could be mutant clones, basic mutants, or test subjects for whatever crazy experiment Icaryus had going this week.”

The clone began, “Ah, Miss Verick, I’m glad to see you made it this far—”

Mia shut him up with a bullet in the eye. The mutants clicked their mandibles and tossed their meals aside. They charged Mia.

The last time she’d fought mutants, it’d been her and Charlie against a horde. This time she outnumbered the pack. Their thick hides took the bursts well, but it slowed them. Charlie blew off a mutant’s leg with his shotgun. It squealed and thrashed on the ground. Grenades flew overhead and showered pain on the mutants.

The mutants shambled forward, bleeding bright red and slowed but not stopped. Mia let one get close. She shoved her barrel into its eye before pulling the trigger. The back of the mutant’s head exploded. Charlie’s shotgun took off the head of the next. Screaming mercenaries charged forward to pour rounds into the remaining mutants until nothing remained but mangled lumps.

Mia walked to the Icaryus clone and kicked the body. “You trained me too well, you bastard. Black Ice, your lab, your clones, your mutants. I know all your tricks. So does Charlie. Send out every last clone you want. It won’t matter. I’ll kill them all.”

She grunted in frustration at a three-way intersection. The tunnels had been winding and uneven on their way there, but they hadn’t run into an intersection since leaving the hallways of the upper levels.

“Okay, we’re going to break up into three teams,” Mia announced. “Everyone up to that tall guy by the dead mutant, you’re with Charlie and me as Alpha Team. Everyone between him and the redhead by the door is Beta Team. The redhead by the door is the start of Gamma Team.

“Beta and Gamma Teams, you go left and right. Anything or anyone not with us, you kill. If you find the databanks, you contact me.” She patted her backpack. “I’ve got the final tools we need to end this horror. You see the real Icaryus, go ahead and kill him.”

“Are you sure you want to split our forces?” Charlie asked. “We don’t have many troops left.”

“We’re running out of time. If he’s sending out clones and mutants, he’s desperate. He might have a back door we don’t know about. We need to make sure there’s nothing left alive in here and confirm the death of Alpha Icaryus or Icaryus Prime, whatever you want to call him.” She charged forward. “Alpha Team with me!”

Blood, viscera, and assorted gore lined the tunnel. Dead guards lay entangled with dead Reapers. More mutants lay scattered around, all dead. Not all their blood was red. An eight-armed monstrosity that looked like a mixture of an alligator and a scorpion had cleaved two squads in half with its claws before they’d blown its head off with the rocket launcher discarded in the same tunnel where they fell.

Beta and Gamma Teams both encountered more mutants and a small number of guards, along with Icaryus clones. Mia wasn’t concerned they were the original given the reports of black eyes in one and hairlessness in the other. Some part of her remained convinced the real Icaryus would make sure he ended up face-to-face with her.

“They must have had most of the Reapers fighting in the fleet,” Mia concluded. “We haven’t run into enough. I’ve thought this for a while now.”

“Did you include the Reapers who might have been killed when the consortium ships opened up the mountain?” Charlie asked.

Mia blinked. “You know, I hadn’t thought about that. You’re right. The forward hangars and barracks were closer to the surface. I assumed Icaryus would keep all the strongest forces closest to him. He must have assumed they’d take out the mining ships, and we wouldn’t be able to get to him without squaring off against the Reapers.”

She looked over her shoulder. Her army had dwindled to a platoon. Not everyone on the ground team had died, but there were more fatalities than injuries. Although the orbital forces were finishing off the last of the fleet still resisting, the damage and losses in space would delay medical treatment for the ground forces.

Mia had to find the original Icaryus and the databanks. Otherwise, all the pain, suffering, and death would have been for nothing. She wouldn't let it end that way. He had to be punished, and his research scoured from existence.

Her team marched through the deep tunnel. It kept widening and growing brighter with light shining from a massive chamber ahead. Mia squinted into the light.

Rows and rows of databanks stood behind black, sealed stasis pods. Icaryus waited with his arms folded near the back of the room, with no obvious exits. His smile unnerved Mia.

She marched her team into the room and kept her gun trained on Icaryus. "Charlie?"

He sniffed the air. "It's him."

"Trying to foist copies off on me is insulting, don't you think?" Mia asked. "It was rude that your great masterpiece should have to deal with that trash."

"I'm ever so pleased you made it here," Icaryus greeted. "I knew you would."

"That's crap. You've been trying to kill me for a while."

"Yet you lived." He shook his head. "It's proof of my genius, and since you are proof of my genius, I'll give you this one chance to turn around and save your life. I'd hate to destroy something so beautiful, elegant, and deadly."

Mia dropped her backpack to the ground. She gestured at nearby soldiers. "Get the explosives and EMPs. Place them in the corners."

The soldiers opened the backpack and pulled out the deceptively small green discs. They jogged to the corners

while the rest of the team aimed at Icaryus. There was no way he was escaping that many people's guns.

Icaryus began, "Don't you understand—"

"Don't you dare warn me I can't win, and stop asking me if I understand!" Mia bellowed. "I've kicked your ass across the entire galaxy, you insane monster. I've seen through all your little schemes, and I'm here now to end you."

She pointed at a detonator. "In case you didn't notice, we're going to EMP and blow this whole room. Everything you've worked for will be for nothing. Your legacy will amount to nothing more than a case study of a madman in history books."

Icaryus shook his head. "Don't make me kill you, Mia. I'd prefer not to, not after everything we've shared."

"How are you going to do that?" Mia laughed. "Where are your mighty Reapers and mutants now?"

He smiled. "Do you not know?"

Her eyes widened. "Shoot the pods! They're filled with Reapers."

Her team opened fire. The bullets bounced, sparking off the pods.

Icaryus smiled and snapped his fingers. The lids cracked on the stasis pods. Steam billowed out. A moment later they flew off and thudded against the ground. Huge men, many almost as large as Charlie, jumped from the pods. Silver-gray implants protruded from the sides of their heads.

"Kill them all!" Icaryus ordered. "No survivors!"

A Reaper took a burst to the chest from one of the men who'd been setting the explosives. He grabbed the man's head and smashed it against the wall. The soldier's body fell limp and dropped.

Charlie rushed the nearest Reaper. He tackled the Reaper against a pod and pummeled him, the blow thudding hard until the crunch of breaking bone mixed in with the noise. The Reaper shoved Charlie off and grabbed a nearby pod lid.

He swung the lid and smacked Charlie, sending him flying backward. Mia couldn't help Charlie as she ducked blows from a Reaper and put round after round into his chest. Blood leaked everywhere, but he didn't go down.

"Die, already," she complained.

Mia had thought the implants were for control. She was wrong. They marked these enemies as something else. They were larger, stronger, faster, and more durable than any other Reaper she'd fought. These were Ultra Reapers.

The opponent caught her with a punch. The blow smacked her hard against a stasis pod. He tore her rifle out of her hand and threw it to the side.

Mia whipped out her knife and shoved it into the Reaper's throat. He clutched his throat. She jumped for her gun and put a bullet into his head. He fell forward, halfway hanging in the pod.

Charlie traded blows with his opponent. He staggered the Reaper and yanked his head down to the thin edge of the pod until it dug into his skull.

Screams echoed throughout the cavern, and none of them from Reapers. Unarmed supersoldiers slaughtered entire squads leaving their skulls caved in, their necks broken, or their limbs torn. Icaryus watched the whole thing with his arms folded as he nodded in satisfaction.

Mia pointed her gun at him. An Ultra Reaper tackled her. She smacked her elbow into his throat. It didn't slow him down. He reached for the rifle and ejected the magazine. She let go.

The Reaper blocked her roundhouse follow-up and grabbed her by the throat. He squeezed hard before throwing her halfway across the room. Her shoulder slammed into a pod with a loud *crack*. Pain flared through her entire body. Agony filled her shoulder.

Mia shook her head, trying to clear it. A different Reaper tried to smash her head in with a powerful kick. She rolled to the side, and his foot dented the stasis pod.

Using her good arm, she yanked his other leg out from under him and dropped him to the floor. Mia rolled and caught his head with a leg lock, squeezing as hard as she could while pounding her fist into his face. Blood sprayed all over.

The Reaper growled and thrashed. She squeezed harder until his eyes rolled up. Mia sat up behind the Reaper, wrapped her arms around his neck, and snapped it.

A dead mercenary dropped to the ground nearby, her arms bent in awful ways. Mia pulled a knife and the sole grenade from the mercenary. She armed and threw the grenade toward Icarus. The explosion left a blackened, cracked mess over the invisible barrier protecting him.

That explained his cockiness. His eyes widened, and he ducked when a barrage of gunfire struck the barrier and tore through the portion weakened by the grenade. The quick-thinking soldier who'd fired paid for it when a Reaper punched him hard enough to cave in the side of his head.

Mia picked the closest Reaper and emptied her magazine into his back. He stumbled, growling, and turned her way. A screaming soldier rushed up and slit his throat.

Charlie broke the back of a Reaper over his knee and flung the supersoldier to the ground. He roared at the Reaper and stomped his head into paste.

Mia sprinted and rolled to grab her rifle. She didn't concentrate on any one Reaper, now sending bursts at different targets, only hoping to wound and slow them.

Concentrated fire from her troopers downed more Reapers. As powerful and fast as their enemies were, they were also unarmed. Icarus' final arrogant gambit had cost him.

A Reaper charged into a squad and earned a chest full of bullets. Coughing up blood, he snatched a rifle from a soldier and knocked him to the ground with a powerful punch. The Reaper spun and sprayed gunfire at Mia.

She twisted her body and jumped over a pod. Another Reaper threw a pod lid at her at the same time.

Mia flowed into her hyper-focus and pushed off the closest pod with her foot. The move knocked her clear of the lid and most of the bullets. She took a bullet to the arm she'd hit before, the pain barely registering in hyper-focus mode.

Another lid slammed into her back. She grunted. The sensation was dulled, but the impact knocked her to the floor.

Charlie's roar shook the chamber. He rushed the Reaper who'd thrown the second lid. The Reaper who'd shot Mia fell backward when the surviving nearby soldiers lit his head up with bullets.

Mia landed and rolled to her feet. Her hand wouldn't move as fast as her mind. She swept her arm in an arc, using her ability to anticipate the shots without ever stopping her movement. Bullets rang out from her pistol and pierced the hardened skulls and necks of the enhanced Reapers.

Not every Reaper fell with each shot, but all stumbled or slowed. Mia's army had withered from a platoon to a handful of squads. Those hardened men and women earned their survival by reacting instantly to Mia's attacks and filling the last Reapers with bullets until they collapsed.

Mia hit the ground and released her hyper-focus, the pain burning in her arm and her back in agony. She sat up and glared at Icaryus. He'd crawled through the hole in his invisible barrier and strolled toward the exit with a soft smile as if he wasn't in a room filled with mauled bodies.

"Where do you think you're going?" Mia spat. Her breathing turned ragged.

Icaryus stopped and turned toward Mia. "I took precautions." He lifted a gun and pointed it at his head. "There's no point in the project continuing without my guidance."

Mia scoffed. "I don't care how you die. Go ahead and take yourself out. I'm happy I'm here to see this."

"Oh, you don't care how I die? Do you care how the rest die?" He nodded toward a squad. "Your explosives are

unnecessary. If my heart stops, my devices will handle this place.”

Mia’s triumphant smirk vanished. “You’re bluffing.”

“It’s not as if I’ve demonstrated a willingness to destroy my facilities.” Icaryus laughed. “That wasn’t even about spite.”

“You’d never risk your life like that,” Mia insisted. “That’s what all your clones are for.”

He shook his head. “That’s the problem. Too many people believed they could seize my power. I needed to make assurances that I wouldn’t be betrayed. You should be happy. You’re the one who convinced me this was necessary. I should have known my perfection on Ice would come back to haunt me.”

“Then it was you on Ice,” Mia commented.

“The smell,” Charlie added.

“When I made you better, yes, that was me,” Icaryus replied. “The one you dealt with on the carrier was a mere clone.”

“He was afraid of you,” Mia concluded.

“Yes. Because he was inferior to me.” He patted his chest. “Go ahead then, Mia Verick. Kill me. You’ll win, but you’ll die along with all these other people. I’d be ever so amused to see how far you’ll go to beat me. Destroying yourself to defeat me would be an elegant ending to our relationship.”

Mia motioned to the exit. “Alpha Team, get out of here. Beta Team and Gamma Team, wherever you are, pull out. I want you on full-speed evac. We have a possible self-destruction situation.”

The surviving mercenary and soldiers crept toward the exit with unsure looks.

“You think I’m going to let you walk, Icaryus?” Mia asked.

“I think you’re weaker than you insist. I didn’t believe that before given your ruthless demonstrations of power, especially on Ice, but that twisted, pathetic piece of propaganda you put out proved how weak you truly are.” He sighed. “I can use that weakness to get past you and start again, so I will. You lack the wherewithal to defeat a dedicated man, and there’s no man more dedicated than I am.”

Charlie knelt behind a stasis pod. He jumped to his feet and hurled a knife at Icaryus. The knife hit the gun and sent it flying out of his hand. Icaryus’ eyes widened, and he jerked his head between Mia, Charlie, and the exit. Icaryus ran for the exit.

Charlie rushed him, vaulting over the stasis pods like they were mere inconveniences. He intercepted Icaryus and lifted him by the neck.

“This changes nothing,” Icaryus wheezed. “You still die with me. I’m not bluffing.”

Charlie turned toward Mia. “Go. I have to end this. If you let him leave this room, he’ll blow it anyway. As long as he’s alive, he can start over. You said it yourself. The only way everybody can be safe is if he’s dead.”

“No.” Mia tried to stand. Her knees buckled, and her arm and back throbbed. She’d taken harder hits than she realized. “No, no, no.”

Charlie nodded at a squad of soldiers near the exit. “Take her and hurry. Do what you have to. She’ll fight you.”

Icaryus thrashed in Charlie’s grip. “Release me, you mistake. You have no idea what you’re doing.”

A soldier saluted. “It’s been an honor.”

He headed to Mia and grasped her. She shoved him off and screamed. The rest of the squad grabbed all her limbs. She pushed them off again. Her shot arm and bruised back were making it hard to use her full strength.

One soldier reached into his belt and pulled out an injector. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but we would have lost this battle before it

started without you. I understand why he doesn't want you to die here."

He shoved the injector into her neck. She yanked it out, but it was too late. The cool liquid flowed through her veins.

"Again," Charlie ordered. "She's a supersoldier. Use three or four. She can take it."

Her vision blurred. She was having trouble standing. Another injector hit her neck, then her arm. She fell to her knees.

"No, Charlie," she pleaded. "Not like this. Please, not like this."

Icaryus pounded his fists against Charlie's chest. "Let me go, you imbecile. Do you understand what you're doing? Do you understand how far backward humanity would go? You must release me for the good of our species. I'm the only one who can lead us to victory against the Bleakers."

Tears ran down Mia's face. She couldn't control her body anymore. The soldiers hauled her out of the room.

"Come, Father," Charlie rumbled. "Embrace me, and let's go to hell together, two monsters arm in arm." He tightened his hand around Icaryus' neck. "Let us repent for all our sins over the decades."

A loud crackling buzz preceded an explosion. The entire tunnel shook. Rock and dust shot from the chamber. The dark cloud billowed outward.

Mia tried to force off the blackness threatening to take her. She'd tried so hard to save so many, yet she couldn't protect those closest to her.

"The place is still shaking, ma'am," a soldier explained, his voice distant. He grunted. "I don't know if you can tell in your state. I think this whole place is going up."

"Save yourself," she whispered. "Leave me."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, ma'am. The big guy went out of his way to save us and you, and now I'm going to pay him back."

Mia groaned. Another distant explosion shook the tunnel. The drugs and hyper-focus caught up with her. She surrendered to the coma.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mia strolled across the surface of a dusty red desert moon. A brilliant light burned through the sky. She smiled at the *Erinyes* parked beside a squat mesa.

The ship looked pristine. People wouldn't know it had been nearly destroyed in one of the most important battles in the galaxy only months prior and repaired by one engineer and a handful of assistants who knew more about flying and fighting than ship repairs.

She drew a deep breath and slowly let it out. Most of her crew weren't up yet. She needed to get them back to maximum operational readiness. It was fine when it was only Paul slacking, but now everyone didn't see a problem with partying too hard and sleeping in. That came from them not having a mission these past few months.

Being praised and paid as heroes was nice, but that didn't mean their duty and jobs were over. The Protocol was destroyed, but there were still fortunes to be won and lost, people to save, and tyrants to thwart.

Her alliance ended the immediate threat of a coup. That didn't mean they could undo all the damage from decades of corrupt manipulation. Reform-minded government officials and politicians were now checking every aspect of the KCAP government and military to ensure they'd purged the Protocol's influence.

That had galactic implications. The KCAP Navy had pulled back from the Fringe. They'd reinforced borders to

ensure the corpos didn't take advantage of the instability and were still dealing with the loss of experienced officers in the battle.

The corpos lowered the level of their open hostilities, perhaps aware of the danger of a larger war from a skittish KCAP looking for someone to punish for Icaryus.

That meant innocent people in the Fringe needed someone to help them. Mia didn't need to become an outlaw from ancient Earth legend, but the idea of helping the weak and powerless when nobody else would appealed to her after her years obsessed with revenge and conspiracy.

Her body and mind felt lighter. She'd tasted true freedom for the first time in her life.

Mia smiled, remembering the ancient history she'd studied under Abigail's direction. So much of it felt pointless at the time, like studying the history of maritime piracy.

Humanity spread into the stars. They'd acquired spacecraft and new weapons, but people were much the same. Governments reached out for control. Others bucked under their constraints.

This must have been what those old sea captains felt like, the original privateers whose swashbuckling adventurers had filtered down through the millennia. Some of those captains were good. Some were evil. Some only cared about money, while others cared about justice and honor.

A thrill like a chill and bracing wind raced through her at the thought. She laughed.

Jon sat up from where he'd sprawled atop a flat rock. "What are you laughing about?"

She smiled at him. Every day he looked stronger. Ito had refined her harness design to make it sleeker, even though it would soon be obsolete. Advanced microsurgery at one of the best hospitals in the cores had taken care of the worst damage. Soon, he wouldn't need any assistance walking.

The surgeons were amazed that he was alive at all given the damage. One doctor had called his rapid recovery

legendary.

That sounded right. The son of the supersoldier Jon Smith Senior, one of the heroes of the final battle against the Protocol, was a legend like his father.

Jon cocked his head. “Are you not going to tell me? Is it a secret?”

“I’m happy. It’s nothing special.”

“That’s good.” Jon blinked and stared at her. “That’s *very* good.”

She stared back. “It’s been a long time since I could say I was truly happy.”

“The same.” Jon slid off the rock and walked to Mia. “All those celebrations, medals, parades, and fanfare are nice, but they weren’t what you were looking for, were they?”

Mia sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder. “All those things feel like they’re a dream or from somebody else’s life.”

“I get that.” Jon patted her hand. “You lived a hard, dangerous way for a long time. To go from the KCAP’s most-wanted to the most-celebrated is a big adjustment.”

“I also keep looking over my shoulder and wondering why Charlie’s not there.”

“It’s okay to miss people we’ve lost and loved.”

“He was more than a giant protector whom I’d come to trust. He was my big brother, watchful and true.”

Jon hugged her. “I know. I miss my father, too. We have to live on and be happy for both of them.”

Mia nuzzled his chest. “I tell myself that all the time. Victory over the Protocol was everything I ever wanted, but it’s bittersweet when I can’t share it with all the people I’d always thought would be there. I kept telling everyone it was a war and a mission and not to expect no casualties.”

“There’s always a longing for the ones we love. That shows how much we loved him.”

Mia shook her head. She smiled and looked up at him. “I didn’t fly out to this place to mope. You’re right. The best way to honor our lost families is to live on, happily and strong.”

“I agree.” Jon looked around. “Can you tell me one thing?”

“Sure.”

“You’ve been mysterious about this moon. You told us we were coming, but not why. That’s not like you. You wouldn’t book a job without telling the crew, and we haven’t had a job since the Protocol.”

Mia laughed. “It’s nothing big. I didn’t want anyone coming up with wish lists and wasting money because we’re more financially stable than we’ve been used to with the government rewards.”

Jon looked confused. “Wish lists?”

“Carana and Galik don’t have to fear the Protocol anymore. They also have official licenses and suppliers. They’ve started over, and they need new well-heeled customers to get their business off to a good start. That’s us.”

“What are you thinking of buying? I thought you loved the *Erinyes*.”

“I do, but we lost the SHKs in the battle. Ito’s been so busy with the repairs that she hasn’t replaced them.”

Jon grinned. “You’re going to buy me new state-of-the-art drones?”

“No. That’s a waste of money. That’s why I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Huh?” Jon blinked. “What about my SHKs?”

“Why would you need SHKs when you’ll be in a fighter?” Mia smiled. “We have the time, money, and resources to get you the equipment and training you need. You’ll be healed soon. It’s time you joined the flight, Jon.”

“A fighter?” He puffed out his chest. “I’ll be a true pilot. Can I get a better fighter than yours?”

Mia punched his arm. “Older fighters have their advantages.”

“Is that a no?”

“It’s a ‘we’ll see.’” Mia took his arm in hers. “We’ll get whatever we need to deliver pain to all the wannabe tyrants like Icaryus.”

“Then I need a cool fighter.”

Mia laughed. “What’s next? You going to demand your own destroyer?”

“Do we have enough to buy a destroyer?”

“Let’s talk to Carana and Galik and see what they have on sale.”

AUTHOR NOTES - MICHAEL
ANDERLE

WRITTEN DECEMBER 4, 2023

First, my heartfelt thanks for coming with me to this series's final pages. Now, as I never promised, but you get it anyway, a little poem:

A Reader Lament - The Book is Over, Long Live the Next Book!

The final words like autumn leaves do
fall,

A tale concludes, we've shared it all.

The bittersweet goodbye, a curtain call,

Yet in this end, a start - to stand tall.

For every story that we close,

Another awaits, its pages posed.

A universe of words, gloriously
composed,

Seek out new adventures, be
emboldened and engrossed.

And now, to the heart of the matter

It's the nature of stories, isn't it? To end. But there's something magical in that ending - it's also a beginning, an invitation to embark on another journey, to fall in love with new characters, to live through fresh trials and triumphs.

So go ahead, find that next book series that will steal your sleep and capture your imagination. Or maybe, just maybe, it's time to revisit an old friend whose details have grown fuzzy around the edges with time.

If you're feeling nostalgic, why not dive back into my Kurtherian Gambit series? I'll let you in on a little secret: it might start off in familiar territory with the paranormal and kick-ass action, but it promises to shoot you into the vast expanse of Sci-Fi. Just give it a chance to unfold.

It's December, my traditional month of ideation. I'll confess, there was a moment of panic - the dreaded creative burnout seemed to loom over me. But no, it wasn't burnout; it was just my mind craving a bit of respite.

Cabo has been my sanctuary. It's amazing how a change of scene and a forced slowdown can reinvigorate the mind.

Unlike the bustling options back home in Henderson/Las Vegas, Cabo's culinary scene has nudged me into a different routine (lots of seafood and sushi options, neither of which do I eat).

Let's be honest, a chance to get creative with a grill. Who knew that a pot on a grill could be such a revelation? And while I might grumble - often and loud - cooking my favorite (deliciously smelly) dishes, alfresco is a small compromise for domestic bliss.

Don't tell my wife, but it's hardly a hardship that she kicks me outside when cooking chili.

As I bid you farewell from this series, remember: endings are just unspoken promises of new beginnings.

Keep turning those pages, and who knows? Maybe my next idea, born from the sandy shores of relaxation, will be the one to keep you up at night, racing through chapters, searching for one more adventure.

Ad Aeternitatem,

Michael Anderle

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