

A Solar Hearts Novel

AGENT'S INTEGRITY



JENN ALLEN

Agent's Integrity

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Night Star Books

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This book is dedicated to my cheerleaders. Without those of you who continue to encourage and reassure me that I can do this, no one would ever read any of my books. I love you guys!

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INTRODUCTION

Over a thousand years in the future, mankind has made massive progress in space exploration and colonization. Several galaxies and solar systems have been mapped, terraformed, and now colonized. Human population has expanded to fill those planets and moons.

As people will always do, no matter how much space is between them, they find reasons to fight with each other. Planets eventually formed confederations with other, like-minded planets, giving birth to the Alliance Confederation and the Conglomeration Confederation. They are the two dominant powers in the universe, and for now they are at peace, tenuous though it may be.

In an effort to solidify peace and friendly relations, the Intergalactic Police Force (IPF) was created to maintain law and order throughout the universe. Both confederations, as well as some neutral planets, signed the Intergalactic Police Force Agreement, which gives the IPF power to conduct lawful investigations on any planet that has signed the agreement, as well as anywhere in open space, regardless of jurisdiction. The IPF is tasked with being a nonpartisan entity responsible for upholding joint laws that all parties agreed to.

Mercenaries and privateers have flourished in the open environment of space. Mercenary crews hire themselves out to whoever has the most money, and will do any job, whether legal or illegal. Privateers prey on spaceships, capturing them and then stripping them of anything valuable. Many of these people call Esmuna home because it is one of the planets that refused to sign the IPF Agreement, and therefore falls outside of IPF jurisdiction.

Regardless of confederation, planetary citizenship, or profession, most people are just trying to make the best out of their circumstances. Some are seeking to change their lives for the better, while others are merely trying to survive. Some are looking for love, and some are running from it. Whatever their life circumstances, most people are just trying to follow their hearts.

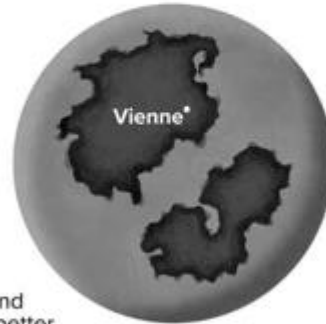
The planets of ASSASSIN'S TRUST

— from the Solar Hearts universe —

Arcadia Prime

Capital: Vienne
Galaxy: Calyx
Solar System: Solea-Abrovian
Moon: Xenia
Confederation: Alliance

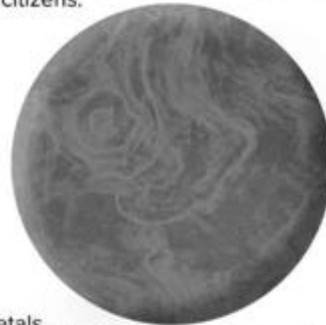
Arcadia Prime is a center of education, where many great universities have been established. Open Forum academic symposiums are held annually in all the major cities. New Schools of thought are explored and encouraged as people search for newer and better ways of tackling systemic issues. Arcadia Prime is one of the smallest planets, with only two continents and about 70 million citizens.



Eremus

Capital: No capital
Galaxy: Helion
Solar System: Diya
Moon: none
Confederation: Alliance

Eremus is mostly uninhabitable. There are only a few settlements in pockets across the planet. Most of the surface is harsh, and the air is toxic if inhaled for long periods of time. However, the planet is rich in minerals and metals. It's worth enough for the Alliance to bring them under their protection to mine their resources to use for their own ends.



Novus Terra

Capital: Marysburg
Galaxy: Calyx
Solar System: Xolaran
Moon: Iomia
Confederation: Alliance

Novus Terra is one of the first terraformed planets and is one of the most technologically advanced. Novus Terra is considered "the heart of the Alliance" and is highly politically influential in galactic affairs. More Old Earth culture survived on Novus Terra than on any other planet except Votera. It is one of the few places that still celebrates Christmas.



The planets of THIEF'S PRIDE

Votera

Capital: Yorkshire

Galaxy: Helion

Solar System: Rebos

Moons: Celbo, Illyrian

Confederation: Alliance

Votera is the only Alliance planet in the Rebos solar system, making it a strategic stronghold for the Alliance. They have massive planetary defense systems in place, and a large military presence, both from their own military as well as from the Alliance military, in case of conflict with the Conglomeration. Votera is known for having the largest collection of Old Earth artifacts, rivaled only by Novus Terra.



Ascillon

Capital: Rumford

Galaxy: Helion

Solar System: Eridanus

Moon: Alhena

Confederation: Conglomeration

Ascillon is a major hub for the slave trade. Slavery is only legal in the Conglomeration, forcing Ascillon to have limited trade interactions with Alliance planets. Because of the high slavery rates, there are a lot of labor-intensive businesses that are based on Ascillon. Slave labor helps major corporations keep costs down, which makes some of the more advanced technologies accessible to the average person.



Venetus

Capital: Hilgard

Galaxy: Calyx

Solar System: Solea-Abrovian

Moon: Luna Undae

Confederation: Independent

Venetus is one of the few planets that has not aligned with either confederation. They have nonaggression pacts with both confederations, and they maintain a strong neutrality stance. The planet is large and boasts almost 800 million citizens. They are an industrious planet and are home to many corporations who export goods to other planets.



Hestia

Capital: Ames

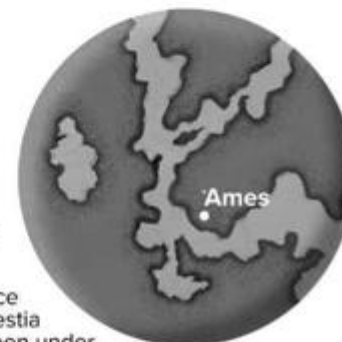
Galaxy: Calyx

Solar System: Xolaran

Moons: Chandra

Confederation: Alliance

Hestia was the only Conglomeration planet in the Xolaran system, but they recently switched to the Alliance. Getting Hestia to switch confederations was key to the Alliance preventing war with the Conglomeration. Hestia has had a difficult political history, having been under the rule of a dictator for many years before its liberation and transition to a democracy a decade ago. The government is still in the process of being dismantled and rebuilt, which has lent an air of instability to the planet even before they changed confederations.



Fairfax

Capital: Elwood

Galaxy: Calyx

Solar System: Solea-Abrovian

Moons: Capella Luna, Luna Opal, Nyx

Confederation: Alliance

Fairfax has a moderate climate and is well-known for its agricultural production. Overall, it is a poor planet, and far less technologically advanced compared to other planets. It is home to the Novem tribe, a people with a rich culture and history. Most drugs that are banned on other planets are legal on Fairfax, though exporting them is highly illegal. However, due to the lax laws surrounding the growing and manufacturing processes, exporting those drugs is easy and profitable. Fairfax exports a much higher volume of illegal drugs compared to any other planet.



The planets of AGENT'S INTEGRITY

— from the *Solar Hearts* universe —

Viridis

Capital: Vitoria

Galaxy: Calyx

Solar System: Xolaran

Moons: Luna Camera, Luna Abra

Confederation: Alliance

Viridis is a tropical planet, with warmer temperatures and high humidity. Over half of the planet is covered in rainforests.

Several types of plants can only be grown on Viridis, making agricultural exports one of their largest industries. In particular, Viridis is

the only planet where cacao trees can grow, making chocolate a very valuable and rare commodity for anyone off-world. Because of the warm climate, there are many nature preserves and sanctuaries set up across the planet, for both plant and animal life.



Esmuna

Capital: Dothan

Galaxy: Calyx

Solar System: Xolaran

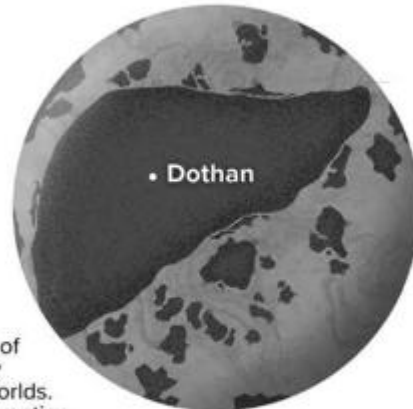
Moons: Acacia, Mahru, Ersa

Confederation: Independent

Esmuna retains independence from any confederation and actively avoids interacting with other planets. Because of its lack of diplomacy, it is home to many criminals fleeing prosecution in other worlds.

Esmuna does not have any extradition treaties with other planets. Esmuna is home to many

endangered animals, which prompted the creation of protection zones to save endangered species. Several islands on the planet have been converted to wildlife sanctuaries, and laws have been put in place to curtail poaching and hunting of those animals.



Cadium

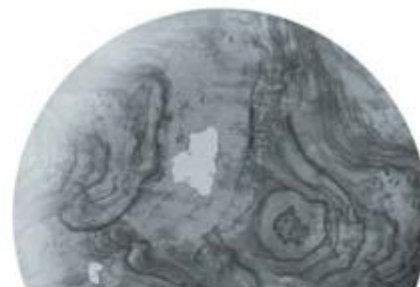
Capital: none

Galaxy: Calyx

Solar System: Xolaran

Moon: none

Confederation: Independent



Confederation: independent

Cadium is a wasteland that is not well suited for year-round human habitation. Terraforming did not work well for this planet, leaving it with few natural resources. The weather is drastic and dangerous, meaning that it's very difficult to live on the surface. The few who do live there must live in geodesic dome structures to protect against the weather, and are centered close to the poles, where it is less severe. Because there isn't anything of worth on the planet, it remains independent and is not aligned with a confederation. There are less than 200,000 citizens on the whole planet.



Lithios

Capital: Berea

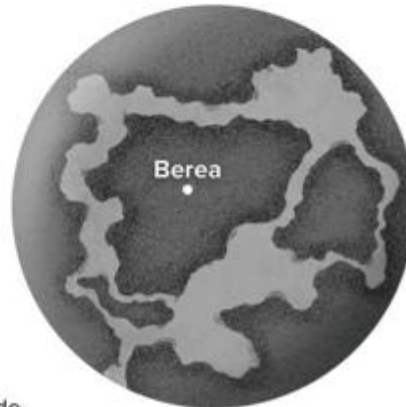
Galaxy: Calyx

Solar System: Solea-Abrovian

Moon: Inops

Confederation: Conglomeration

Lithios is known for growing the widest variety of trees of any planet, making exotic lumber their largest export. Their economy thrives from the production of non-mass-produced, unique, handmade items, making it an ideal place for small businesses, particularly artisans who use the exotic wood to create handmade pieces. Although they aren't as agriculturally focused as Fairfax or Viridis, they are still one of the top producers of agricultural exports in the Calyx galaxy.



CHAPTER ONE

Julia

I cursed my short legs as my feet pounded against the asphalt, trying desperately to gain some ground. I pumped my arms, trying to push myself even faster. I ran nearly every morning, and I did it so when I was put into situations like this I could keep up with the criminals with much longer legs. And yet, it was still a challenge.

Not far ahead, I could see the suspect's bald head bobbing in between people as he ran down the sidewalk. Pedestrians dodged to the side and yelled rude comments at him as he bowled through the middle of everything. He didn't seem to care if he ran someone over so long as I didn't catch up to him.

He disappeared, ducking down an alley. I swung in after him, glad for the better visibility the alley afforded, and spotted him entering a door in the building on the left. I made a beeline for it, eyes searching for any hidden danger.

Time was of the essence, but I took a moment to pause in front of the closed door and crack it open. I flung the door wide and tucked myself to the side, just in case. I was relieved I did when a butcher's knife sailed through the doorway, clattering to the pavement in the alley.

My heart danced to a new tune, releasing another rush of adrenaline. My body went rigid, and then the shaking began. "Snails!" I held my tongue from the rush of words I wanted to say and forced myself to take a deep breath. I ignored the negative side effects of the adrenaline rush and refocused my attention on the door.

Inside, I could hear clattering and shouting. It sounded like a kitchen. I removed my stun gun from its holster and stepped through the doorway. Several men dressed in kitchen attire stared at me, arms raised in fear. They backed away from me as I entered. I scanned the interior and spotted my suspect darting through another door. I sighed and followed, being as swift as I could while still being cautious.

The door led into a dining room packed with people. Not a single table was empty. I holstered my gun when my suspect collided with a server, knocking food everywhere. A woman screamed. I ran towards him, but he was already moving. At least being tiny allowed me to navigate the tables with ease.

I was gaining ground on him when he launched out the front door and back onto the street. He didn't even pause. He turned right and kept running. I dashed after him, pushing my muscles some more. For a bulky guy, he sure could run fast. If there had been less people around, I would have shot him with the stunner, but I couldn't risk catching someone else in the crossfire.

Immediately, he raced across the street, right in the middle of ground traffic. I groaned and looked both ways before pursuing him. The last thing I needed was to get hit by a car. Vehicles beeped and honked at him as he recklessly raced in front of them. He reached the curb and tripped, hit the ground, tucked into a roll, and regained his feet. It took me a few seconds to get across the road, but I could still see him ahead of me. He turned down another alley.

I saw an opportunity to gain on him since his gait had slowed significantly because of his tumble. I was not going to let him get away. I lengthened my stride, knowing I might be sore the next day, but I didn't care. My sheer determination would give me the edge I needed to catch him.

He had almost reached the end of the alley when I launched myself at him in a flying tackle. I caught him around the knees and we both crashed into the ground. I grunted when his foot slammed into my stomach, and I rolled off his lower half, reaching for his shoulders.

The wind might have been knocked out of him, but he recovered quickly. He flipped onto his back, wedged his foot between us, and shoved me away. He scrambled to his feet, but I was on mine just as fast, and I slammed my foot into the back of his knee.

He bellowed, and his face tensed up in pain. His eyes landed on mine as he leaned against the wall for support. I paused just

in case he'd had enough.

Wounded and cornered, he should have given up, but I saw his eyes flicker over me, taking in my small stature and overt feminine features. They screamed fragility, even if it was a lie. Everyone always thought I was weak because I didn't look intimidating. He had no idea how long I'd trained as a fighter.

I could see it clearly in his eyes when he decided to fight. I didn't hesitate. I turned my body and launched a side kick at him, taking him by surprise and knocking him off balance, though he didn't fall. I took advantage of his disorientation and came in close, catching him under the jaw with an uppercut.

His teeth clacked together, but I didn't hear bone crack. He grabbed for me, twisted his fingers into a handful of my hair, and yanked. I ground my teeth against the pain but allowed him to pull me closer. He wrapped his arm around my neck, attempting to cut off my oxygen, and finally released my hair. As soon as he did, I grabbed the hand that held my neck, wrapped my fingers around his thumb and yanked. With my other hand, I reached up and jabbed at his face until I poked an eye.

He swore and growled at me while I stomped down on his foot. He jerked away with a cry, and I used his thumb to leverage his arm away from my neck. I considered hitting him in the jaw again, but I wanted his face as unharmed as possible so I could read him when we interrogated him. Instead, I coiled my muscles, building as much power as I could, and punched him in the gut. His breath fanned my face as the air left his lungs. He doubled over, and I grabbed my right fist with my left hand and lifted it up as high as I could, using all my power as well as gravity to slam my right elbow down on his shoulder. The force knocked him on his face.

I knelt on his back, pulled out a pair of cuffs, and roped his hands into them. He was in too much pain to resist me. He moaned into the ground, and I rolled my eyes.

“Shut up. It's your own fault. You shouldn't have run from me or tried to fight me. Just because I'm tiny doesn't mean I

can't beat you." I read him his rights, huffing a little while catching my breath. "Now, you should know I'm IPF. So, if I decide to treat you as a terrorist suspect, your rights go out the window. And since you were involved in the kidnapping and attempted assassination of a high chancellor, that can be classified as a treasonous act with intent to destabilize world balance. That qualifies as a terrorist attack."

"Hey, I didn't try to kill him! That wasn't me! I wasn't even there for that!"

I rolled my eyes for a second time. "You were there for the kidnapping. And just because he left you behind to kill Kit Matheson instead of bringing you to help assassinate Barrows doesn't mean you are any less guilty than Santiago."

He started sputtering and I shook my head, cutting him off. "Save it. I'm not going to talk to you on the street. We're going back to the office first. Then you can give me all your lines. I suggest you think of a very, very convincing reason why I shouldn't charge you with treason and destabilization. Those charges would make life very uncomfortable for you."

He fell silent. I reached up and tapped on my com. "Blaze?"

A second later, his voice flooded my ear. "You got him?"

"Yeah. A pickup would be nice."

"Heading for your tracker now."

Within a few short minutes, a police hovercar descended into the alley. I pulled the suspect up onto his feet and pressed his back against the alley wall to ensure he didn't get any ideas about trying to flee again.

The driver side door opened, and Agent Jordan Blaze stepped out, a grin on his face. "Carter, you still surprise me some days. I thought for sure he was going to get away."

I glared at him, and I had to tilt my head back when he walked closer. At over six and a half feet tall, he towered over me. I hated that he was so much taller than me, especially when he made fun of me for being barely an inch over five feet. "Unlike you, I don't give up in my pursuits, even when running across the whole bloody town."

My words didn't even faze him. He was still smiling as he took our suspect's arm and turned him to face the wall. "I didn't give up. It was pure luck he chose to run out of the strip club through the door closest to you and not me. There was no way I could catch up to you."

"Seems your long legs are still not as good as my short ones," I said triumphantly.

Jordan barked out a laugh. "My legs, in no way, compare to yours, of that you are correct." He turned his attention to the cuffed man. "I'm going to conduct a search. Do you have any weapons or anything sharp or dangerous on your person that might harm me?"

The man huffed before finally murmuring something I couldn't hear. Jordan fished in his left pants pocket and pulled out a knife. He held it out to me, and I took it and laid it on the hood of the car. That was soon followed by two more knives and a capped needle. The needle was filled with some sort of drug, but it was unclear what kind.

Jordan continued the pat down professionally, divesting him of all his possessions. I dutifully bagged everything and labeled them appropriately. I handed Jordan a biometrics scanner, and he pressed the suspect's palm to the screen before handing it back to me. It only took a few seconds for the database to pull up his name and record.

"Claude Parkston. It seems like you have several arrest warrants, Claude." I scanned down through the report as Claude screwed his face up in a mixture of anger, defiance, and contempt.

Jordan escorted Claude to the car and put him in the backseat. He walked back over to me and I passed him the scanner. "I hope this is the break we've been looking for."

Jordan started reading the warrants and sneered. "This guy is despicable. Two convictions for assault, one for rape and one for felony larceny. Warrants for cases in connection with murder, theft, and piracy." He shook his head. "This mercenary is not one of the nice ones."

I bristled in irritation and clenched my jaw. “Can you stop bringing that up?”

One corner of his mouth turned up, though his serious expression remained. “Am I ever going to stop giving you flack for referring to a mercenary as ‘respectable as far as mercenaries go’? No. You will never live that down.”

I couldn’t blame him for teasing me about it because if our positions were reversed, I would have teased him mercilessly, too. “That knowledge stays between us, got it? I’ll lose my job if the captain ever finds out I colluded with a mercenary.”

Jordan shook his head. “To find a kidnapped girl. Even the captain would understand that.”

“I doubt it.”

“Wouldn’t the high chancellor bail you out?”

I sighed. “Maybe, but there’s always a chance he wouldn’t. So, keep your mouth shut.”

“Of course.” He handed me the tablet back. “I’ve always got your back, Jules. We’re partners.”

Partners seemed like a shallow description of what we were. He was like a brother to me. Jordan and I went through the Intergalactic Police Force training together. I had known going in that it would be difficult and rigorous, but I hadn’t been prepared for the mental tests and strains they put on us. Jordan and I were in the same program, and we’d become friends instantly, needing someone else to rely on amongst all the pressure. We had even been lucky enough to receive the same assignment after graduation. We had both steadily moved up from enforcers to officers and finally to agents.

However, a little over a year ago, I was transferred to the diplomatic security branch because of my skill at deception detection. It was a valuable skill to have when trying to prevent assassinations or terrorist activities. I couldn’t blame my superiors for transferring me, but they didn’t transfer Jordan with me. That had been rough. We were partners, and we trusted each other. Working without him at my back felt wrong.

Then High Chancellor Ben Barrows had been kidnapped during the peace summit between the Conglomeration and the Alliance confederations on Venetus. He had been missing for weeks before he appeared again, and he personally assigned me to his case, to find out who was behind it, especially since Santiago, his kidnapper, claimed the Conglomeration had hired him.

Barrows gave me permission to bring anyone to the team I wanted to. The IPF already had a task force that investigated these kinds of diplomatic issues, but I wanted Jordan. I asked if he wanted the transfer, and he hadn't hesitated. It was good to have him at my back again.

It had taken weeks for us to interrogate all of Santiago's men. The ones who had been with him when he attempted to assassinate the high chancellor had been killed, but the rest of his crew had been on his ship and were apprehended before that. None of them had seemed to know who had hired them or been willing to give up the names of anyone else involved. There had been one, finally, who I managed to crack. He had listed off all the men who were supposed to be with Santiago on Venetus, and all were accounted for except one.

The name he gave was obviously fake. We were eventually able to piece together that it was the guy Kit said was supposed to dispose of her after she was kidnapped the second time. She had managed to overpower him and left him tied up while she tried to prevent Ben's assassination. Unfortunately, Kit was almost killed in the assassination attempt and had to undergo emergency surgery. By the time she regained consciousness and told us about the mercenary, he was already gone. According to his crewmate, Claude liked to hang out on Lithios. It had taken a lot of legwork to track him down since we only had a fake name, but it was worth it. Claude was one of the inner circle. He knew more about Santiago than anyone else still living.

Jordan and I got into the car and he fired up the engine, programming it to head back to the local IPF office. I leaned back in my seat and rubbed the back of my neck. "I didn't expect him to put up such a fight."

Jordan chuckled. “You expect people to look at you, this tiny woman, and see the roaring beast within, and they don’t. Those of us who know you know you are fierce and not to be messed with, but guys like him?” He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder at Claude. “They have no idea you’re a firecracker.”

I grunted. He was right and I knew it, even though it irked me. I hated people judging me based on my size. I was more than what showed on the outside.

Jordan ignored my unhappy noise and smiled. “I have a good feeling about this one.”

“Me too.” I peeled my black gloves off and checked over my knuckles. There didn’t seem to be too much damage from plowing my fist into Claude’s body, and I was grateful for that. I used my fists often enough to have built up some resistance to bruising. It wasn’t much, but it was something, and I would be grateful for the small things in life.

We didn’t say much on the drive back. It wasn’t a long trip. Jordan carefully parked the car in the lot. He climbed out, unfolding his long limbs, and helped Claude exit the vehicle. I followed behind them as Jordan pulled him towards the building. I wasn’t going to give him any opportunity to escape. He was too valuable.

We walked through the lobby and public waiting area before Jordan steered Claude through a side door with a nod at the enforcer behind the desk. The back room was full of bustling people flitting from place to place, holding tablets, and gathering around holographic projection screens. There were a few criminals in the mix being processed or moved from room to room.

Jordan brought Claude to a halt in front of one of the check-in stations and began the booking process. I transferred his possessions to the enforcer behind the desk and watched as Jordan and the enforcer collected scans, fingerprints, blood samples, and what personal information they could, though Claude wasn’t very forthcoming.

Eventually, the booking process was finished, and Jordan hauled him away to get him changed. Once Claude was dressed in neon orange, he'd be placed in either a holding cell or an interrogation room. I banked on it being a holding cell until Jordan and I could confer on how to handle the interrogation.

“Agent Carter.”

I turned to see Captain Bryan heading in my direction. I nodded at him. “Sir.”

He was looking at Jordan's retreating form. “I take it you found your suspect.”

It wasn't phrased as a question, but I nodded again anyway. “Yes, sir.”

“Excellent.” Captain Bryan rubbed the back of his neck. The skin around his jaw turned flabby as he arched his head, making him look something like a jellyfish. It wasn't that the IPF captain was fat; he just had a little chub that was probably onset from age more than an unhealthy lifestyle. I hadn't known the captain before yesterday, but as far as IPF captains went I thought he was rather good. We had communicated before Jordan and I had traveled to Lithios, and he had been helpful. Some captains didn't like dealing with off-world agents, as we tended to come with extra paperwork and a lack of local knowledge, but Bryan didn't seem to hold it against us.

“I would like to interrogate the suspect. His name is Claude Parkston. He has several outstanding warrants, and quite the record already. I think if I apply some leverage in the right way, we'll get some information.”

Captain Bryan nodded. “Use whatever or whoever you need. If there's anything else you need, don't hesitate to ask. I hope he's the break you've been looking for.”

I hadn't shared much, but the captain knew Jordan and I were the lead investigators in the high chancellor's case. Even if it might not have been as significant to someone from

Lithios, he still knew the importance this case held. I was grateful for the cooperation.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll be sure to do that.”

The captain turned to catch another agent, and I took the opportunity to head down a hallway towards the interrogation rooms. I picked an empty one, checked it over, and then went into the adjoining room. Projection recording systems were set up in the interrogation room, and I checked the equipment to ensure it was all working properly and on standby. The session would need to be recorded, for a variety of reasons, and I didn’t want it to malfunction.

Jordan found me there not much later. He smiled. “I figured I would find you prepping a room.”

I nodded, not looking at him as I ran the last check on the computer. “I think it’s ready. I want it recording from the moment he’s brought into the room, not just while I’m in there.”

Jordan pulled out a chair beside me and plopped down. “Okay. What’s the approach you want to take with this guy?”

I chewed on my lip, thinking. “I need to establish a baseline, and then I want to see what he thinks about Santiago and the kidnapping. We might be able to trick him about the Conglomeration involvement to catch him in a lie. And I want to know what his reaction will be to Kit. She can identify him. That gives us a lot of leverage. And there are his other warrants, too.”

Thinking about it, I pulled up his record again. I read down through his warrants. “Check this out: he’s wanted for murder on Ascillon. Says here he bludgeoned a store clerk to death during a robbery. They have him on camera. And guess what Ascillon has?”

Jordan caught on and laughed harshly. “The death penalty.”

“Precisely. I bet he won’t be too hard to rope onto our side with a record like that. Not if we can take the death penalty off the table.”

“Looks like we might have this one in the bag.”

“Yeah, *if* he knows anything.” I tapped my fingers against the tablet. “If he doesn’t know anything then this will all be a waste of time. Just because Santiago trusted him doesn’t mean he told Claude who really hired them.”

“Think positively. I think we’ll get something out of this.”

“I hope so.”

“Want me to have someone bring him here?”

“Yes.”

Jordan left and came back a few minutes later, closing the door firmly behind him. “Someone will bring him in shortly.”

I moved closer to the virtual display, pulled up the software, and began recording. Before long, the door to the interrogation room opened and Claude was led inside by an enforcer. I was glad the holographic cameras could catch every angle because Claude turned his face away from the enforcer with a sneer, and I would have missed it otherwise.

The enforcer left, and Claude reclined in his chair, eyes roving the room. His hands were unbound, but that was by my request. It was always easier to understand someone’s body language when they weren’t being forcefully restrained. And he couldn’t leave; the room was locked. And I didn’t fear for my safety; I’d already proved he wasn’t a threat to me physically.

Jordan pointed to Claude on the projection. “He’s rubbing his thumb.”

I twisted the projection controls so it focused in on his leg. I squinted until I could see his right hand, sitting on his leg, absently rubbing his thumb with his forefinger. “Bingo. Self-soothing gesture.” That probably meant he was afraid, though it could just be a sign of stress. Given the circumstances, it was most likely both.

Knowing he was off-kilter would be an advantage we could use. Jordan and I sat there for quite some time, studying his behavior. He didn’t get up and pace, though it seemed like he wanted to. He shifted positions restlessly several times.

I studied his body, cataloging his graying beard and how it concealed some of the lower part of his face. It wouldn't be impossible to identify expressions through the beard, but it could present a challenge. His body was built like a barrel, and I watched how he moved around. It seemed like he might have an old injury in one shoulder which restricted his movements. Another thing to account for. His hooded eyes studied the blank walls in irritation. He didn't like being there at all.

Finally, after about an hour, I stood up, picking up my tablet as I did. "Okay. I think I'm ready. You good?"

Jordan stood up with a nod. "Ready when you are."

I opened the door and my eyes zeroed in on the suspect. He was watching me closely, steeling himself for what was to come. I kept my expression blank as I moved into the room and pulled out the chair across from him. Jordan closed the door firmly and moved to stand against the wall behind me. I didn't have to look at him to know he'd have a hard and unfriendly look on his face. He was taking the role of bad cop. He usually pulled it off well, too.

Slowly, I sat down in the chair, not taking my eyes off him, and plopped my tablet in my lap. I crossed my legs and relaxed my posture. He met my eyes for the first few moments, but when it became clear I wasn't going to speak, he looked away. His eyes darted around the room, from me to Jordan, then to the wall and back. He might be looking for a way out, but he wasn't going to find one.

Finally, I could see the silence becoming too much for him. "I want a lawyer."

I shrugged and his eyes darted back to me. I smiled sweetly. "I haven't asked you any questions yet."

He blinked, surprised by my attitude. I watched his eyebrows lift and his mouth part slightly. Good baseline for surprise. I leaned forward slightly, and he tensed. "You know why you're here, Claude."

He swallowed. "I didn't try to kill that high chancellor."

Truth. Of a sort. I smiled again. “You didn’t try to kill him, but you knew Santiago was going to kill him. You knew your boss was going to go out and set up that rifle and try to shoot him.”

Claude’s head and eyes dropped. I sighed. “Did you like your boss? Santiago?”

“What kind of a question is that?” Claude sounded confused, but his face gave nothing else away. No contempt, no obvious dislike, nor admiration.

I shrugged. “What about Kit Matheson?”

Contempt lit up his face as he looked away. “I don’t know who that is.”

“Liar.” I pursed my lips. “According to her, Santiago ordered you to kill her.”

“That never happened.”

Another lie. “She says you took her down to the water to kill her and dump the body. She overpowered you and escaped.”

His hand lifted to scratch his forehead, briefly shading his eyes, and then returned to his lap. He shifted in his chair and licked his lips. Then, he shook his head. “That wasn’t me.”

“Then why do you feel ashamed about it?”

His eyes shot to mine. I shrugged. “You obviously feel ashamed that she was able to overpower you. I bet that wasn’t good for your reputation.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” There was a sneer on his face, and he crossed his arms protectively, trying to create a barrier between us.

Jordan spoke. “It’s certainly plausible. I mean, my partner took you down with barely a fight today.”

Anger flashed vividly across his face when he looked at Jordan and then at me. That bit of information rankled him. He said nothing, though. Obviously, he knew talking while he was angry was a bad idea.

I shrugged. “Guess you don’t have an excuse for that. Truthfully, it doesn’t matter what I think happened. Kit has given her testimony, and we’ll get her set up to positively identify you. Once that happens, it’s off to trial.” I paused so he could think about the ramifications of a trial. “You do know who Kit Matheson is, right? I guess she’s going by Kit Silverman now, but regardless. She saved the high chancellor’s life. She’s an intergalactic hero. Do you really think you’ll get a not guilty vote? I don’t think so. But you can take your chances with trial if you want.”

Stubbornly, he refused to speak. I pressed my lips together, knowing I wasn’t going to break him on this one. Shifting tactics, I clicked on a file on my tablet. “Tell me about the store clerk you killed on Ascillon.”

The swift change in topic threw him. I saw a hint of fear flash across his face before irritation took over. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Now, Claude, we both know that’s a lie.” I sat forward, drawing his attention as I planted my elbows on the table. “You have a warrant out for bludgeoning a girl to death during a robbery. Don’t you remember?” I pulled up a picture of the girl’s dead body and showed it to him.

I watched his face closely and was rewarded when I saw the corner of his mouth turn up for an instant before settling into a flat line. A second later, an exaggerated look of disgust crossed his face. “I don’t know who that is.”

He was smart for trying to portray a fake emotion, but I wasn’t fooled. His true feelings still showed. He wasn’t disgusted by her mangled body; he was happy she was dead. I don’t know what she had done, but she must have made some misstep during the robbery that set him off. He was obviously a sick and twisted individual.

Exaggerated confusion on my face, I looked from him to the girl. “Oh. You’re saying you *don’t* know her?” I played up the fakeness in my voice so he’d catch on. He gave me an annoyed look and I pulled the tablet back. “Well, that’s a relief

then, if it wasn't you who robbed the store and beat the girl to death with a golf club. Do you know why that's such a relief?"

Claude didn't answer. I smiled at him, pulling up another file, but not showing him yet. "Ascillon has the death penalty. Not a lot of worlds ascribe to that level of justice anymore, but Ascillon is old school. And that girl? She might have looked twenty-one, but she was only seventeen."

Fear flashed across his face again and his blink rate tripled. I glanced over my shoulder at Jordan. "Do you happen to know how many death penalty convictions on Ascillon are for the murder of minors?"

"Ninety percent of death penalty convictions are for the death of a minor."

I whistled. "That's a pretty high number." Then I winked at Claude and shrugged. "But hey, you could live for years on appeals alone."

"Actually," Jordan spoke again, satisfaction in his voice, "the limit for appeals is one year. They don't let you drag it out. The government feels like that defeats the purpose. You might put it off for a couple of months, but certainly not years."

Claude was looking between us both now, and his whole body had gone still. He was trying to figure out where we were going with this, and especially what evidence we had. I played it out a little longer before dropping my ace in the hole.

"But you don't have to worry, do you Claude? You didn't kill that girl. I bet you weren't even in the store that night, were you?"

"That's right. I wasn't even there. I didn't kill that girl. You have the wrong guy."

"Right." I flipped the tablet around so he could see it. "So that's *not* you on the security camera?"

The tablet played the recording on file of the girl's murder. The owner had installed hidden security cameras to monitor employee behavior and had caught the whole incident on tape.

I pointed to where a figure was repeatedly hitting the poor girl with a golf club while two others looked on.

“That guy right there? That’s not you?” I lifted an eyebrow at him as raw fear replaced all other emotion on his face. “That’s a crystal-clear shot of you right there. I’m betting you have no alibi and no other plausible explanation. Maybe a long-lost twin? Oh, no, your birth records show otherwise. But I’m sure you have a reasonable explanation for why you killed that girl.”

I winked at him again and turned the tablet off. I stood up and glanced at Jordan. He motioned towards the door, and I nodded.

“Wait, what?” Claude seemed confused by our actions. “You’re leaving?”

I paused and glanced back at him, hoping he’d fall right into my trap. “Well, I don’t think I need to address any of your other warrants. Ascillon will have priority. Even over the attempted murder of Kit Matheson.” He swallowed, hard. I shrugged and turned my back on him. “I guess you’re on your own.”

Jordan opened the door and gestured for me to exit first. I took a step forward and Claude rose from his seat, scraping the chair noisily against the floor. “Wait! You aren’t going to offer me a deal?”

“You want a deal?” I glared at him over my shoulder. “You killed a seventeen-year-old girl in cold-blood, for no reason. What could you possibly have that might be worth her life?”

Claude licked his lips, obviously scrambling now. He knew we had him. There was no walking away from this one, especially not with Santiago dead. He wouldn’t be able to leverage Claude out or spring him from prison. I’d bet with Santiago’s crew arrested his list of friends was extremely short.

“You want to know about the attempted assassination of High Chancellor Barrows? I have information about that.”

Jordan laughed. “We know who tried to assassinate him. Santiago. He’s dead. Agent Carter killed him herself.”

I winced, wondering if mentioning I was the one who killed Santiago would make Claude distance himself from me, but he didn’t miss a beat. Obviously, he didn’t care for Santiago as much as I had assumed. “Yeah, but he was hired to kill him. It wasn’t Santiago’s plan.”

I smirked. “The Conglomeration hired Santiago. We know that.”

Claude rolled his eyes. “That was a lie he told everyone to keep the heat off the real boss.”

Bingo. I faced him. “Who hired him?”

He pressed his lips together, and something inside me deflated. “You don’t know, do you?”

A pained look settled on his face. I sighed and looked at the floor. I’d really hoped this would be the break we’d been looking for. I scuffed my shoe against the floor. “Snails!”

Jordan gave my shoulder a light squeeze. I shook my head, aggravated, and turned for the door.

“Wait!” Claude seemed desperate and I paused. “Look, I don’t know who hired Santiago. He refused to tell anyone. A few of us knew it wasn’t the Conglomeration, that he was putting that out there on behalf of the real boss.”

No one knew. That was worse news. It almost made me regret killing him. *Almost.* I rubbed my forehead for a long moment. “Santiago certainly was crafty.”

Jordan seemed aggravated too. “He didn’t tell anyone. That was smart.”

Claude shook his head, drawing my attention again. “Santiago was real smart about that kind of thing. He kept all the information to himself. He didn’t want anyone else to know and mess it up or get ideas of their own.”

“That doesn’t help us, Claude.”

He put up his hands in a placating gesture. “But Santiago was clever in another way. He never told anyone, but he kept records.”

“Records? What do you mean?”

“I mean he kept a file on everyone he ever did business with. Communications, logs, contact information, everything. He kept all of it on a memory stick. A thumb drive.”

That was as good as gold. That could give us a name and prove involvement. Hope welled up in my chest. “Where is it?”

Claude tilted his chin up and his face relaxed. He realized he had something we wanted. I bristled, annoyed at myself for forgetting to play it cool. I tapped a finger on my tablet for several seconds before I walked back to the table and sat down. I motioned for Claude to do the same, and he slowly sank into his chair.

I leaned forward, giving him a long, hard look. “Listen to me very closely, Claude. I am going to offer you a one-time deal. One time only. It expires in two minutes, so listen carefully. You tell me what I want to know, you give me accurate information that leads to this file, and I will take the death penalty off the table.”

He sneered. “That’s it? That’s not much of a deal.”

I glared at him. “That’s a big difference. You can live the rest of your life behind bars, or you can be sentenced to death. They’ll start trial in maybe six months. Give it another two for a conviction and sentencing. Six months of appeals, if you’re lucky. You’re dead in a year. This is an open and shut case. You have no defense. The prosecution won’t need to offer you a deal. They will get the death penalty. I promise you I will make sure they do. I would think twice before I turn this down if I were you.”

Claude watched me with hooded eyes. “I want the deal in writing and signed.”

I nodded. “Done.”

He closed his eyes before giving me a piercing look. “No tricks, Agent Carter.”

I shook my head as Jordan disappeared out the door. “No tricks. I want this just as much as you do.”

“Yeah, I doubt that,” he grunted.

Within half an hour, we had the paperwork ready. I was relieved at the swiftness with which we had broken him. We had gotten lucky with the video. Without that, it would have been a different story altogether.

I set a pen and the papers in front of him. “It’s already been signed and sealed. Just need your signature.”

Claude eyed it before he wrote out his name. He set the pen down and sat back in his chair. I took the paper and passed it off to Jordan. “Now, tell me where to find the file.”

He looked between the two of us, calculation in his eyes. I leaned forward on my elbows before he could say anything. “Think very carefully before you speak, Claude. We have a deal. You give me the information, and the death penalty goes off the table. But let me make sure you understand if you give me false information, I’ll charge you with treason.”

His jaw dropped. “What?”

I lifted an eyebrow at him, feeling my face harden. “I’ve been very careful so far not to refer to anything you’ve done as treasonous, but that can change in an instant. I’ve decided to only charge you with the attempted murder of Kit Matheson, but if you give me bogus information, I might have to change that to treason, conspiracy to commit murder, aiding and abetting, attempt to destabilize, the list goes on. Do you know what we can do with you once you’re charged with treason?”

The threat hung thick in the room while Claude glared at me. I shrugged, unaffected by his look. “I don’t want to have to do that. Give me accurate information and nothing happens. Lie to me, and I’ll make your life miserable to the point you’ll wish you were dead.”

The silence stretched. I let it. I let him stew and think about it. I watched him carefully and only relaxed when resignation

settled on his face. “Santiago kept a memory stick listing everyone he’d ever worked for. There’s a lot of information I’m sure you’ll want.”

“We didn’t find it on his ship.”

Claude shook his head. “He wanted it kept away from him in case anyone ever infiltrated his ship.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why didn’t he keep an online file?”

He shrugged. “Santiago was paranoid. You can hack into a system and destroy files easily. A disconnected copy is a lot harder to get rid of. He kept a home of sorts on Viridis. A hideout in case something ever went south. The file is there.”

“How do you know that?” Jordan queried.

“Santiago had me help stock the place. I wasn’t supposed to know about the file, but he was always hinting that he had blackmail on everyone he’d ever worked for. We stopped on Viridis after we kidnapped the chancellor. It was a quick detour, but I went with him to the hideout to stock a few things. I saw him with the file on the computer. He turned it off as soon as I came in, but I still saw it.”

All signs were saying that he wasn’t being deceptive. He believed he was telling the truth. There was no guarantee the file was still there, or that it contained anything about the person or persons who had hired Santiago to kidnap Barrows, but we had to check it out. If nothing else, a file of dirty laundry could be useful in other cases.

I pushed a clean pad of paper and a pen across the table to him. “Write down the address and directions. Coordinates, if you have them. Write down everything else you can think of about the hideout. Security codes, security features, everything. Got it?”

Claude nodded and picked up the pen. Jordan and I exchanged glances. This wasn’t necessarily the break we were looking for, but if the file really did exist, then it could have the information we needed. This was still an important step in the right direction. It was a solid lead if nothing else.

When he was finished, I took the pad and scanned the contents before standing up. “I hope for your sake you’re telling the truth.”

CHAPTER TWO

Julia

As much as I would have rather gone straight to Viridis, our unit was based on Venetus, as protocol dictated since the incident took place there, and we needed to check in with them and approve our next move with our captain there. Although, as the lead investigator, I had the authority to pursue leads at my discretion, I wanted to follow protocol. This case needed to be airtight. No loopholes by not following proper procedure. This needed to be by the book.

I was used to traveling for work and I didn't mind it, especially since it mostly consisted of short trips. Venetus was in the same solar system, so it wouldn't take more than a day to get back. We had only been on Lithios for two days, and I was happy the trip had been a short one. I wanted to get back to Alexi. I hated being away from her, but sometimes it wasn't practical to take her everywhere with me.

Jordan and I boarded a ship, and I settled back into a seat and pulled out my tablet. I sent a quick message to my little sister to let her know I'd be back soon and about what time to expect me. She messaged back a short reply, but I hadn't expected anything more from her. She was sixteen and going through a rebellious stage. I tried to be as understanding as I could, especially since I'd been there myself, but it was tough. We weren't the same person, and I didn't know how to relate to her.

"Hey." Jordan nudged my arm and nodded at the message on my tablet. "Everything okay?"

I sighed and nodded. "Yeah. It's Alexi. I haven't exactly been on her good side lately."

Jordan smiled. "She's a teenager. A little rebellion never hurt anyone. She probably misses you. Maybe once we crack this case you can have a little time off. Maybe go back to Luna Abra and work from home for a while."

That idea was appealing, but I wasn't sure it was possible. "Maybe. If we crack this case. I might be able to snag some time off and take Alexi on a vacation somewhere."

"Now *that* sounds like a fabulous idea."

A pretty attendant walked past, and Jordan caught her eye and shot her a smile packed with charm. She blushed and smiled back at him before disappearing down the aisle.

"She's pretty," I commented. "Not quite your usual type."

He lifted an eyebrow at me. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Usually, you go for the dumb ones. She looks smarter than your normal prey."

Jordan pressed his hand to his heart dramatically. "You wound me."

I held in a laugh, but I still smiled. "Yes, I do. What happened to Ilene? She seemed at least moderately intelligent. I thought you liked her?"

"Well, seems she found some stuffy dude who makes more money than I do." He pressed his lips together. "But hey, it's okay. I can do better."

Feeling annoyed with Ilene, I nodded. He deserved better than that. "You certainly can. Ilene doesn't know what she's missing out on."

Jordan glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "And what about that accountant friend of yours? Is he still around?"

Truthfully, no. And I didn't want to talk about it. I crossed my legs and looked out the window. "Keith is still Keith."

He snorted. "That's not much of an answer. Are you guys dating, or aren't you? It's not that hard."

I shrugged. "We go on dates occasionally. I don't know if I would classify that as dating in an exclusive sense." The truth was Keith and I were *not* dating. We had both talked about it the last time we had gone out and mutually decided we had no chemistry. We weren't going to waste each other's time. Now I

was stuck without a name to throw at people when they asked if I was single. Keith had been my convenient excuse whenever people said I should date more.

Jordan shook his head. “You need to dump that guy. Seriously, Jules. Just end it. You aren’t doing each other any good. Not really.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Jordan.”

He knew me well enough to drop the subject, but he was miffed at me. I ignored him and continued to stare out the window. Talking about Keith reminded me of home.

Luna Abra had been my home since starting IPF training. At least, it was as much of a home as it could have been since I was always traveling. Arcadia Prime was my home world, but I didn’t claim it as home. It hadn’t ever felt like home. I had felt more at home among the recruits in the barracks on Luna Abra than I’d ever felt anywhere on Arcadia Prime.

Not wanting to think about the past, I focused on the case, running the interview with Claude over in my head, just to be sure I hadn’t missed anything. I had a gut feeling he hadn’t lied about the file or its location. This was a good, solid lead, and we desperately needed this to work.

The ship docked with a slight shudder several hours later. Jordan and I unbuckled, grabbed our packs, and followed the rest of the crowd out to the terminal. The line through customs was relatively short, and once we flashed our shields, we were ushered through immediately. We didn’t faff around afterward, either, instead heading straight for the exit doors.

Overhead, one of the suns was hanging low to the horizon, but the other one was higher up, giving us several hours of daylight still. Venetus was in a binary system, with two primary suns. During part of the year it offered longer daylight hours, which was a perk, but it had its drawbacks too. Since Arcadia Prime was in the same system, I was used to the strange temperature fluctuations and light variances.

We headed straight for the office. This facility was larger than the one on Lithios. That was because we were in Hilgard,

the capital. Venetus was an independent world, which meant they weren't part of a federation like the Alliance or the Conglomeration. They tried to stay neutral on most foreign relational issues, but IPF was not affiliated with any one federation or planet, and as such we were able to provide a large presence on the planet. It helped keep the peace, which was IPF's main tenet.

The place was buzzing with people and chatter as we passed from room to room. We found the lift and went up three levels to where our unit was located. This floor was only slightly quieter than the main floor. Jordan and I went straight for our designated set of rooms, which consisted of three offices and two conference rooms. It wasn't much, but we didn't need much to function. I had worked cases in far smaller spaces.

"Carter, Blaze, you're back finally."

Agent Abbott spotted us first, looking up from his computer. He pushed his chair back from the table in the conference room, careful of his arthritis, and stood up. His face morphed into a smile, making him appear more youthful.

Jordan laughed and reached for his hand, giving it a shake. "Abbott. I see you haven't retired while we've been gone."

Abbott rolled his eyes and sank back into his chair. "Can it with the age jokes. You need to focus on making it to my age. I see you, you know. You're at that age where you feel invincible." He wagged a finger in the air. "It's not true. That kind of thinking will get you killed quicker than a heart attack."

I smiled at him and dropped my pack into a chair. "What's your secret to living so long? Old or not, you can take a full retirement in a year. IPF isn't exactly the safest career choice out there."

Abbott smiled at me before rubbing a hand over his stubbly gray hair. "Shoot first and ask questions later? No, that's not it." He laughed at his own joke, poor taste though it was. "Always find partners you can trust. If you get put out there with people you can't rely on, you're going to bite the dust. That's just the way it is."

My eyes went to Jordan, and he nodded at me. I nodded back. As long as I had Jordan around, I didn't need to worry about not having backup.

Officer Paige Michelson stuck her head in the door, glasses nearly sliding off the end of her nose. She lifted her hand to stall their progress, shoving them back up her face. "Boss?"

I smiled at her, though I shook my head at her appearance. Her bronzed hair was pulled back into a bun so tight it stretched the skin on her face, making her eyes appear more slanted than they already were. She was wearing an appropriate dress, but in a garish yellow color that washed out her skin tone. She was the newest member of our unit, and fresh out of officer training. She was our communications specialist, which meant she relayed information back and forth and was a whiz on the computer.

"Michelson, get the team together for a debriefing."

Paige nodded, causing her glasses to slip again. She caught them as they started to fall off her face and she disappeared back out the door. Abbott visibly held back a comment as she disappeared, and I glared at him. He lifted his hands. "What? I didn't say anything."

"Yeah, but you were thinking it. Stop it."

He didn't deny it. He changed the subject instead. "You caught him, I heard."

I nodded and reached into my pack to pull out my tablet. "Yes, we did. And we've got a lead. But I'm only going to say all this once, so we'll wait until everyone gets here."

It took less than ten minutes for everyone to assemble. Agent Karson and Officer Borski appeared first, dropping into their seats after exchanging greetings. Captain Tyson came in last, giving each of us long, assessing looks before sitting down at the table as well. Michelson came back and took a seat, though she continued typing away on her tablet. She always seemed to be doing something on that thing.

That was everyone, so I pulled up Claude's file on my tablet and projected it so everyone could see it. I gave a short recap

of who he was, how we apprehended him, and then what information he gave us.

Michelson frowned. “A flash drive? It isn’t a digital file?”

“No. Santiago was overly cautious and kept a hard copy only. He wouldn’t leave it connected to the net.”

Captain Tyson rubbed his mouth for a long, thoughtful moment, but didn’t comment. I looked at him until he met my eyes. “We need to go to Viridis and search his place and see if we can find it. There could be more than just the name of whoever hired Santiago on that file. The sooner the better.”

He nodded. “Your team should leave first thing in the morning. This sounds like a promising lead.”

Having gotten the permission I wanted, I turned back to the rest of the team. “Borski, call the spaceport and get everything set up. I want to be out of here at six tomorrow. Abbott, contact the IPF office on Viridis and let them know we’re coming. I want everything ready for when we arrive. We’ll need tactical and forensics teams, and transportation. Make sure we get what we need.”

Abbott nodded, making a quick note on his tablet. “On it.”

“Michelson, find out everything you can about that address. I want satellite pictures, infrared scans, property history, everything. Santiago was extremely paranoid, and I wouldn’t put it past him to have set up security measures. Karson, brush up on Santiago’s file and see if you can predict the kind of precautions he might have taken.”

Agent Karson was the profiler. He had a degree in psychology and specialized in reading people and seeing behavioral patterns. It was a unique skill to have, and I knew to play to his strengths. He might not be able to predict exactly what we would encounter, but he could give us an idea of what to look for.

I glanced at Jordan to see if he had anything to add, but he shook his head. I cleared my throat. “Keep this under wraps. If people ask, we found one of Santiago’s hideouts, but don’t

mention the file. This stays as quiet as possible. If someone doesn't need to know, don't say anything. Got it?"

There were nods and murmurs of acceptance. Satisfied, I closed up my tablet. "Let's get going."

The rest of the team rose and shuffled from the room. I took a second to pack up before Jordan and I headed for the door.

"Going to your quarters?"

I nodded. "Want to say hi to Alexi?"

He nodded back. "Sure."

We took the lift up two floors. I stepped out and looked up and down the hallway. This floor was temporary housing for agents. Most offices were equipped with rooms for agents on assignment to have somewhere to stay. It was safer and cheaper to stay at the office than at a hotel somewhere. The security was much better, and it was convenient.

I turned right, counting doors until I almost reached the end of the hallway. I pulled my access card from my pocket and swiped it before typing in my personal security code.

The door slid open, and I stepped inside. Piano music met my ears immediately, the volume up a little too high. It wouldn't bother any of the other rooms, but it was still loud. I held in a sigh.

"Alexi?" I called out, moving through the kitchen towards the living area.

A dark head popped up from one of the sofas. Hazel eyes locked onto me, and Alexi jumped to her feet. I relaxed when she hugged me. I smiled into her hair and squeezed her. "Hey, kiddo. How are you?"

She pulled away and wrinkled her nose at me. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me kiddo? I'm sixteen, not six."

There was genuine annoyance on her face, but there was no anger. I nodded. "You're right. It's a habit. Sorry, Alexi."

“No hug for me?” Jordan folded his arms and pretended to glower. She, in turn, tossed her head to the side in dramatic fashion and opened her arms at him.

“Blaze. I know better than to try to get away without a hug from you.” She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. He slid an arm around her shoulder before laughing at her antics.

While she was distracted, I went over to the control panel on the wall and bumped the volume down so we could talk without shouting. Alexi still caught me and gave me a look, but she didn’t say anything. I smiled sweetly at her.

She sniffed, released Jordan, and flopped back down on the sofa. “How long are you back for this time?”

“Just until tomorrow.” I hesitated and decided to wait to tell her where we were going next.

She grunted and rolled her eyes. Jordan lifted an eyebrow at me before glancing around. “So, Alexi, who are you listening to?”

Her eyes lit up and she smiled. “Leo Night. He’s the best pianist ever, without a doubt. Not to mention what he can do with a flute. Did you know he’s been playing instruments since he was, like, four? He’s my age and he’s one of the most well-known musicians out there.”

I had long since heard all of Leo Night’s background from her and had subsequently bought her his recordings and posters, and I was hoping to one day snag concert tickets. That would have to wait a while though. Concert tickets were expensive.

Jordan whistled. “He sounds amazing.”

Alexi nodded, proud of her music choice. “He is. His music is complex and beautiful. He writes all his own music, too.”

“Some days I think she’d die if she ever met the guy, the way she goes on and on about him.” I reached over and affectionately ruffled her hair. She growled and dodged to the side while I laughed at her.

As soon as I touched the side of her hair, I knew something was different. I blinked and brushed some of the strands to the side. “What did you do to your hair?” I couldn’t keep the incredulity out of my voice, but I managed to keep from yelling it.

A patch of an inch and a half was shaved from the side of her head. If she parted it a certain way, enough of her hair would fall over and conceal it. I had seen the side shave style before, which was popular among mainstream artists of all varieties, but Alexi had never mentioned her desire to cut her hair like that.

She swatted my hand away with a scowl. “What? It’s called a haircut. You act like I shaved the whole thing.”

I blinked at her and tried to turn off my emotions and focus on her. Her eyes met mine and slid away, her fingers moved around nervously in her lap, and she bit her lip. I reined in my anger and looked at Jordan. He was flashing me a warning look. Probably not the best time to undermine her individuality. There were a lot of worse things she could have done besides cutting her hair. I could manage a haircut.

After a moment, I crouched down in front of her and pulled her hair back from her face, seeing what it would look like from other angles. Alexi gave me a weird look, like she couldn’t figure out what I was trying to do. I scrutinized her face before finally releasing her hair. “Not what I would choose,” I spoke frankly, but without malice. Alexi’s face dropped. I smiled at her and dipped my head so she had to look at me. “But it’s your choice. So, I’m fine with it. You caught me off guard. It’s your hair and you can do with it what you want, whether I like it or not. Do you like it?”

She blinked at me again before reaching up and playing with the ends. She shrugged. “Kinda. It’s hard to get used to. There are certain hairstyles it looks really good with. I’m trying to get them right.”

“I’m sure you’ll find something you like. You know, curl the ends, and pin it back like this,” I pushed her hair back and held it in place with a finger. “That would look good.”

“Maybe.” Alexi shrugged.

“And if you can’t find anything you like, there’s always a wig.” I winked at her.

She stuck her tongue out at me but smiled. “Jerk.”

“Sisters can be jerks for sure.” I straightened up with another smile. “Just remember when you make decisions that you have to live with them. Maybe ask someone’s opinion next time. They can tell you possible problems you hadn’t thought of.”

Alexi squinted her eyes at me. “I asked people, thank you very much.”

“People besides the ones who told you to get that haircut in the first place.” It was a guess, but I knew I got it right when her nose crinkled. I shook my head and turned to Jordan. “Hang on Alexi. I gotta talk to Jordan for a minute.”

I pulled him into the kitchen. He had an amused look on his face. “You think you’re having trouble with that? If her rebellion is as mild as this, I think you’re safe.”

“Only if it stays this mild.” I sighed, making sure to keep my voice down. “What happens when she moves from haircuts to staying out late to hanging around with bad people? That won’t be mild, and I don’t want her to go through the same things I did.”

Jordan nodded. “I know. But she’s not you. Have faith in her. If she knows you trust her then she’s going to try and respect your wishes. She’s still going to mess up, but it may not be on such a scale as you. Okay? You need to relax a little. You did fine with her.”

“Yeah, but I’m not her mom. Is she really going to listen to me and respect me as a parental figure when I’m her sister? Do you have any idea how hard it is to be a mother and a sister at the same time?”

“No, but I think you are balancing it fine. If you start having troubles, then ask for help. Find someone who’s been there. Ask Mariah. Someone.”

His words made sense. I could always ask Mariah if I ran into trouble. “Okay. Okay. You’re right.”

“Of course.” He winked at me. “I’m always right.”

“Ugh, don’t make me gag.” I smiled and stuck my tongue out at him and then raised my voice so Alexi would hear. “You excited to go to Viridis?”

“Viridis?” Alexi popped up and hurried over to us, excitement on her face. “You’re going to Viridis tomorrow?”

She was so excited I couldn’t hide another smile. “Yes. I’m not sure for how long, though. It depends on what we find.”

“I don’t care.” She rubbed her hands together. “Can I go? Home, I mean, not Viridis. It’s close enough, isn’t it?”

Luna Abra was indeed close enough, being Viridis’ moon. I folded my arms and lifted an eyebrow. “Are you sure? Are you going to behave? I’ll have to spend most of the time on Viridis.”

“I’ll be good. Promise.” She grinned at me. “You leave me alone for days sometimes. I’m old enough to take care of myself.”

I gave her a hard look. “I do not leave you alone. I leave you at IPF headquarters where it’s safe and there’s always someone on duty to help you if you need it and someone to check on you. Our house on Luna Abra doesn’t afford that kind of safety.”

“Please? Julia, please let me go. I miss it. I miss home.”

There was no way I could fault her for that. I missed home too. I pressed my lips together. “Of course, you can come. That was my plan as soon as we got the okay to go. It would be great to stop by home for a little while.”

“Yes!” She jumped, pumping her fist into the air before racing down the hallway. “I need to go pack!”

Jordan chuckled at her enthusiasm. “She’s excited.”

“Aren’t you? Luna Abra is your home, too.”

“Yeah, but I thrive on travel. I love it. I can stand being away from home for a while.”

“Well, I need to make some arrangements before tomorrow.” I glanced down at my feet and caught sight of a hair on my shoulder. I carefully picked it off and let it drift to the floor. “And some sleep would be nice. Whose idea was it to meet so early tomorrow?”

He smirked. “Oh, how making the tough decisions are such a pain! You’re the boss, remember? Making these calls is your job now. And yes, you have to make the calls that make the most sense.”

“All right, stop with the lectures.” I gave his arm a light punch. “Get out of here. You have stuff to do too.”

“Okay, boss, whatever you say.” He gave me a light punch in return before opening the door. “Get some rest. You deserve it. I’ll see you in the morning, Jules.”

“See you tomorrow.” I closed the door behind him and rubbed my temples. I felt fatigued, and there were still things to do. It wasn’t late yet, but I had been awake for what seemed like forever. One of the drawbacks of interplanetary travel.

I grabbed my bag from where I had dropped it and went to my bedroom. I refreshed my supplies, then refolded and repacked all my clothes. Thank goodness they were wrinkle resistant. It was a must for my kind of work.

“Hey, Julia?” Alexi appeared in the doorway.

“Yeah?” I tugged on the zipper, straining until it closed.

“I forgot to tell you Mom called.”

My muscles froze, and my brain forgot what my hands were doing. “She called?”

I could feel Alexi nod behind me. “Yeah. This morning.”

Closing my eyes, I breathed in deeply to calm myself. Once I was sure none of my feelings showed on my face, I turned around. “What did she want?”

Alexi pressed her lips together. “Just to catch up.” She shrugged. “She’s still in that rehab place. Wanted to know how we were doing.”

She was still in rehab. That was surprising. Usually, she could only last two months before she was back on the street. I folded my arms and looked away from her. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her you were working, and we were fine. She...” Alexi hesitated. “She wants us to visit sometime.”

Through sheer willpower alone, I kept the sneer off my face. “That’s not happening any time soon.”

Alexi’s face sagged a little. “We haven’t been on Arcadia Prime for years. I haven’t seen her since your graduation.”

I remembered my graduation from IPF training. Mom had shown up, to my surprise. At first, I was happy. I hadn’t seen her in ages, and I thought she was clean. She looked vibrant and happy, if a little skinny. But she had been with a guy. It had been several years since I had been part of the street world on Arcadia Prime, but I still recognized him as a lowlife drug dealer. He used to have a shop set up a few blocks from our house. I was surprised he had even come to Luna Abra.

Mom had hugged me and told me how proud she was. Alexi had been positively glowing. She only saw Mom a handful of times since we’d been taken by the Department of Social Services when she was three. Alexi didn’t know her the way I did. She didn’t realize how destructive Mom could be.

Within an hour, I realized Mom was still using. I had figured she was, based on her company, but she hid it well. It was the middle of dinner when I noticed her hands doing that telltale twitch. Then she started scratching at her arms and her behavior became erratic. So much for that round of rehab.

If Alexi hadn’t been there, I would have yelled at her in the restaurant. But Alexi was happy to see her mom and had no idea she was using. I couldn’t do that to her. So, I had waited through that awful day. She only stayed until the evening before catching a flight back to Arcadia Prime. Alexi had cried

when she left, and I had hugged her and told her I loved her and her mother loved her too, even if she had to go. Lexi was only twelve.

I wasn't going to let our mother ruin her life too.

"No." I turned and pulled out my tablet, looking at my messages. That was just an excuse not to face her.

"No?" Alexi sounded confused and angry. "Just like that? No discussion, no reasons, just, no?"

Fighting for patience, I didn't look up. "I'm in the middle of a case, Alexi. I can't just pick up and go to Arcadia Prime for a visit. I have responsibilities."

"Well why can't I go?"

"By yourself?" My head jerked up. "To Arcadia Prime? With our mother?" I couldn't keep the incredulity out of my voice. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?" She was starting to sound like a petulant child. "I'm old enough to travel by myself. You taught me how to travel safely, what to say and do and where to avoid. You even taught me how to fight. I'll be fine."

"I have little doubt that you can navigate a spaceport, but there is no way I would leave you with our mother on your own. With the kind of people she knows? The neighborhood she lives in? No."

"She's in rehab, Julia." Alexi folded her arms and squeezed her elbow with one hand. "I don't think there is a lot of danger in a rehab facility."

The last update I had received from the rehab center indicated Mom's treatments were going well and they were thinking of establishing a release date. She was a good patient, they said, doing what they told her to, and she had been clean the entire time. I knew better. It was all an act. Mom knew how to make everyone think she was doing well, that nothing was wrong, and then as soon as they weren't looking, she'd be shooting up again. She'd always been like that.

“You’d be surprised. There are dangers everywhere, Alexi. Mom doesn’t exactly keep the best of company.”

Alexi scowled. “She’s just reached the stage where she can have visitors. Her doctors think having family visit might be good for her.”

“Good for her? What about what’s good for you or for me?” I shook my head, feeling my temper flare up again. “You don’t understand, Alexi. Mom doesn’t need us to visit her, and I’m not about to let you go by yourself. I wouldn’t put you in that kind of danger.”

She scoffed. “That’s a cop out. You hate her and want me to hate her as much as you do! Well news flash, Julia: I’m not you, and I don’t hate our mother.”

I flinched at her tone and words. “I don’t want you to hate her. I just want you to understand she isn’t a saint. She isn’t a good person, and she doesn’t care about us. All she’s ever cared about is her next hit. If she wants you to visit her it’s because she wants you to score drugs for her or do something that results in her getting drugs.”

“What if she’s changed? What if she’s really getting better?”

For years I had played the what-if game. What if this time the rehab worked? What if this time she really wanted to get custody of us back from our foster families? What if this time her boyfriend was a good one? What if this one didn’t hurt her? Every single time I had been disappointed.

I laughed. As soon as I did, I knew it was the wrong response, but I couldn’t take it back. I wasn’t being the mother figure in this conversation; I was being the woman who had shielded her little sister from every bad thing imaginable. “Don’t be naïve, Alexi.”

Her jaw tightened and her brows drew low. “Don’t be such a judgmental, overbearing, jaded, egotistical jerk, Julia!” With those words, she spun on her heel and marched away.

My hands started to shake, and I realized they were clenched into fists. I took a deep breath, trying to calm down and loosen up my muscles. It took a good five minutes of

breathing exercises before I was finally able to drop my shoulders and unclench my fists.

I was angry. It wasn't Alexi's fault. She didn't know. She didn't understand. She had been a little kid when we were with Mom. She didn't know the things Mom had done—the drugs, the alcohol, the parade of men. How she would forget to come home sometimes or forget to feed us. How she would spend all our money on drugs and we would have our heat shut off.

I shoved the memories out of my mind. I couldn't think about the past or fall into that never-ending black hole. It would eat me alive if I let it.

Unable to sit still, I bounced up from the bed and stepped into the adjoining bathroom. I turned on the tap and splashed cold water over my face, again and again, until the cold numbed my senses. I scrubbed my hands with soap, though I knew they were already clean. I stripped my jacket and shirt off until my arms were bare. I grabbed more soap and scrubbed up and over the old scars. I scrubbed until my skin turned beet red. And then I scrubbed some more.

Finally, I shoved my arms under the stream and let the water rinse everything away. All the soap, the memories, the tears. I watched the water circle the drain before disappearing. The old pains were supposed to be dead. Dead and gone. Not ghosts.

I turned the faucet off and grabbed a hand towel, burying my face in it. I dried my arms and winced at how raw my skin now felt. I set the towel down and finally looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was wet, turning from its normal reddish-orange color to blood red. Brown eyes that had seen too much stared back at me, framed by thick lashes. My eyebrows needed to be plucked again. The hair was growing in an unruly fashion. Creamy, pale skin looked red everywhere but my neck. Dark freckles stood out against the raw skin. A faint scar traced down the side of my neck, near my ear. Most people never noticed it.

My arms hurt, and I looked down at them, though I didn't want to see the scars, hated seeing the scars. I tried not to

scowl at them.

Enough, Julia. Enough.

I grabbed a clean shirt, threw it on, reached into a drawer, and pulled out a pair of tweezers. I leaned close to the mirror and began plucking my eyebrows. The little bursts of pain grounded me, and focusing on the task cleared my mind. I didn't want to think about anything else.

When that was finished, I tossed the tweezers down and went back into the bedroom, turning music on. I turned it up, louder than I normally would have, louder than I should have. I didn't care if Alexi heard it. I didn't care if the neighbors heard it. They could send an enforcer to ask me to turn it down if they wanted.

I grabbed the side of the bed and shoved it all the way against the wall, clearing some space in the middle of the room. I unfolded the little stepladder I kept in the closet and placed it in the middle of the floor. I grabbed one of my punching bags from the corner, hefted it up the ladder, and attached it to a hook in the ceiling.

Once the bag was secured and swinging freely, I grabbed my work gloves and pulled them on. I punched the bag, over and over again. I kicked it a few times, rotating to do combinations. The music pounded into my ears, making its way into my veins, pulling me out of my body. I paused and closed my eyes when a particularly good song came on. I swayed back and forth, tilting my head. *Nothing can hurt me, not here, not right now. Not the past, not the future.*

Anger surged in my veins, and I punched the bag again, and again, and again. I tried to push all my anger into my fists and release it. Let the anger out. Kill the bag. That was the goal.

The door opened behind me. I didn't hear it or see it, but I could feel the change in air pressure. I had my back to the door, and I didn't turn around. If it was Alexi, she would say something or leave. If it was anybody else, they'd try and sneak up on me, and it would be the last thing they'd ever do.

I punched the bag again, grunting as I did. I'd be sore tomorrow, and my knuckles would hurt, but I didn't care. After a few moments, the door closed, and I kicked the bag. Hard. It swung around and I grabbed it, stilling it. I took a deep breath. I needed to return to the unflappable, unstoppable cop and big sister. I needed to pull myself together. I was the responsible one, and I needed to take care of things, to protect my sister, and to find out who was responsible for kidnapping High Chancellor Barrows. I needed to be the strong one everyone relied on.

But not yet.

I hit the bag again.

CHAPTER THREE

Julia

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Jordan gave me a worried look. Again. He’d asked me probably five times since we got on the ship.

“I’m fine.” Despite my attempts to conceal my annoyance, some of it leaked through my tone.

“Are you sure?” He obviously wasn’t convinced by my words.

“Seriously, Jordan, lay off.” I looked around us carefully, making sure no one else was listening. The rest of the team didn’t seem to be paying us any attention, but the last thing I needed was anyone thinking I had a problem that might affect the team.

“Okay.” Jordan glared at me. I felt a pang of guilt, but I ignored it. I wasn’t in a good mood, and no, it wasn’t his fault, but I couldn’t magically make myself want to talk about it. I just wanted to pretend yesterday didn’t happen.

The ship shuddered when we dropped out of hyperspace. I sighed, relieved we’d finally made it to Viridis. I felt like I was going to claw my skin off if I had to stay cooped up for much longer. Normally, I didn’t have a problem with the longer trips, but not today. I had no patience for anything today.

An attendant’s voice came over the public com system, saying we’d be docking in less than twenty minutes. I forced my shoulders to relax. I cleaned up my area, shoved my tablet into my bag, and tossed my trash into the receptacle.

“Did something happen?” Jordan asked softly.

Thank goodness he was the only one seated next to me. I glared at him. “What do you think?”

His eyebrows lifted. “What happened after I left last night?”

It’s not his fault, Julia. Chill out. Biting his head off won’t make you feel better.

I took a deep breath and counted to ten. “Mom called.”

That was all I had to say. Understanding crept into his eyes, and I looked away. Jordan knew everything about me, about my past, and about my family. I didn’t keep secrets from him. Only Dennis, Mariah, and Jordan knew how bad my past was. I hadn’t even told my recruiters. Everything from my juvenile years had been sealed away.

“I’m sorry, Jules. Are you okay?” He reached over and took my hand.

I flinched and pulled away. His eyes narrowed and he snatched my hand back. I started to pull it away again, but I knew if I fought too much Jordan would make a scene and the others would start to notice.

Though I didn’t want to, I let him peel away my glove to look at my ruined knuckles. He cursed under his breath and ran his fingers gently across a bruise. “What were you thinking?”

When I pulled my hand away this time, he let me. I pulled my glove back on. “It was a bag.”

The disbelief in his eyes was palpable. “You did that just from a punching bag?” He started to curse again, but the word morphed into a strangled noise in his throat. It took a lot to make Jordan lose his cool. “Seriously, Julia? You look like you broke your hand.”

“It isn’t broken.” It hurt like crazy, but the damage wasn’t severe. “It’s just some bruises.”

“And swelling. What happens if you have to fight while you’re here? How are you going to fight with hands like that?”

“Like I normally would.” I struggled to keep my voice low and even. “It can hurt all day long. I don’t care. I’ll be fine. I needed to let off a little steam.”

His lips thinned. “A little steam? Are you even in a decent frame of mind to be here right now? You’re in charge of the case, Julia. Lives are dependent on you. If you’re having a meltdown, you need to sit this out.”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job,” I hissed at him. “I’ve put it out of my mind. I’m fine. I beat the bag until I couldn’t lift my arm anymore. That helped. Everything is under control.”

He looked away. “Fine. Just don’t do anything stupid. If you’re out of control, don’t put the rest of us in danger.”

We didn’t say anything else while the ship touched down. He was right; I shouldn’t do anything to put the team in jeopardy. But I knew myself. I was okay now. I had processed the anger, gotten it out of my system, and now I could move on. There were other things I needed to think about and focus my attention on. I wouldn’t think about my mother. Right now, I needed to focus on finding Santiago’s hideout and secret file. That was the most important thing.

The attendant announced that it was time to disembark, and I stood up, slinging my pack over my shoulder. Jordan followed suit slowly. I didn’t look at him and I followed the others out the exit door. Alexi appeared behind me and stuck close to me. I was glad. I wanted to get her over to her shuttle and off to Luna Abra as soon as possible.

We stepped down onto the landing pad, and heat waves swirled in the air around us, stifling and heavy. I took a deep breath, drawing the wet heat into my lungs and trying to get used to it. It was the middle of summer here, and Viridis was a unique planet. It was closer to Xolara, the sun in this solar system, so it took on a lot more heat. The atmosphere was thicker than the average planet and blocked most of the harmful radiation and heat, creating an almost greenhouse effect. Some of the northernmost parts were cooler, but most of the planet was hot and humid all the time.

A bus was waiting to relay us to the main building. Once we reached the terminal, I put my hand on Alexi’s shoulder and steered her towards the Luna Abra shuttle. Jordan waved for the rest of our team to head for the front door.

Alexi and I came to a stop in front of the security station for the shuttle. I looked her over to be sure she had everything. “You’ve got your bag? Good. You have money. And you know what to do and what not to do. Don’t talk to strangers and

don't offer to watch anyone else's bags. Stay in populated areas only, and don't aggravate any of the security officers."

She rolled her eyes. "I know, Jules."

I tried to hold in my anxiety. "When you get there, go straight to a cab, and then go straight to the house. Once you get home, I want you to message me. Okay?"

"Yes." She gave me a one-armed hug before hefting her bag onto her shoulder. "Now get to work. Let me know if you'll make it home tonight."

"I will. Be safe."

"Yeah, yeah." She offered a weak smirk and stepped into the security line. I watched to make sure she made it through without issue before I left.

I looked out the window while the hovercab made the quick trip to the IPF office. Exotic trees were everywhere, even in the city, making for a gorgeous view. I knew it was normal for city workers to have trouble keeping them from cropping up even in the smallest cracks in the pavement. It was almost like the planet wanted to take back civilization and turn it wild again.

They weren't new sights for me because I'd been to Viridis plenty of times before. It was close enough to Luna Abra to make a day trip. I hadn't explored the planet outside the major cities, since wild rainforests covered most of the surface, but I went to the populated areas a lot. It made for a good day at the beach when I was in the mood.

Once we landed, I paid the cabbie and hurried inside. I spotted Abbott immediately, and he waved me over. "They were ready and waiting for us. Jordan is debriefing the teams, and we are pulling out in five. We've got a tactical unit and a forensics crew. The tac team will make sure we can get close to the house without accidentally blowing everyone up, and then forensics will process the scene."

I sighed, feeling slightly deflated. "We'll have to wait around while they work, won't we?"

He shrugged and chuckled. "It won't be so bad." He led me over to one of the local enforcers, who nodded at me and motioned into the briefing room. Jordan and Paige were at the front of the room with satellite images of the area displayed on the wall. Jordan was reading something off his tablet, and I leaned against the back wall.

"The area is heavily overgrown, as you can see in these images, and we've decided to go in by ground instead of air. We would be hard pressed to land any aircraft far enough away to ensure we wouldn't set off any alarms or traps. Tactical will go in first and secure the area. Once it's clear, we'll head up and start our search."

Jordan glanced at me, noted my presence, and looked away. "Everyone clear on the plan?" Once he determined there were no questions, he clapped his hands together. "Let's get going then." He gestured to me. "This is Agent Carter, and she is the special agent in charge. All commands go through her or me. Let's do this."

The men got up and began dispersing to their vehicles. Jordan left immediately, ignoring me entirely. I followed him out of the room and picked up the pace, nearly jogging down the hall, until I caught up with him. He glanced at me but said nothing. He was still mad.

We went out to the lot and piled into vehicles. Jordan and I hopped into one of the UTVs and belted in. Santiago's place was out in the boonies, and a lot of the roads were either dirt trails or nonexistent. UTVs were practical, and the IPF-issue UTVs were larger than average, boxy, enclosed, and air conditioned. They would handle the terrain with ease while keeping us from baking in the oppressive heat. I appreciated the comfort.

Jordan and I had the vehicle to ourselves. Abbott, Karson, and Borski piled into the unit behind us. Michelson was staying at the office and coordinating from there. She wasn't much for field work, and there wouldn't be a lot for her to do onsite until we found the drive. If we could find it.

We had to wait for the tactical unit's tank-like vehicles in front to load up before we could leave. The officers and enforcers moved quickly and with purpose, and before long our caravan began to move. Jordan put our vehicle into gear and followed the line ahead of us.

The air was thick with tension, and I chewed on my lip while I pulled my radio com out and pushed it into my ear. Jordan already had his in. I mentally checked everything over in my head, making sure I hadn't forgotten anything.

When there was no putting it off any longer, I sighed. "I'm sorry."

Jordan grunted.

I folded my arms and scowled. "I was a jerk, I know. I'm sorry. I had a bad night, and I took out my frustrations on you."

"Did you ever think of calling me instead of beating a bag to a pulp?"

I sniffed and looked away. "I'm independent. You know that."

Jordan sighed, the anger bleeding out of him. "Why did her calling upset you so much? I know you don't like to talk to her, but this seems like more than that."

I didn't want to talk about it, but this was Jordan. He was my best friend. "She wanted us to visit her, and Alexi wanted to go by herself. She doesn't understand the kind of person Mom is."

"Because you've shielded her from that."

"Is that a bad thing? Can you blame me? I know Alexi is her own person and will eventually discover that our mom is self-destructive and the god of her own universe, but I don't want Lexi to hate her."

"Shielding her isn't necessarily a bad thing. But she's sixteen now, not ten. Talk to her. Really talk to her. And listen to what she has to say and what she wants. Don't you think it

would be better if you told her what was going on versus her figuring it out from Victoria?”

He was right. It would be better if it came from me and not her. “I don’t want to hurt her. I want her to think her mother is just misguided and an addict, not...not horrible. If she knew even a quarter of the stunts Victoria pulled, she’d never speak to her again.”

“Eventually she’s going to figure it out. She’s a smart kid.”

“Can’t I pretend?”

He snorted. “You? Stick your head in the sand? That would be a first.”

I wrinkled my nose. He was right. That wasn’t my personality. “Fine. Maybe when this craziness is over, I’ll talk to her. But I can’t promise I’ll tell her everything.”

“She doesn’t need to know every detail, but some basics would be good. At least let her know why being with her mom alone would be a bad idea.”

We lapsed into silence for a while. The drive took around an hour by ground. I felt better now that Jordan and I weren’t on the outs, and I decided to shove my personal issues to the back of my mind. The anticipation of what we would find at Santiago’s place was building. I hoped we would find something, *anything*.

But, preferably, a name.

The vehicles in front of us finally stopped, and the tactical team disappeared up ahead. I couldn’t see anything through the thick foliage surrounding us, but we weren’t far from the coordinates Claude had given us.

Jordan grabbed the hand radio, swapped frequencies, and turned it up so we could hear the team ahead of us talking. We listened while they moved methodically towards the cabin, carefully examining everything. Eventually, I heard a report of a string of landmines. I held my breath until another voice confirmed they were disarmed.

“This is why we needed tactical out here.” Jordan shook his head. “Can you imagine if we had just wandered up there?”

I nodded. “Hopefully there won’t be anything else, but I’m sure that’s wishful thinking.”

After a tense eternity and three booby traps later, we were cleared to approach. Jordan and I hopped out, and the rest of our team piled out behind us. I walked down the path until we were met by one of the tactical agents. “Follow me through. All the traps we’ve found are disarmed but stick close just in case.”

None of us were going to argue. I fell into step behind him. My tablet beeped, and I checked it while we walked. It was a message from Alexi saying she’d made it home safely. I shot off a quick response with a promise to call her later. After shoving the tablet into my jacket pocket, I looked up to see a wood cabin. Though calling it a cabin was too generous. A shack would have been more apt. It wasn’t as large as I’d expected, and parts of the wood looked dilapidated and in disrepair. I had expected Santiago to be more concerned with his comfort than this. But it was a hideout after all, not a permanent residence.

The rest of the tac team had set up a perimeter. Several had scanning equipment out and were searching the area for other surprises. I surveyed the scene, looking at the landscape and surrounding forest. The cabin was incredibly isolated. Good for a mercenary who wanted to be off grid.

After a few long moments, I stepped towards the front porch. I figured it would be safe enough. Jordan followed right on my heels as I ascended the rickety stairs and pushed open the door. There was one large main room that housed some kitchen appliances, a small dining table and chairs, a couple of lounging chairs, and a couch. A large metal cabinet stood along the right wall, and a computer desk was pressed up against the opposite wall. There were two doors that led into other rooms, but it was too dark to see into them.

Two enforcers were inside, scanners out. One looked up and nodded to the metal cabinet. “We’re getting some hot readings

from inside there. I'm guessing it's a weapons stash. We haven't tried to open it yet."

I nodded. My eyes were already on the computer desk. It was too dark to see much of it. "Can we get some lights on?"

He shook his head. "We tried." He pointed towards the corner. "That light's functioning, but it's the only one. Most of the lights don't appear to be working."

"Fine." I motioned Borski forward and pointed to one of the doors. "Check and see if that's a bedroom. He might have something in there. Karson, check the other room. Abbott, look through the kitchen. Be careful."

My team scattered, and I headed straight for the desk. A computer sat open, but offline. I didn't touch it. That would be something for Michelson. If Santiago had any sort of security, there was a high chance I would trigger it, and we would potentially lose data.

Instead, I began opening drawers and rifling through papers, random junk, and some notebooks. Jordan began methodically searching the rest of the room, looking the furniture over thoroughly. I tried to be as efficient and detailed as possible, while still being careful. I came up with nothing even remotely resembling a memory stick.

With a sigh, I straightened up. I didn't know why I thought he might have left it in an obvious place. I assumed it was because this was his secret spot. But, of course, I should have known he was too paranoid to make it that easy for us.

I moved onto another section, and we began the laborious task of checking everything. A few hours later, we had cataloged a massive stash of guns, explosives, and knives of all varieties in the large cabinet, plenty of cash hidden in a dozen different spots, lots of junk and scrap metal, but no memory stick.

The atmosphere among the team quickly changed from optimistic to pessimistic as the hours progressed. I wanted to find something. We all did. There had to be something there.

We were missing something; we had to be. We just didn't know where to look.

Borski stretched, trying to relieve the pressure in his back. "We aren't finding anything, Carter."

I sniffed. "Keep looking. Even if we have to take this cabin apart board by board, we keep looking until we find something."

He didn't say anything; he just went back to work. Jordan lifted an eyebrow at me, but I didn't amend my statement or retract it. I was serious. If the file was in the cabin, we were going to find it. One way or another.

The forensics team came in and began cataloging and categorizing the items we had found. There were some papers pertaining to suppliers which I figured could be useful for other cases. The weapons obviously needed to be checked. The computer would need to be bagged and taken back to the office with everything else to be processed and looked through.

Aggravated, I moved into the bedroom. Abbott was checking it over. The mattress had been torn to bits and someone from the forensics team was bagging it up to clear it out. Abbott was currently on his hands and knees, checking the floor for any false boards. I moved around him towards the windowsill, eyeing it for anything unusual. I felt along all the seams to see if there was a weak spot, but I came up empty.

Frustration welled up again. I ground my teeth and turned towards the walls, looking over the smooth, wooden panels. I started at a corner and slowly moved my way around, picking at the edges and trying to find one I could pry up. I took my time, double checking when I wasn't sure if I had felt a little give. I managed to wrench one board off the wall, but there was nothing underneath it. I growled and kept going.

When I had finished all the walls, I clenched my fists and took a deep breath. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back, counting to ten. I relaxed my fists and then relaxed my shoulders. *We'll still find it. We aren't finished yet.*

I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling, which was also paneled. I turned my head to look at the expanse of the ceiling, and I frowned. I walked to the doorway and flipped the light switch, but nothing happened. The light stayed off. I flipped it again to be sure. “Blaze!”

“Yeah?” His muffled voice came from the kitchen.

“Bring me that chair from the desk.”

A minute later, Jordan stepped into the room, easily lifting the metal chair. “Where do you want it?”

“Under the light.” I pointed to the circular light in the middle of the room. The bed was in the way, but Jordan nudged it aside and set the chair down. I stepped onto it, grabbed Jordan’s shoulder for balance, and reached up to unscrew the light dome.

Abbott paused his searching to watch me. I unscrewed the dome and passed it down to Jordan. I squinted at the wires connected to the light bulb. I pushed my fingers around the edges of the light’s base where it sat flush against the panels, and it wiggled. I smiled and tugged on it until the whole base popped out. I held it carefully, looking it over. The wires weren’t attached to anything in the ceiling.

“Seems a little stupid to have a light that isn’t hooked up to the electricity.” I passed it down to Jordan as well. “I think this light is for show.”

Jordan nodded and looked it over. “I think you’re right.”

I peered up at the dark gap in the ceiling. “Do you have a flashlight?”

A light was placed in my hand. I clicked it on and lifted it up to peer into the darkness. I was still too short, even on the chair, so I carefully lifted onto my toes, trying to see more. I pulled a pen from my pocket and began gently poking around the inside lip of the hole. I made it halfway around before it hit something that moved. I prodded it with the pen a few more times until I was sure it wasn’t going to bite me or blow up before I carefully reached in and pulled it out.

I held the dusty object between my fingers and grinned. “Jackpot, boys.”

The memory stick was dirty, but intact. I looked it over and saw no visible damage. Jordan held up an evidence bag, and I dropped it inside. He was grinning, too. “You found it.”

I jumped off the chair and quickly filled out the information on the bag and sealed it. “We need to get this to Michelson as soon as possible.”

Abbott walked over and clapped me on the shoulder. “We’ve got it. We could have a name by the end of the day.”

That thought excited me. I glanced around the rest of the room. “Forensics needs to finish processing in here. Let’s get out of the way.”

Karson and Borski both looked up when I emerged from the bedroom. I waved the bag up in the air. “We got it.”

Both smiled and their shoulders relaxed. I stepped out onto the porch and set the bag on the table that also held the computer and some of the weapons. “Let’s wrap this up as fast as we can.”

We spent another hour helping search for any other hiding spots. That was about as much time as I was willing to lend to the search. I almost felt bad for how much more the forensics team still had to do, but I wanted to get the evidence back to the office so Paige could tell us what was on the memory stick.

Jordan approached me, wiping dust off his shirt. “Hey, are you ready to head back? You and I can take the evidence we’ve collected so far. The others can stay and help finish up.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. I’m anxious to know what’s on this thing.”

We loaded up one of the vehicles not blocked in at the rear of the caravan. I scanned all the bags onto the tablet and loaded them into the back of the vehicle, except for the memory stick, which I kept with me. I wasn’t letting it out of my sight.

Jordan and I climbed into the UTV, and he started it up. He swiveled in the seat to look out the back windshield to back around the other vehicles. He was still smiling. “I have a good feeling about the memory stick. I bet the information we need is on it.”

“You’re right. I’m sure of it.” I shifted restlessly in my seat. “I want Michelson to start working on it immediately. This has priority. Speaking of Michelson, I need to let her know we’re on our way.” I pulled out my tablet and typed a message to her.

We bumped along down the trail, and I tried not to stare at the evidence I held. It was hard, though. “Who do you think will be on here?”

Jordan shrugged. “We have our suspects. It could be any one of them, honestly. Barrows had enemies on Novus Terra—people that might have wanted to get him out of the way to get his position.”

I wrinkled my nose. “But no one stepped forward to take over while he was gone. And if that was the plan, then why kidnap him? Why not kill him outright? It seems more like someone just wanted him out of the way for a while. Or maybe someone wanted to frame the Conglomeration. Maybe kidnap him and release him later so he tells everyone that the Conglomeration did it. Peace talks fall through. War ensues. Or someone wanted to hold him to use him as leverage later on. It doesn’t seem like a home world issue to me.”

“The high chancellor certainly has enough enemies that it could be any number of people. I’m just hoping the thing will tell us who and why. Maybe give us some hard proof, too, so we can get a conviction.”

“Me, too. It would be nice to wrap this case up soon and let Ben know he’s safe now. At least from one threat.” I tapped the bag against my leg. “Whoever it was must be powerful. And rich. Santiago’s services aren’t cheap, and he won’t work for just anyone.”

“Agreed. But if someone was going after Barrows, it makes sense that it would be someone with a lot of money. He would need—”

Something slammed into the front of the UTV. The whole vehicle rocked and flipped over. The seatbelt dug into my ribs, and I watched with uncomprehending eyes as the ground rolled around outside the window. The loose items in the cab flew around like tiny missiles, pelting me in the face. I closed my eyes against the onslaught, feeling tiny cuts opening on my skin. I threw my arms up and covered my head as we rolled. The vehicle tipped one last time before settling back on its top.

I lay suspended from the seat, staring blankly at the spider web cracks in the windshield. I gulped in a deep breath, feeling the seat belt cutting into my ribs. I heard noises outside, and it snapped me into action. I craned my neck to look at Jordan. He was also suspended in his seat, but his head was hanging low and there was a large knot on his forehead. Blood dripped down the side of his face and into his hair. I reached for him, panic flooding my veins. “Jordan! Wake up! Jordan!” I touched his arm, but he didn’t stir. I tried to touch his head to check his wound, but I couldn’t reach. It looked like his chest was still moving at least.

Voices approached the vehicle, and my head snapped over to look at the window on my side. I wedged my hand against my waist and managed to pull a knife from my belt. My gun wasn’t in its holster. It must have gotten knocked out in the crash. I hesitated a second before unsnapping my seatbelt.

As I fell, I ducked my head, but the impact against the roof was still painful. I grunted and unfolded my tangled limbs. I tried to assess myself for injuries. Even though I was in pain, nothing felt serious. My body still seemed mobile. I turned to Jordan, pressing my fingers to his throat. He still had a pulse.

“Jordan!” I hissed at him. “Wake up!”

A hand latched onto my ankle and yanked. I yelped and almost lost my grip on the knife. My body scraped across glass and debris while I was dragged out the window. I barely registered that there were three men surrounding me before I lashed out at them with my knife. I managed to take the guy holding my ankle by surprise, and I sliced through his arm. He jerked away from me with a cry, and another man lunged at me. I batted his arms away and planted my foot in his stomach

simultaneously. I wedged my arm up, trying to get the knife in a position to stab him.

The third man came at me, grabbing at the arm with the knife. I clenched my teeth and twisted away from him, rolling into the other one. I got enough leverage to knock one off balance, and he landed on his back. I scrambled on top of him while the third guy grasped my shoulder and tried to pull me away, but I was too quick for him. I slammed the knife down, slicing deep into the chest of the man beneath me.

Hands pulled me off him. I swung the knife blindly behind me. The hands released me, and I had a second of freedom. I reached up and slapped my com. “Abbott! We’re under attack!”

Before I could even finish the sentence, a hand ripped the com from my ear and threw it. I turned and slashed at him with the knife, but he stepped out of reach, and I missed. My shoulder throbbed, and I worried I might have torn something.

The first guy regained his feet and tackled me. I hit my knees hard and lost my grip on the knife. The other one kicked it away and grabbed my wrists. I tried to fight, but my muscles burned with pain and fatigue. He wedged my arms behind me and bound them together. My feet were next. After that, I was jerked upright and divested of my weapons and tablet.

“I got it.” One of the men held up the evidence bag with the memory stick. At least it had survived undamaged.

“What do we do about the other guy?” Another man was bent over, peering in at Jordan.

I held my breath, praying they’d leave him alone. I would fight like a wildcat if they tried to hurt him. They would have to kill us both.

The one holding me seemed to be in charge. I could hear the frustration in his voice when he snarled at the other man. “We don’t have time. Leave him. He hasn’t seen us, and he’ll die anyway. She called for backup. We need to get out of here.”

With that, I was hauled up a bank to where a small shuttle waited. Behind me, I could hear the other two lifting the

injured man and struggling after us. I didn't try to fight, mostly because there was nothing I could do, but also because I didn't want them to think about using Jordan against me. I still had my tracker. My team would find me.

The door to the shuttle stood open, and I was carried inside and dumped unceremoniously on the floor. The injured man was brought in and dropped with just as much care beside me. I scooted away from him and put my back to the wall. I was breathing hard, and I tried to slow down, calm down, and assess the situation. I was kidnapped and injured, but not fatally so, and I wanted that memory stick back. I watched the leader stuff it into his pocket. I wasn't going to leave without that thing. Not when I had worked so hard for it.

As soon as the last man was aboard, the shuttle took off. The leader went and said something to the pilot in a low voice and then came back to me. I glared at him, and he glared right back. He had hooded, deep set, beady eyes. Thick, black brows sat low over them, adding to his menacing appearance. A white, puckered scar ran from the side of his nose to the outer corner of his mouth. He was in his late thirties to early forties, with the hard face of a seasoned criminal. A murderer. Mercenary, maybe, though this crew didn't exactly feel like a mercenary outfit. His face was shaved, except for thin sideburns that ran down the length of each jaw. Short black hair covered the rest of his head, though his hairline was deeply receding.

He stopped in front of me and pulled a knife from his pocket. I tensed and tried to push away from him. He grabbed my arm, and one of his buddies pushed me onto my stomach and held me down.

My jacket and shirt were pulled back from my neck, and I stilled, knowing exactly what they were doing. I barely had time to brace myself before the knife dug into my skin, cutting deep. I screamed, unable to help myself, as the tip of the blade dug around until it found my tracker. My vision blurred, and I thought I would pass out. Only a few moments passed before he pulled the knife out.

The tracker fell to the floor in front of my face and a booted heel smashed it to pieces. I closed my eyes and whimpered. That was my lifeline. A tracker was a cop's best friend. If anything happened, I could be found, but not if it was destroyed. My chances of surviving had just decreased exponentially.

Someone slapped a bandage on the wound. I laid on the floor, in too much pain to do anything else. I focused on breathing and on trying to work through the shock and panic.

Focus on the positive.

I was still alive. That was something. And so was Jordan. I hoped he would stay that way. Abbott would be able to track him, find him, and get him help. My team would make sure Jordan survived. He would be safe. The file hadn't been destroyed yet. I wasn't sure what they were going to do with it, but it was still intact. That was positive. I wasn't seriously injured. In a lot of pain, sure, but no broken bones or internal injuries from what I could tell. I wasn't completely incapacitated.

The others were taking their seats, and one was tending to the man I'd stabbed. I wasn't sure if he was going to live, but I doubted it. I was pretty sure I had nicked something vital.

One of the men eyed me for a long time before looking at the one in charge. "Hey, boss. Why don't we kill her?"

The boss obviously tried to be patient, though he still rolled his eyes. "Were you not listening earlier? We need information. We need to know if they looked at the memory stick and if they have any idea who was behind the chancellor's kidnapping. Idiot."

I didn't think that was a good turn of events. I swallowed hard and tried not to panic as the boss walked back over to me. He eyed me disdainfully. "We'll find out what she knows. And *then* we'll kill her."

Crap, crap, crap.

His lackey grinned. "And what about the thumb drive?"

The boss, obviously irritated, faced him. “Our employer wants it. We keep it and hand it over once she’s dead.”

I closed my eyes when I felt a tear leak down my cheek. This was not the time to cry. I forced away the despair that sat in the pit of my stomach. They might be planning on killing me, but they weren’t going to do it right away, so there was time to plan some sort of escape. I would fight with my every breath to survive.

The shuttle docked on a ship, shuddering. *If there is a God, or anyone, or anything out there, please, please let Jordan live. Please help me survive this. Don’t let me die like this. Please. I need to be there for Lexi. Help me.*

The shuttle door opened, and I could hear the others stirring and moving about. I knew with certainty that whatever happened next was not going to be pretty. Someone grabbed me by the shoulder, jerked me to my feet, and hauled me through the door. He yanked on my hurt shoulder, and the pain hit hard. My vision swam, and I blacked out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ethan

An alarm wailed overhead, signaling that the conditions outside were ‘unfavorable’, and I sighed. I stood by the ship’s exterior door, pulled a mask over the lower half of my face, and adjusted the goggles around my eyes. Reaching over, I pressed a button to silence the alarm.

“I do not think it is a good idea for you to leave, Ethan. The storm will be here soon.”

I faced Andy, who stood tranquilly a few feet from me, looking at me with an unchanging, bland expression. I shook my head and smiled under the mask. “I’ll be fine, Andy.”

“The storm is approaching from the east and brings with it many dangers. It would be unwise to get caught in it.”

“I’m well aware.” I tugged the sleeves of my jacket down to cover my wrists and pulled my gloves up to cover any gaps before picking up the remaining sensors. “I need to get these last two sensors in place before the rain. I still have enough time to get them set up and adjusted before the real storm begins.”

“Then I could do it instead. I would be precise.”

“No, Andy. I won’t chance you getting stuck out in the storm.” I looked the android over. Sending him out would be too much of a gamble. “Stay with the ship and prepare the rest of the equipment to begin recording. Check the safety guards on the ship. And get the force field up. I don’t want any of that nasty weather getting in here.”

I opened the door to the Rabelo, Beta Class 880, and a gust of wind blasted me, grinding dirt into my face. I sighed and stepped out, closing the door firmly behind me. I hurried down the stairs and looked around to get my bearings. I had parked *Nightfall* inside a cave with a curved lip to block some of the wind. It would give us enough protection from the coming storm, but it would also not be too inconvenient for us to maneuver in and out of.

Sand and dust covered everything and whipped around in the wind. It wasn't dense enough to obscure visibility yet, but it wouldn't take long for that to happen. I checked my belt, making sure the GPS was strapped to it. Even if it became impossible to see, I could find my way back with that. I jogged towards the mouth of the cave.

We had arrived on Cadium barely an hour before. The ship had suffered a mechanical malfunction, forcing us out of hyperspace too soon. That had delayed us far too long for my comfort, but we still would have time to get all the recording equipment set up before the storm broke. The whole point of being on Cadium was to study the effects of the massive storm that occurred biannually. If I missed this opportunity, my employers wouldn't be happy.

Dark mammatus clouds with uneven, bizarre-looking lobes hung low in the sky overhead. It was an eerie but beautiful sight, and one I didn't have time to stare at. I jogged along the barren landscape, eyes peeled for the hill I had seen on the sensors when we first landed. It didn't take long for me to find it, and I started the painstaking task of climbing the sandy dune.

Cadium was a desert planet, and close to uninhabitable because of its poor atmosphere and destructive storms. The land closest to the equator was usually scorching, while the poles were extremely cold and mostly covered in ice. There was very little in-between.

I used the sensors like walking sticks to help me trudge up the incline. I finally reached the top and paused to catch my breath. I didn't have the luxury of time, so I didn't rest long. I moved laterally along the crest for a good hundred feet, using the GPS to align with the ship at the right angle. I looked up at the sky and another gust of wind tossed sand into my face. The goggles did their job and kept the dust out, but I still had to wipe them off before I could shove the sensor into the sand. *Only one more to go.* I peered down at the GPS and set off again.

A ship appeared out of the dust and dirt on the far side of the dune. There was enough flat space between the dunes for it

to land safely and be relatively out of sight. I frowned and kept moving. If someone was stupid enough to be out in the open during this kind of storm, then that was their problem.

Their closeness was a little unsettling, though. If they had ill intentions towards me, they wouldn't have far to go. I doubted they were there for me or could even see me—not with all the dust—and the weather would have completely messed up their ship's sensors by now. The strong electromagnetic field in the air would scramble even the best sensors. My GPS and recording equipment had to be specially made to withstand this kind of weather.

Resolving to ignore the ship, I trudged back through the sand to the other end of the dune. I double checked that I was in the right spot before pushing the sensor into the sand. I glanced back at the ship, more out of curiosity than anything.

I had to wipe my goggles off again before I could see a couple of people marching out from the ship. I shook my head and shoved the pole down until it hit something solid. I pressed the button on top so it would latch onto the rock and not blow away. The sand could collect in some places up to a dozen feet deep, but here it was only a few inches. I didn't want the sensors to get sucked away by the wind. There was already a good chance I would lose at least one to the fire whirls.

With my task completed, I stopped to look down towards the ship again. The dust was getting worse; it was swirling around the air, making it hard to see. I started to walk back to my ship, but something stopped me, and I felt a tingle on my right palm. I glanced down at my gloved hand, as if I could see the tattoo beneath it. My palm started to burn. I knew better than to ignore a sign, so I grabbed a spyglass from my tool belt and put it up to my right eye, closing my left. I moved it around until I spotted the figures below.

There were two men with rags over their faces, but no eye protection. Between them they held a woman. Her head was down and all I could see was bright red hair, though the dirt attempted to mask the vibrant color. Her wrists were bound

behind her back, and her feet were dragging. Suddenly, her arm jerked as though she was trying to pull out of their hands.

Instinct told me they had wandered too far from their ship. The men were obviously having trouble seeing, and the woman struggled in their grasp, slowing their progress. Their intentions towards the woman were evil; I could sense it. Even as I watched, the one on the left reached out and backhanded her, nearly knocking her to the ground. The other pulled out a gun, but a gust of wind blew dust into his face, and he threw his arms up before trying to rub his eyes clean.

My feet were sliding down the hill before I even realized I was moving. I shoved the spyglass into my pocket and pulled out my knife while I ran. As soon as I hit flat land, I spurred on faster, kicking up more sand behind me. The wind was blowing harder now, making it difficult to see more than a couple dozen feet in front of me. I navigated on instinct, catching little flashes of color here and there. The storm was almost upon us, but I had a little time.

The three figures appeared in front of me suddenly as the dust and sand momentarily cleared. The woman was on her back, arms still bound behind her, but her legs were free, and she swept one out and knocked one of the men to the ground. I heard him curse before the wind whipped it in the opposite direction. She rolled onto her side, coughing.

The one still standing had the gun, and though he was still trying to battle the wind, he lifted it and fired, just missing the woman's shoulder. I sent up a brief prayer because I was still too far away to help yet. Another gust of wind kicked up, pelting the man with more sand. He cursed loudly, covered his eyes, and fired blindly, missing the woman wildly this time.

That gave me just enough time. I reached the man and smacked the gun from his hand easily. He jolted away in surprise, not having seen me approach. I struck out with my knife without pausing, catching him in the shoulder and slicing deep. He roared and pulled back. I followed the blow with a swift punch with my free hand. He stumbled away and tripped.

The other man had regained his feet by then, and he sprinted at me. I spun away from him, light on my feet despite the loose sand. He slid in the shifty ground, and I kicked his back, knocking him on his face. He hit the ground hard, shook his head, and got back to his feet. His buddy stood up as well and they both faced me, the woman seemingly forgotten.

I hadn't forgotten her, though, and she had somehow pulled herself to her knees and was struggling to her feet. I didn't look at her as I circled away, encouraging the men to keep their attention on me. I waited, holding my knife in steady hands. I false started to the right, and both launched at me on what they thought was an interceptive path. I stepped to the left and they banked, trying to change direction, but neither of them had the balance for a quick transition. I kicked at the one closest to me, catching him in the side. He grunted and grabbed my leg, holding me against him. I braced myself against his body and lifted my free leg to kick him. That one took him by surprise, and I landed a solid blow against his head.

He crumpled, releasing my leg. I kept my momentum as soon as I hit the ground, thrusting at the other man with my knife. He tried to get his upper body out of range by bending over backward, but he missed the woman stumbling up behind him. When his body tipped back, she swung her leg high and caught him right in the face with her heel. He went down.

I heard a crack of thunder too close for comfort and winced. The worsening conditions caused me to hesitate before attacking again. *Move, Ethan. It's too dangerous to be here.*

We didn't have the time to continue fighting. I eyed both men. They were crawling away, back in the direction of their ship. I could just barely see the ship lights, so I knew they'd find their way back unless they were complete idiots. This wasn't the time to pursue them.

Instead, I went for the woman. I took her by the arm as she started after the men and pulled her in the opposite direction, back towards the dune. She opened her mouth to say something and was rewarded with a mouthful of sand. She choked and sputtered. I pulled her with one hand, and with the

other I reached up and untied the bandana I wore around my dreads. I paused long enough to tie it around her face below her eyes. I didn't have any spare goggles with me, so she would have to endure the grit. I used my knife to cut the bonds holding her wrists before retaking her arm.

She didn't fight against me when I pulled her up the hill. I would have said something to reassure her, but it was impossible to be heard over the wind and thunder now. The dust was so thick I could barely see the woman. I held onto her tightly, knowing if we were separated, I wouldn't be able to find her. I used my free hand to help pull us up the hill, and she did the same with hers.

The going was slow, and I prayed we would make it in time. The woman slowed me down, but I didn't stop or let up on her, even when she would slide and lose her footing. I held her arm with an iron grip, probably bruising her, but I had to. If I let go and she fell, she was as good as dead. She would never survive on her own.

After far too much time, we finally reached the top of the dune. I surged forward, pulling her to the other side. My feet started slipping, and I knew we were going to fall. It would be the fastest way down the other side, anyway. I grabbed her with both arms, tucked her short frame under my chin, and let myself fall.

I took the brunt of the fall, and the sand cushioned some of the impact. I could feel more than hear her scream into my chest. I covered her head and held her as tightly as I could until we hit flat land. I rolled so that I landed on my back with her on my chest. I breathed heavily, already exhausted, and checked to make sure nothing was broken.

With that determined, I stood up and pulled her up with me. Looking around, I couldn't see anything but sand. I grabbed my GPS, knowing I would never find my way back to the cave without it. I couldn't see more than a foot in front of my face, and thunder boomed not far behind us. If we were stuck out here when it started raining, we were goners.

Following the screen, I turned left and started jogging. The woman kept up well now that we weren't struggling up the dune, but she was either injured or exhausted or both, which hindered our pace. We didn't have time to rest, so I silently apologized and kept jogging.

A quiet hiss sounded through the air, and my heart started racing. I didn't bother glancing behind me, knowing I either wouldn't be able to see anything, or I would see the rain dampening down the dust, and neither would be helpful.

We were almost there. I ran faster, and when the woman stumbled, I scooped her into my arms without hesitating. She was tiny, but heavier than I anticipated. She must have more muscles than what I could see. I cradled her close and ran with everything I had. The hissing sound was coming closer. The looming outcrop of the cave came into view, and I pushed harder as little drops of rain started to fall. I felt them pelt my back. I grabbed the woman's head, tucked her into my chest to protect her exposed skin, and bent my head as well.

Once we finally reached the relative safety of the cave, I slowed. As soon as we approached the force field surrounding the ship, it dropped. I raced through it, and the field went up right behind me. It was a good thing Andy was paying attention.

The door to the ship opened and Andy appeared. I didn't stop to talk. I ran right up the steps and into the safety of the ship. He closed the door behind us while I went straight to the lab. "Andy, get this stuff off of here." My voice was muffled, but Andy's hearing was impeccable. He went to the table in the middle of the room and cleared it off, shuffling papers and charts out of the way. I carefully set the woman down. She immediately started coughing, and I rolled her onto her side.

"Get the med kit." I gave the woman a quick look over as Andy moved to one of the cabinets. I didn't see any rain on her anywhere, so I yanked my own jacket off before the rain could burn through to my shirt. I dropped it in the sink and went back to the woman. I leaned over her, pulling her bandana off to get a look at her face.

She was young, or at least she looked young. Mid-twenties. Her hair was caked with dirt and dust and fell wildly around her face, but I could imagine it was quite beautiful when clean. Pale skin was streaked with dirt and blood and who knew what else. Her lips were chapped and caked in sand. She was wearing black pants. What once was a blue colored shirt was now torn, stained, and covered in grit. A black jacket sat over the shirt and was also ripped in multiple places, and one sleeve was half torn off. Nondescript, scuffed, black shoes adorned her feet. Black gloves covered her hands, completing her outfit.

“Are you alright? Did the rain touch your skin anywhere?”

The woman turned and her brown eyes, the color of dark oak, settled on me. My right hand tingled, and I squeezed it into a fist to cut off the sensation. The eyes widened as she looked me over. I couldn't blame her for the fear. I was looming over her with a bandana and goggles covering most of my face. My hair was pulled back, but dreadlocks tended to put off a lot of people regardless of whether they were tied up or loose. My skin was naturally brown, and it was coated in sand and dirt, making it look several shades darker.

In an effort to calm her fear, I pulled off my goggles and yanked the bandana down. “Did any of the rain hit you?”

She coughed again, but her face relaxed marginally. “No,” she choked out, her voice sounding like she'd swallowed gravel.

“Andy, bring some water.” I took the med kit from him, cracked it open, and started lining supplies up on the counter so I could see them.

Andy returned quickly with a glass. I slid my arm under the woman's shoulders and lifted her into a sitting position. She winced in obvious pain and cradled her right arm against her body. At least that wasn't the arm I had been yanking on.

I took the glass from the android and held it gently to her lips, helping her drink. She took a few sips and tried to swallow it but ended up gagging. She spat out a couple

mouthfuls of sand and grit, but eventually she was able to take a few real gulps. She winced again.

When she was finished, I lowered her back down. I started to check her over, beginning with her head. Blood matted part of her hair and ran down her right cheek and jaw. It seemed to be a superficial cut and not something more serious. I grabbed a wet towel and gently began rubbing at her face to clean off some of the dirt and blood.

Pain crinkled the skin around her eyes, but she said nothing. She took deep, gasping breaths. I cleaned enough of the skin around the wound to properly dress it. By the time I was finished with that, her breathing had settled. It looked like the shock was starting to wear off.

“Where are you injured?”

Her eyes flew to mine. She swallowed. “My shoulder.” Her voice was still raspy, but not as bad.

I nodded. “Anywhere else? Stomach, chest, legs? Your neck? Anything vital?”

When she shook her head, I relaxed a little. She was obviously in a lot of pain, but it didn't appear as though she was dying. I turned to the med kit and pulled out a syringe with a strong pain medicine. If her shoulder was out of place, which I suspected it was, she would need a good dose of pain killers.

I lifted the syringe to check the dosage. Her hand shot out and clamped around my forearm like a vise. “What's that?” she rasped.

Speaking gently, I tried to calm her fears. “It's pain medicine. I think your shoulder is dislocated.”

Her eyes turned wild. “No. No pain medicine.”

Maybe she was hurt more than I thought. If she had a head injury, it could confuse her. I gently pried her hand off my arm. “It's okay. It's just medicine. I promise. You're going to need it.”

She shook her head, her lower lip trembling. “No. No pain medicine!”

“You need this.” I didn’t understand her reluctance, and I reached for her arm where her jacket was torn, revealing bare skin.

“No!” She thrashed, pulling away from me. “I don’t want any! I’ll be fine.”

Her hand launched towards mine, and I jerked the syringe out of her reach. “Andy, help me restrain her.”

The android stepped forward and her head whipped around to face him. Terror filled her eyes. “No!”

Andy was fast and strong, and his arms locked hers against the table. She screamed and thrashed and tried to kick him with her legs, but to no avail. When she started crying, I set the syringe down and touched her cheek. Something was obviously not right with this situation, and I didn’t want to terrorize her.

“Hey. Listen.” Her eyes turned towards me and when she saw I was empty handed, her movements ceased. “I’m not going to hurt you. I want to help you, but I need you to cooperate.”

Another tear leaked out of her eye, and she took a shuddering breath. “Don’t give me the medicine. Please.” Though her arms were locked into place by Andy, her hand was close enough for her to touch my fingers. “Please. I can take the pain. Please.”

There was something in her eyes and in her voice that made me believe her. She didn’t look confused. She looked perfectly sane and in pain and so very afraid. I didn’t understand why she would refuse the medicine, but I dropped my head and nodded. “Okay.”

Her body went lax, and another tear leaked down her cheek. “Thank you.”

“You can release her, Andy.”

He let go of her and took a step back. I sighed and moved around to her injured arm. "This is going to hurt."

She simply nodded. I tugged her jacket carefully down her arms and dropped it to the floor. A flash of light caught my attention, and I glanced down at her waist. A police shield was hooked into her belt. I closed my eyes and silently cursed. *Of course, she would be police.* I squinted at it and could faintly make out the IPF insignia. I sniffed and tried to keep my contempt to myself. I discreetly reached up and tucked my necklace under my shirt.

Cop or not, I wasn't going to stop helping her. I positioned myself by her head, carefully cupped her shoulder, and took her arm in my other hand. I didn't have formal medical training, but I had some experience with field medicine.

She pressed her lips together, anticipating the pain, and I didn't draw it out any longer. I yanked, hearing the shoulder pop into place with an audible click. She screamed, her body tensing, and she fell back against the table. I checked over her shoulder, making sure everything was where it should be.

Everything looked fine. I relaxed a little and met her eyes again. "What else hurts?"

She licked her lips, exhaustion heavy in her eyes now. "I'm fine. Everything else is minor."

Trusting she knew her injuries better than me, I nodded and stepped back to grab the towel. I proceeded to wipe off her face gently, removing the sand and dust from her pores and lips.

She watched me in silence while I worked. Those eyes were so observant, so knowing. I felt scrutinized, like she could somehow see beyond the surface, but I didn't say anything. She could stare if she wanted. There was some level of mistrust in her eyes, and I had a feeling she'd been through a lot if she was still suspicious of me after I'd helped her.

"Do you have any food?" she asked suddenly, coughing again once the words came out.

I nodded. "Yes. Are you hungry?"

“Yes,” she nodded. “I haven’t eaten in days.”

That wasn’t good. I set the towel aside. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” I left the lab, and Andy silently followed.

He waited until we reached the kitchen before speaking. “I surmise you had some complications while erecting the last sensors.”

“Yes.” I dug around the cabinets until I found a can of soup. I grabbed it, cracked it open, dumped it into a bowl, and placed it in the quick cooker.

Andy looked down the hall for a long moment as he processed my answer and the implications of the situation. “Was the woman in danger?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything I can do to assist you?”

The cooker beeped, and I gently pulled the bowl from it with a towel and retrieved a spoon from a drawer. Then I paused and looked Andy over thoughtfully. “There are men out there who were trying to kill her. I doubt they’ll be stupid enough to try again while it’s raining, but I want you to see if any of the ship’s outboard sensors are working. If not, see if you can get them functioning at least a little. I bet when the rain is past, they’ll come after her again. We need some sort of warning if they do.”

Andy nodded. “Of course.” He disappeared towards the cockpit.

I carried the food back to the lab. The woman was still lying there, eyes wide, cradling her shoulder. I set the bowl on the counter and approached her side. “I brought some soup. Can you sit up?”

After a slight hesitation, she nodded. I gently raised her up and helped position her sideways, so her feet hung off the table. Then I picked up the bowl and held it close to her. She eyed the food but said nothing. I took a spoonful and held it to her lips.

She said nothing about me feeding her, and she didn't insist on feeding herself. Every now and then she would sway, as though sitting up was difficult. I finally set the bowl beside her and braced her back with one arm while feeding her with the other.

Feeding her was slow, but I was patient. She ate the entire bowl. It was a little messy, so I kept the towel handy. She would open her mouth, chew mechanically, and then swallow, but it seemed to exhaust her. She needed the fuel, though. If she hadn't eaten in days, I was surprised she was even conscious after everything she'd been through.

There was no telling what those men had done to her. If she was IPF then they were obviously criminals of some kind, and criminals didn't take well to cops. They could be quite cruel. I wondered what they wanted her for and what had happened, but I didn't ask. There would be time for that later.

When the bowl was empty, I set it aside. Her eyelids drooped and she swayed again. She righted herself quickly. I wiped her mouth again.

"Thank you." Her voice sounded better, though she coughed again when she spoke.

I nodded. "You're welcome. I think you need some rest. Would you like to sleep?"

Slowly her eyes lifted to meet mine. I don't know what she was looking for, but her eyes searched my face for several moments. Finally, she nodded. "They'll come back for me."

"I assumed so. It'll rain for a long time. They won't come out in that. You're safe right now."

That seemed to satisfy her. "Sleep would be nice."

When she slid off the table, I reached out to help her. She tried to put weight on her feet, but they crumpled. I lifted her into my arms. Her body tensed, but she didn't complain or try to stop me. I carried her from the lab down to the bedroom, kicked the door open, and placed her onto the bed.

She winced and I felt bad, but I was trying to be as gentle as possible. I tugged her shoes off and set them on the floor, and

then drew the blanket up to her shoulders. Her eyes watched me, not quite as sharp and alert as before, as if she was already fighting off sleep.

I smoothed the hair from her face and smiled softly. "Sleep. I'll make sure nothing happens to you."

"Thank you." Her mouth curved, as though she was trying to smile, but it never fully formed.

When I turned to leave, she spoke again. "I'm Julia."

Her voice was low, but I caught the words. I smiled at her again over my shoulder. "My name is Ethan. Rest, Julia."

With that, her eyes closed. I left the room quietly and shut the door behind me. I stood in the hallway for several long moments, thinking. That had certainly been an unforeseen turn of events.

I was hopeful that when Julia awoke next, she would be able to tell me what was going on and why these people wanted her dead. I knew the more information we had, the better prepared we would be. I didn't want to fight, but I wouldn't back down or run away. Julia was obviously the victim here, and I was now involved whether I wanted to be or not. I wouldn't turn my back on someone in need, not even a cop.

With that decided, I moved through the ship until I reached the cockpit. Andy had a display pulled up of the sensors. He typed away on a screen, and I dropped into the seat next to him. "How's it coming?"

He didn't spare me a glance. "The sensors are currently scrambled. I am attempting to program the estimated level of electromagnetic interference from the storm so the computer can compensate. I am uncertain if it will work. However, it is a plausible theory, and while it may not cause the sensors to function fully, it may work to a degree, giving us a slight edge."

So, the ship's sensors are probably going to be useless. Getting them to work again had been a long shot anyway. As soon as the rain stopped, those men would come back, and

with my equipment set up not far from the cave it would be like a homing beacon. Even if they didn't have functioning sensors, it wouldn't be hard to find the cave. I hadn't chosen this spot for its concealing capabilities; I had chosen it because it would provide sufficient shelter from the rain.

Stress started to creep up on me, and I forced my muscles to relax. Stressing out wouldn't help anything. "Do what you can. If you can think of anything else that might help, let me know. I'm going to shower and rest. I want you to remain vigilant to anything approaching outside the ship. If you see even a possible sign of a human or danger, wake me up immediately."

Andy nodded. "I will do that. How is our guest?"

I scratched at the back of my head, sighing when I felt dirt press under my fingernails. Sand made everything uncomfortable. "Julia is sleeping. I want her to sleep as long as she can to regain her strength. She is rather weak."

"What are we going to do with her when she wakes?"

I pressed my lips together. "Protect her, Andy. We're going to protect her. And help her. Understood?"

"Yes, Ethan."

Confident Andy could look after things, I stood up and headed for my room. As far as androids went, Andy was top-notch. We had been working together for a year now, and I had learned to rely on him. It wasn't the same as having a human partner, but sometimes, like now, it came in handy. He could stand watch all night and would know long before I did if someone was close to the ship.

I stepped through my bedroom and into the attached bathroom. I stripped off the dirty, dusty clothes and dropped them into the bin. I turned on the water and stepped under the cold spray, scrubbing away at my skin and hair. There was sand everywhere. I didn't mind the stormy weather so much—could enjoy it even—but I loathed sand. It was unpleasant and virtually impossible to get rid of.

Eventually, I scrubbed my skin clean, until it was back to its normal brown tone. I watched the water turn from murky to clear as it hit the floor. That would have to be clean enough for now.

Stepping out, I toweled off before pulling on fresh clothes. I pulled a shirt over my head and tugged the sleeves down to be sure they covered my arms. I wasn't embarrassed by my tattoos, but it would probably be best not to show them to Julia immediately.

I fingered my necklace thoughtfully. I could take it off while she was on board. Put it away so she wouldn't see it and ask questions. But I never took it off. And it didn't define me as a person. If she saw it, she could ask me about it or she could choose to ignore it. But, given her precarious circumstances, if she saw it, she might feel unsafe or threatened. I wasn't a threat to her, and if I was going to help her then I would need her trust. Not her suspicion.

Pressing my lips together, I dropped the necklace under my shirt again. *Just for now.*

I left the bathroom and crawled onto the bed. I sat cross-legged in the middle of it and closed my eyes. I breathed deeply, slowly pulling air into my lungs and pushing it back out. I focused on clearing my mind of all distractions.

Meditation was soothing to me, and I tried to meditate every day. My tribe practiced meditation. I learned how when I was a child and continued the practice into adulthood. It was important to connect spiritually with the forces around me. It kept me centered, focused, and peaceful.

Tonight, however, I was having trouble. Every time I tried to let go of my thoughts, I would see Julia's face, afraid and in pain. I opened my eyes to clear the image and rolled out my shoulders. Then I tried again. And again, her face kept creeping into my mind.

My right hand tingled, and I compressed my lips into a thin line, confused. I pressed my thumb into my right palm and tried to rub out the sensation. It didn't work. I took it as a sign

and gave up meditating. I wouldn't be able to clear my mind, and I was tired. I could try again later.

Flopping onto my back, I rubbed my forehead and sighed. Obviously, the universe brought Julia to me for a reason. I didn't believe in coincidences. It was no coincidence my ship malfunctioned, and I was behind schedule setting everything up. If I had arrived on schedule, I wouldn't have been out in time to see Julia and her captors. It was providence, of a sort.

The question wasn't whether I was supposed to meet Julia or not; it was what I was supposed to do now. Was she here so I could help her? Or so she could help me? Perhaps both. Things had a way of happening exactly as they needed to and when they were supposed to.

There was no sense dwelling on it. *I'm not going to figure anything out tonight. She has been brought into my life for a reason. That reason will eventually become apparent. For now, I just need to help her.*

With that decided, I drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Julia

I sat up with a start, my heart pounding. My shoulder screamed at me in protest, and I scooted up the bed until my back was resting against the wall. I looked around the unfamiliar room, trying to remember what happened. I didn't remember them moving me to an actual room. Last I remembered, I was tied up on the floor of a spaceship.

No. Something else happened.

Focusing on my breathing, I tried to stop panicking. I filled my lungs up and let the air slowly release. I counted out the second it took to breathe in, hold, and release.

There was something on my forehead. I touched it, surprised it was a bandage. Someone had dressed my wounds.

Too confused, I backtracked in my mind, trying to pull memories out of the fog in my brain. They dumped me in an empty room on a ship. They interrogated me, wanting to know if I or anyone else had looked on the drive. They wanted to know everything I knew about the investigation, all the information we had.

I had wanted to hold out through their questions, but it was pointless. We hadn't looked at the drive, and we had no other leads. We had no real suspects and no information. Being quiet wouldn't have protected anyone, so I told them the truth.

That didn't stop them from hurting me.

I blocked that part out, not wanting to think about it. Eventually, once they were sure I wasn't lying, they'd stopped. The next step was to kill me. They had no more use for me, and I'd seen their faces. They'd never allow me to live.

My memory stalled there. I pressed both hands to my temples, trying to remember. They had taken me from the ship, I remembered that. There was so much dust and sand. And then...

And then someone showed up.

Like magic, he'd suddenly appeared, stepping from the swirling sand. He moved with grace and ease as he fought my captors, rescuing me from their grasp. I could barely see what was happening because of the sand in my eyes, but I had seen enough.

His face. I remembered his face. He had a mask over the lower half of it, and goggles covering his eyes. I remembered him taking them off and seeing startlingly clear, very concerned, brown eyes.

Everything else came flooding back. He'd brought me back to his ship, treated my wounds, and fed me. Then he'd carried me to a bed and assured me that, for the moment, I was safe. He was the only reason I was alive.

I sat forward, testing out my muscles. My shoulder hurt, but it felt miles better than the day before. I had a few aches, cuts, and bruises, but I felt overall okay. Dirt caked every inch of me, making my nose crinkle. I scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up slowly, prepared in case I wasn't strong enough to stand.

Thankfully, my muscles supported me. I was a little shaky, but I could manage. I took a careful step forward, and then another. I smiled, though it fled quickly. Just because I was momentarily safe and mobile didn't mean I was out of the woods yet.

Cautiously, I made my way to the door. It slid open, and I took a deep breath before stepping into the hallway. I looked around, trying to get my bearings. It was a narrow hallway with closed doors lining both sides. The ship didn't seem very big because I could see the cockpit at the end of the hall to the right. There were no other intersecting hallways, so I guessed it was probably a one-man vessel. To the left, the hall ended in an open space, and I decided to head there first.

My legs seemed to get stronger the more I moved. I kept a steadying hand against the wall while I walked. Soon, I reached the end of the hallway and it opened into a den of sorts. There were seats along the left wall, but against the right were several large storage containers and a desk. Electronic

gadgets littered the top of the desk, and papers stuck out of the drawers.

In the middle of the floor sat my rescuer. He was sitting cross-legged with his arms resting on his knees and his eyes closed. It looked like he was meditating. I hesitated, not wanting to disturb him. Instead, I took the opportunity to study him.

His face was rectangular, with low cheekbones and a wide nose that suited him well. He had a thin face, with a wide forehead and a hint of fuzz on his chin. It wasn't unattractive. Far from it. Brown and blond dreadlocks were tied back and trailed down to his breastbone. They were thick, ropey, and slightly frizzy. Brown pants and a long-sleeved, dark red shirt covered most of him.

“How are you feeling?”

His voice made me jump, and I blushed, but with his eyes closed he didn't see it. I cleared my throat and leaned against the doorway. “Better.” My throat hurt, and my voice sounded scratchy. “I didn't want to disturb you.”

“You are not disturbing me.” His eyes opened, revealing deep, soul-seeing eyes. They were darker than his skin but were the same warm brown base color. They reminded me of chocolate, a treat I only had on rare occasions. They held mine in what almost felt like a physical grasp, and a shiver went down my spine, but it wasn't from fear; it was from awareness.

I licked my lips. I tried to snap out of it. He was just a man. An attractive man, yes, but still just a man. And more than that, he was a man I didn't know, a man who had me on his ship for some unknown reason.

He saved your life, Julia. Give him the benefit of the doubt.

Agreeing with that voice, I broke eye contact and looked down. I wrinkled my nose at my ruined clothes. *If I don't get cleaned up soon, I'm going to go crazy. I'm filthy and I need a shower. But first, I need answers.*

“Thank you. For helping me.”

“You’re welcome.”

When he didn’t say more, I chanced another glance at him. He was still looking at me, his expression unchanged. *Guess I need to get the conversation moving.* “What was that rain?” I don’t know why it was the first question I asked, but it popped out immediately.

A hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. “Acid rain.”

That answer surprised me. “I didn’t think acid rain was that dangerous.”

“Normally, no, but Cadium is home to a host of toxic chemicals. The land is full of them. They mix with the water, and when the water evaporates it combines with the chemicals in the atmosphere. When mixed, the liquid becomes highly acidic, to the point it can eat through almost anything when it falls.”

I swallowed, hard. “Well. That sounds awful.”

The smile bloomed fully, making him even more attractive. “Yes. A large storm occurs in this area biannually, which consists of acid rain, fire whirls, dust storms, and lightning. It can last for days.”

“Days?” I frowned. “Is it still raining?”

“Yes. Though, by my estimation, the rain will only last for a few more hours. It still won’t be safe outside, but it will be better.”

Shuddering, I rubbed my injured arm. “Then why are you here? Were you caught in the storm?”

“No.” He unfolded his limbs and languidly stepped over to his desk. “I’m here to study the storm. I work for a company that collects data from planets about their typical weather patterns and how it affects the topography of the land. They, in turn, sell it to cartography companies. I am studying the changes the storm makes to the surrounding geography.”

I blinked. “You study the weather?”

“Yes. And I gather data as to how it affects the surrounding landscape.”

“So, you’re like a...meteorologist?” I didn’t mean to sound skeptical, but I’d never heard of anyone having a job like his, and I had no idea how to label it.

He laughed and placed a hand against his stomach. “Kind of, but not quite. I’m a climatologist. I do have a degree in meteorology, though.”

There were worse things, I supposed. *He could be out here trying to dispose of a body like my captors.* “That’s why they brought me here, then. So the storm would hide them.”

He gave me a long, assessing look. “Who are they?”

I pressed my lips together. There was no way around telling him at least some of the story. “I’m Agent Julia Carter of the IPF. I was investigating a case that took me to Viridis. My team recovered evidence that is vital to our investigation. My partner and I were transporting it back to the field office to have it looked at when our vehicle was attacked. They took the evidence and kidnapped me. My partner was injured.” Grief welled up inside me, but I pushed it away. He was alive. I wouldn’t believe Jordan was dead until I saw a body. “Whoever these guys are, they don’t want that evidence to get back into police hands, and they don’t want me to survive.”

Silence stretched between us as he mulled that over. I wasn’t sure if he didn’t believe me, or if he was just thinking about what my words meant. Then, finally, he nodded. “If they escaped the storm or found shelter, then they’ll be searching for you as soon as they are physically able. With my sensors set up, it won’t be hard for them to find us.”

Not the news I was hoping for. I took a deep breath and pressed my hand to my forehead. “You don’t have subspace communications operational right now, do you?”

“No. We won’t have any off-planet communications working until the storm passes. The electromagnetic force is too strong, even more so than what you’d typically run into in this kind of weather.”

“I figured as much. Can we leave the planet?”

He sighed. “Unfortunately, no. Not safely. The storm carries with it a type of charged particle that will destroy the ship if we fly through it. The storm is massive, blanketing a large portion of the planet. The shields would protect us a little, but the particles would rapidly deplete them and then they’d drain the power from the other systems, effectively crippling us.”

Great. We can't leave and we can't call for help. “That’s not ideal.”

“No. How many men are we looking at?”

“A dozen, maybe. I didn’t see them all. I was kept in a secluded room the whole time. They certainly outnumber us.”

He tapped a few fingers against the desk. “We need to be smart. We have some time before they can even think about looking for you.”

I wasn’t sure I was ready to expend the mental energy to plan. I touched my ripped sleeve, fighting the urge to rip it off completely. “Do you have some clothes I could borrow?”

When he blinked at me, his eyes taking in my disheveled appearance, I blushed. “I need to get cleaned up. I won’t be able to think until I’m clean. I’m pretty sure my shirt is a goner.”

“Of course.” He stepped past me into the hallway. I caught the faint scent of maple and pine, but he was moving too fast for me to get more than a little whiff. I followed a little slower, mindful of my weak legs. He disappeared into one of the rooms and returned with some clothes. “I don’t know how well they’ll fit, but you’re welcome to them.”

“Thank you.” I took the clothes without complaint. I was just grateful to have something clean.

“Use my bathroom.” He gestured to the door he’d just come out of. “I don’t think there are any supplies in the other one.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. I stepped into the doorway and paused. “It’s Ethan, right?”

He smiled. “Yeah.”

“Thank you, for all this.” I felt my hands starting to shake again as fear tried to crowd into my mind again. “You saved my life. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t been there.”

“Things happen for reasons you’d never expect. I think we were supposed to meet, Julia Carter.”

My spine tingled, and I turned away, unsettled by my reaction. It wasn’t like I was afraid or thought he was creepy. Quite the opposite. His presence seemed to affect me in a way I couldn’t explain. Like being close to him or looking in his eyes was too intense for me. I wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Without looking back, I went into the bathroom. I stripped down, gently peeling the bandage off my forehead, and stood under some hot water. The heat soothed my battered muscles. It felt good to slough off the layers of dirt, dust, and grime. I washed my hair three times to be sure I got all the muck out of it. Once I didn’t have to focus on the lack of cleanliness anymore, my head cleared and allowed me to concentrate on the problem at hand.

After I was scrubbed clean, I stepped out and dried off. I glanced in the mirror, checking myself for any major injuries. The spot where they had cut out my tracker was raw and throbbed when I touched it. My forehead was alright, though it was bruised. I had a dozen cuts across my arms and chest. My face had a few thin marks from the car accident, but nothing severe. My shoulder hurt, but my range of motion had returned. I tested it carefully and decided not to use it unless I really needed to.

Unable to do anything else, I pulled on the clothes Ethan had given me. The pants were too large, but I took my belt off my old pants and used it to hold them up. The shirt was also too big, but it had long sleeves, which I appreciated. I was practically swimming in the shirt, so I tied the hem up to make it fit a little better. I grabbed my gloves and tried to clean them off as best as I could before sticking them in a pocket.

The last thing I grabbed was my badge. I scrubbed off the dirt and wiped it dry. I stuck it in my pocket, too. I could have

clipped it back to my belt, but I didn't have a jacket to cover it, and I got the feeling Ethan didn't like that I was a cop. I remembered the look on his face when he first saw it. I could have been mistaken, but I didn't want to flaunt my badge around him just in case.

Once I felt put together and somewhat strong again, I left the bathroom. His bedroom was empty, and this time I took a moment to study it. It was small, but most spaceship rooms were. A bed took up most of the space, but there were books and notebooks strewn about the floor amongst some clothes. It was chaotic, but not dirty.

It felt impolite to linger, so I went back out into the hallway. "Ethan?"

"I'm in the cockpit."

Turning, I headed for the front of the ship. I reached the cockpit and paused, fighting against the uncertain emotions I felt. Ethan was sitting in the co-pilot's seat, a projection screen pulled up with a bunch of technical stuff on it I didn't even pretend to understand. In the pilot's seat sat the android.

I had never met an android before since there weren't many in existence. They were also extremely expensive. Androids used to be everywhere until an incident a few decades ago. Someone hacked into their data network and re-programmed them to kill humans. Almost all the androids were destroyed, and production was outlawed for decades before the ban was finally lifted. Popular opinion of them hadn't changed much, and most people thought they should still be banned. Androids were often considered dangerous, and only a few companies bothered making them. They weren't commonly found, and as far as I knew, most androids were relegated to military use.

Ethan looked up at me and blinked, straightening. "How do you feel?"

Time to revert to professional mode. I shut off my feelings and looked away from the android. "Fine. Sore, but I'll live."

"Good." He looked at the android. "Andy has been trying to get the outboard sensors working at least enough to warn us if

anyone approaches, but he hasn't made any progress so far."

"On the contrary," the android spoke, not taking his eyes off his screen. "I have made much progress. However, I have not gotten it to work yet."

He looked human, with dark skin, hair, and eyes, but he was also inhuman in appearance. He sat too still to be a person because he didn't breathe. He had perfect posture. *If I sat like that, my back would ache.* It wasn't natural, and I could feel the unnaturalness of it growing the more I looked at him.

Ethan smiled, as though the android amused him. "Anyway, I've been tracking the progression of the storm. It seems like we have around three hours left before the rain dissipates."

I pressed my hand to my temple. "Okay. And how soon after that can we take off?"

He shook his head. "The rain might stop, but the storm will be far from over. The particles will be denser in the center of the storm, but they will blanket most of the area for a while. And then we'd still have to deal with lightning and fire whirls long after the rain is gone."

"Fire whirls?"

"Think of it like a tornado made of fire. The lightning strikes anything that can burn, sparking a fire. The wind is so strong it whips the fire into a whirl. They can be quite dangerous, depending on how strong the wind is."

More bad news. "Okay." I sighed. "So, we have to outlast the storm and somehow keep them from finding us."

"They're going to find us." He sounded sure, as if it was a fact. "We aren't hiding. I set up the data sensors in the most exposed locations. It won't be hard to find us from there. They *will* find us. If they are crazy enough to venture out once the rain is gone, they'll check where they last saw us, and then it's just a matter of time."

"Do you have any encouraging news?"

"We have a force field up. It was to keep out the rain and weather, but it will keep them out too. They'll go back to their

ship, plan, and then return. That buys us more time.”

I pressed my lips together. “Once the rain is gone, could we move to a different location on the planet? Somewhere they won’t be able to find us?”

“I checked over the area before coming. This was the only cave nearby. The rest of the land is either flat or covered in sand dunes. There is no better place in range.”

“So basically, we get to sit around on our thumbs until they show up and try to attack us.”

He hesitated, which was as close to a yes as I was going to get. I sighed and tried to tamp down my annoyance. It wasn’t his fault. None of this was his fault. I was the one they were after, and all he had done was help me.

Ethan stood up. “Let’s get some food. You must be hungry.”

When I hesitated, he smiled at me. “Andy will be on the lookout. He’s vigilant and doesn’t need sleep. He would see something long before we would. We’re safe right now in the rain.”

That allayed some of my fears. I was on edge still, but if what he said was true, then only an idiot would venture out in the rain. I nodded and stepped back so he could fit through the doorway. He brushed past me. I got another whiff of maple and found myself relaxing a little. Which was stupid because there was no reason his smell should affect me at all. *Don’t be an idiot, Julia. So, he smells good. That should not make you feel anything.*

Ethan led me to a kitchen where he rummaged around and pulled out sandwich toppings. He got some meat out and started putting things onto the counter. “Help yourself.”

I found a plate and started assembling a sandwich. I grabbed lots of meat. I would need the protein. When I had the food piled high, I sat down at the table and dug in. Ethan made himself a sandwich and sat down across from me. I watched him while I ate, trying to figure out why I reacted to him the way I did. I didn’t come up with an answer.

He knew I was watching him, but he didn't say anything. He simply ate and openly watched me too. He seemed like a good person, but I couldn't help remembering his face when he saw my badge. Normal people didn't have that kind of reaction to law enforcement.

"Why don't you like cops?" I finally asked.

One eyebrow lifted. "Who says I don't like cops?"

"Your face. When you saw my shield."

"I don't dislike them," he said thoughtfully. "I have a healthy distrust of them."

I snorted. I couldn't help it. "A healthy distrust? Really?"

He chewed and swallowed before answering. "I'm not a criminal."

"See," I put my sandwich down, "when someone's first reaction to that question is defensive, it makes me wonder. So, I'm having a little trouble believing you."

"I'm not." He hesitated. "I've just known too many dirty cops."

"Well, I'm not a dirty cop." I let it go with that explanation. I could understand his reluctance to have a cop around if he'd had issues in the past. I didn't have rose-colored glasses on when it came to my profession, and I knew there were a lot of bad apples out there. I still couldn't help but think there was a lot more to the story, but I would give him the benefit of the doubt.

"I believe you." He sounded like he did, too. "If you were dirty, I doubt those guys would have any need to kill you."

That prompted a harsh laugh from me. I picked my sandwich back up. "Good point."

We ate in silence for a while. There were more things I wanted to know about him, so I didn't keep quiet for long. "How did you get into mete—er, climatology?" I stumbled over the word while trying to remember it.

“Well, I grew up out in nature. I’m Novem, born and raised on Fairfax. It’s part of my culture to be connected to nature. I loved it. My tribe lives out in the woods. I was always rather fascinated by the outdoors and the weather and all the cool things that happen in nature. Eventually, I went to school for it and was recruited by Centric Enterprises. I live and work on this ship now, studying nature.”

The story sounded simple. “Do you like it?”

“Yes. A lot.” He grinned. “It fascinates me.”

“Good.”

“And how did you become an IPF agent?”

Not a story I wanted to share, but it was only polite to tell him at least part of it. “I knew a local cop. He was a good guy. Helped me and my family through some stuff and kept an eye on me. I wanted to help people the way he did. Make a difference. So, here I am.”

That was cutting out a lot of details, but I wasn’t willing to share more. I didn’t know this guy yet. I didn’t share my past with anyone. It was my burden, and I didn’t want pity. I also didn’t want to make things awkward. I was who I was now, not who I was then.

“Sounds like a noble goal.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“And are you succeeding? At making a difference?”

“There’s no easy answer to that question. I like to think so.”

He grunted in agreement. “You held your own yesterday, with those men. Which is a high compliment, considering you were bound, injured, and disadvantaged.”

I smirked. “Thank you, I think. You seemed comfortable in a fight.”

Ethan shrugged. “I used to box. For fun, not professionally. I picked up a few things along the way. Fighting doesn’t scare me.”

“What about the weather stuff? Does any of that scare you?”

“Yes and no.” He smiled. “I find it exhilarating. Nature is such a powerful force, and we forget that a lot. I have a healthy respect for nature and her power. But fear it? Not necessarily. That may be crazy, since I’ve seen the kinds of things she can do, but nature is all about balance.”

“Is that part of your tribe’s beliefs?”

“Very much so. The Novem respect nature in all her forms. We believe the universe is all about balance.” He gestured around him with his right hand, revealing a tattoo in the center of his palm. “Everything is connected and works in harmony. When the balance is upset, it must be restored.”

“That’s a very interesting attitude. Is that a tattoo on your hand?” The words popped out before I could stop them. Asking a Novem about their tattoos was considered rude if you weren’t part of the tribe.

Ethan closed his hand into a fist, but then he opened it so I could see it clearly. It was a paw print of some sort in the center of his palm. It was done in heavy, black ink, and seemed to fit perfectly in his hand.

“It’s a coyote’s paw.”

“Why a coyote?”

His eyes flashed to mine and then dropped to the table, along with his hand. “I’m a coyote.”

What? He’s a what now? I blinked at him. He laughed at my blank expression and shook his head. “Okay, I have the spirit of a coyote. Everyone has a spirit like an animal. It’s a way to understand your own nature better. My tribe determined mine was a coyote when I turned thirteen. That’s when a boy becomes a man among my people.”

“A man? At thirteen?”

He shrugged. “A man in the sense that they can go hunting with the older men, join in the rituals, and be considered a contributing part of the tribe. Not necessarily a mature individual.”

I pursed my lips. “I suppose that makes sense. Why did they decide you were a coyote?”

“A coyote represents a lot of things. I was a mischievous youth, and often pulled pranks on others. Very indicative of a coyote. I was light-hearted and carefree. Playful. But I was also resourceful and clever. The elders used to say I could survive out in the woods for weeks without any provisions. I used to love the forest and I would disappear for long periods of time. I always came back. All those traits belong to a coyote.”

“That sounds fascinating.” I was genuinely intrigued. “Are there a lot of different animals that you believe represent people? Or is it just, like, a handful?”

“There are quite a few. Some are more prevalent than others. There are a lot of different animals in the wild, and there are just as many different types of people. Since I was a coyote, it felt appropriate to get this tattoo.”

“Do you have a lot of tattoos?”

When he smiled, I felt myself blush again. “I’m sorry. I know it’s a big cultural thing for your people, and I shouldn’t ask.”

“No, I understand. I’ve lived around enough outsiders to have stopped being offended by the question.” He shrugged at me and leaned back. “I have many tattoos, and each of them has a story. We would be here for days if I tried to share them all with you.”

Knowing that getting the story behind the coyote paw was more than I was entitled to, I let the subject drop. My food was gone, and it was time to return to the problem at hand.

“Do you think it would help our situation if, when the rain was finished, we took down your sensors? If they come looking for us and don’t find the sensors, that would make it harder to find us, right?”

Ethan lifted an arm to scratch his shoulder. “Possibly, but like I said, we aren’t hidden here. Eventually they will track us

down. I doubt we will be able to evade them or hide from them.”

“What about going farther into the cave? Do you know what’s there?”

“The cave dead ends after about a thousand feet. There’s no exit out the back.”

“Okay.” That was unhelpful, but I was determined not to lose now that I had finally gotten free. “What about weapons? Do you have any?”

“Some,” he admitted. “Not a lot. I have more knives than I do guns. The ship itself has some weapons, but I doubt we’d be able to use them without causing the cave to collapse.”

Feeling frustrated, I folded my arms. “Well, what do *you* suggest we do?”

“Easy there.” He smiled, as though we were discussing something as trivial as what to eat for dinner. “Taking the sensors down is still a good idea. That’s the first thing I suggest we do. I need to not leave them behind, if possible, anyway. They are extremely expensive. As soon as the rain stops, we can go get the sensors and bring them back here. We need to be careful going out there, but the sensors aren’t far. Then I suggest maybe we set up someone to keep watch. Perhaps from the mouth of the cave. It might give us some forewarning if someone does come looking.

“There is another idea I had.” He paused to rub his jaw. “I should run it by Andy because I’m not sure we can do it, but it’s theoretically possible. The sensors are made to record the storm’s severity. One of the things they can do is detect the density of the charged particles. If we can set them up to scan overhead, we might be able to find a break in the storm where the particles are less dense, and it would be safe to fly through. That may take time to find because I doubt there’d be a clear spot until the tail end of it reaches us, but it could still provide us a way out sooner. Anything else we can do is just to buy us time. We have the force field. Unless they think to collapse the cave over us using their ship, which would be extremely

dangerous, there isn't too much they can do to us with the shield."

I brightened up at the idea. "That actually sounds like a not dreadful plan."

He pressed his hand to his heart. "Your words cut me to the quick! You feel so poorly towards my ideas? Here I thought it was a brilliant flash of genius."

I burst out laughing at his dramatics. "Not quite up to my standards. Now, if you figured out a way to reconfigure the sensors to somehow hide us from those guys, I would call *that* a genius idea."

"Unfortunately, I think that's far outside my wheelhouse. Technology isn't my strongest skill. That's why I have Andy around."

"Is he yours or is he with the ship?"

"He belongs to my employers, so he comes with the ship. He's useful to have around. He helps me get better results faster, so Centric Enterprises considers him a valuable investment. He honestly does all the heavy lifting."

"At least there is some use for an android." I tapped a finger against the tabletop. "How long until the rain stops?"

He pulled out a tablet and clicked on it. "If the storm continues moving at the same pace, about two hours, but we should give it a little extra time before venturing out. The rain can hang around in the air for a while and still do damage."

"Agreed. But I don't want to wait too long. I doubt those guys will be smart enough to be careful."

"It might cost them their lives." Ethan shook his head. "This storm is no joke. The only reason I'm even considering going out there is because I know what to look for. I've studied this weather pattern for a long time. An amateur will likely step in the wrong thing out there and that's it. They're dead."

His words were serious, and I shivered. "There have been too many near deaths around me recently. I think I'm ready for a vacation."

“Hopefully, you can have one soon.”

I hope so. “I’d love some time off. This is a high-profile case, and I’ve made some friends in high places. I might be able to call in a favor or two and get a break once I solve this case. Who knows?”

“I think if you ask nicely your superiors will want to reward your efforts. I bet you are an excellent cop.”

“What makes you say that?” I tried not to squint, but I wasn’t sure his tone was complimentary.

Ethan shrugged. “I can tell. You are obviously strong, and you seem competent and dedicated to your job. Are you telling me you’re an awful agent?”

“Of course not,” I scoffed. “I think I do a good job. I’m just not sure how I feel about that coming from a guy who has a ‘healthy dislike’ for cops.”

He laughed again. “I’m sorry. I have nothing against you. Really. The cops and I have just never been friends, that’s all.”

“You’re hanging out with the wrong kind of people in that case. Some of the best people I’ve ever known have been cops. Good people, with kindness and strength and a sense of justice. I know there are some bad ones out there, but there are a lot more of the good ones. If I didn’t believe cops help people, I wouldn’t be one.”

Ethan nodded. “I can see that. You believe in what you do. That’s important. Everyone should believe in something.” He stood up. “I need to tell Andy to start working on a plan to program the sensors to see if they can detect the weak spot we need.”

Even though I didn’t necessarily want to see the android again, I followed Ethan from the room. For one, I didn’t want to be alone, and for two, if they found something, I wanted to know it. Knowledge was power, especially when I was already at such a huge disadvantage.

The android hadn’t moved since we left. Ethan dropped back into his chair and recited his idea to the android, who listened in silence.

“Do you think we could do that?”

“Yes.” The android’s tone didn’t fluctuate much. “It should be well within the sensor’s capabilities. I may have to amplify the output to reach more than the immediate area, but it is theoretically possible.”

Ethan grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. “Excellent. Can you get to work on that?”

“Of course. I will need to reprogram the sensors manually.”

“I figured as much.” Ethan pressed his lips together. “Do everything you can to prep for that now. Just be ready for when we have the sensors.”

The android paused. “Are we abandoning our original mission to collect data regarding the storm’s effect on the topography of this area?”

Ethan pulled at the hairs on his chin. “Compile whatever data we have and save it, but that’s no longer our priority. Our new priority is to get off this planet as soon as possible.” He glanced at me over his shoulder. “I assume you need to return to Viridis, yes?”

I nodded. “As soon as possible.”

Ethan nodded back. “It’s official IPF business. They want her dead. That overrides your protocols.”

Andy—though I didn’t like to think of the android as having a name—turned his head to look at Ethan. “My first and foremost objective is to preserve human life. If either of you are in danger, then we must leave as soon as we are able.”

“Good.” Ethan turned to the computer and began typing. “We need to find a way to outmaneuver the storm. There haven’t been any signs of any people yet, right?”

“You instructed me to inform you if I saw anything that might remotely point to human life, and I have not alerted you. Therefore, I have found nothing.”

“Another good sign.” Ethan didn’t even acknowledge the android’s condescension. Maybe I was imagining it. He had an odd way of speaking, but Ethan seemed used to it. He didn’t

appear to have any problems with having an android around. And if Andy hadn't killed Ethan by now, then I could assume he was at least moderately safe to be around.

Ethan typed away for several long moments before he stood up. "Come with me."

I followed him into the hall and down a set of stairs. The lower level contained a ton of equipment. Some I knew their use, like the radiation detector, personal protective gear, sample collection gear and so forth. Other things I didn't recognize.

He ignored them all and went to a cabinet along the back wall. He typed in a code for the locked door, and it popped open. Inside were weapons. I spotted a few guns, one rifle, and an extensive collection of knives.

I whistled as he began rifling through them. "Are those guns registered?"

"Do you care?" Ethan half-smiled at me as he passed me a projectile gun.

After checking the gun over, I shook my head. "Nope. Not even a little. Pass me some ammo."

"Yes, ma'am." He chuckled and passed me a box of bullets and then a couple of knives. He had quite an assortment of them.

"I see you are much more into blades than guns."

"When I was younger, I used to hunt a lot with my tribe. Knives were our friends. I didn't have access to a gun, so I got used to killing with a knife. And then we'd have to butcher what we killed. Knives had all sorts of uses out in the woods. I became as comfortable with a knife in my hand as I was with a pen."

I wrinkled my nose at the idea of killing and butchering an animal. It was a hypocritical reaction, but I couldn't help it. I didn't mind eating animals, but I didn't want to be the one to hunt them down and kill them. "You did a lot of outdoorsy things as a kid, didn't you?"

“Oh yes. I never liked spending time in the house.” His fingers stilled. “My grandfather was my guardian. He wasn’t the nicest of people.”

A feeling of kinship welled up in me. “Yeah, I get that.”

Some of my feelings on the subject must have leaked into my voice because he shot me a knowing look. “Did your parents raise you?”

I shrugged. “My dad died when I was little. My mom didn’t take that well and went down a bad path. I was taken from her when I was twelve. Went through a variety of foster families. Some good, but most were bad.”

Ethan gave me an understanding look. He withdrew the rest of the guns and passed some of them to me before loading up his arms. “That’s rough. Do you have any other family?”

“My little sister. Alexi. I have custody of her now. No other blood relations. At least, not that I know of. You?”

“No siblings. But in our tribe, we were all family, in a way. I had plenty of boys my age that I grew up with. Many of them I feel are my brothers.”

We headed back for the stairs. “I feel that way about my partner, Jordan. He’s like a brother to me.”

“Real family can come in unexpected packages.”

I thought of Dennis and Mariah. “That’s very true.”

We reached the top of the stairs and Ethan unceremoniously dumped his weapons onto his desk. He had brought up plenty of ammo, and he began loading them. I set the guns he’d handed to me down beside him.

“Why do you have all projectile guns?”

He lifted a single handgun. “This one is a laser. When I was old enough to use firearms, I learned how to shoot using a projectile gun. They were cheaper than laser guns. I don’t mind using a laser, but I’ve always been more comfortable with a projectile.”

“Lucky for me, I am proficient with both.” I grabbed the rifle and started loading it.

We worked in comfortable silence. It took a while to get everything prepped. Ethan took the rifle and one handgun down to the cockpit. I followed, more curious than anything. He handed them to Andy. “Here. Just in case.”

Ethan left the cockpit again, and I blinked at him, surprised by his actions. “You’re giving the android guns? Can he even use them? Doesn’t that go against his programming?”

“No.” Ethan returned to the desk, palmed the last gun, and tucked it into his belt. “Andy is programmed not to kill, but to protect human life. I am his owner, for lack of a better term. He is programmed to protect me from danger. He is programmed with a specific set of moral and ethical commands. He is not permitted to injure any humans, but he can point a gun at them and threaten them. You can’t tell from a first glance that he’s an android.”

“Maybe not the first, but certainly by the third you can. Androids are just so...unnatural. They look like humans but aren’t. They talk differently, they walk differently, they even sit differently.”

Ethan paused to give me an assessing look. “When it comes down to the moment when we need him to back us up, I’d rather him have it than try to threaten them with nothing. Maybe it will work, maybe it won’t, but it definitely won’t work if we don’t try.”

He had a point. I shut my mouth and nodded. I was in no position to argue about whether we should trust an android or not. I took my now loaded and ready-to-use gun and tucked it into my belt. The knives went in various pockets and locations on my body.

Ethan finished arming himself as well and pulled out his tablet again. “We have a little time before it will be safe to leave. We need a plan. When I go get the sensors, it’s going to be a race against time. If your captors found shelter nearby, they’ll find us immediately once they start looking.”

I frowned at him and placed my hands on my hips. “When *you* go out there? Don’t you mean *we*?”

His eyes swept me up and down. It wasn’t a lewd look; it was evaluating. But it made my stomach flutter all the same. “Are you feeling well enough to head out there?”

The obvious concern in his voice touched me, but I hated the idea that he might think I was weak. Too weak to protect myself, too weak to help. I was not weak, and even if I was, I wouldn’t let anyone else know that. Staying strong was key to surviving.

“I feel much better.”

“It will be dangerous out there. The terrain is not pleasant and obviously the storm will still be a problem.”

“Understood. I can handle it.”

Ethan nodded. “Okay. We’d better get prepped.”

I blinked. “You’re giving in that easily?” I thought I would need to convince him. I thought he would insist that, because I was a woman, I wouldn’t be able to help him out there.

He shrugged. “Truthfully, I could use the help. The sensors aren’t exactly light, and we’ll have a lot of ground to cover. It’s an open and exposed place. Having someone watching my back would be nice.”

“Most people I know aren’t as logical as you.”

That caused him to laugh. “I haven’t always been logical. I’ve worked very hard at it. Took some college classes.” He smirked. I wondered if he was joking about that last part, but before I could comment, he changed subjects. “Let’s get you some gear for out there.”

‘Gear’ consisted of goggles, another bandana, and a GPS, which he clipped onto my belt. “Don’t lose that. If we get separated or anything happens, this is your best shot at finding the ship again.”

I fiddled with the small device. “This is how you got us back last night, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It’s specially made to be unaffected by the electromagnetic field. The flashing icon is you, and the solid dot is the beacon on the ship. I’m assuming you are proficient at navigation?”

I snorted. “I know how it works.”

“Just checking. Most people don’t know how to do this kind of thing.”

“IPF training covered that extensively, don’t worry.”

He took his tablet and pulled up a picture on it. “Tell me what you see.”

I blinked at the screen, confused by the obviousness of the answer. “Mud puddles?”

“Yes. This one is acid rain and is murkier than normal puddles. It’s almost impossible to tell the difference at first glance whether the water is safe or not. When we go out there, you need to avoid all of these. Any pool of water or place that seems more than damp could still be highly acidic and should be avoided at all costs. It will burn through your skin in seconds.”

A small shiver went down my spine, and I tried to force back my fear. “Got it.”

“Lightning is another thing to be wary of. If we are high up and exposed, there will always be a chance we could be struck by lightning. Usually, it will be clustered in a section of the storm, but that’s not always the case. You can feel the change in the air, the electrical charge. Always be alert. There’s no real way to escape lightning.”

Joy. I may have escaped my captors just to die from a lightning strike.

“Then there are the fire whirls. Usually, if you steer clear of them, they won’t be troublesome. But it is fire, blown around by the wind, so don’t go near them. Period. It’s a bad idea.”

I nodded. “Okay. Fire equals bad.”

“Any questions about out there?”

“No.” I suddenly felt tired. I was probably just anticipating the physical work that was coming. I might tell Ethan I was feeling fine, but I wasn’t fully recovered. I would deal with it because I had to, but it wasn’t going to be pleasant.

I dropped into a chair and sighed. “What now? We wait?”

He sat in a chair beside me. “We wait.”

“I hate waiting.”

He chuckled. “I can teach you how to meditate.”

“Maybe some other time.” I poked at my injured shoulder, testing it. “Do you think we have a chance of actually getting out of this alive?”

I’m not sure why I asked. It wasn’t something I would ever ask anyone in our situation except maybe Jordan. I was the one who supported everyone else, who kept morale up, who refused to dwell on the negative. But there was something about Ethan that made me feel like it was okay to be a little vulnerable. Just a little.

For the longest time, he was quiet, staring at the wall. Then he shrugged. “There are no guarantees. That’s life. But I trust the universe. I don’t think we were brought together just to die here. I think you still have a lot of things to do with your life. I think we stand a good chance.”

His words were oddly comforting. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “I hope you’re right.”

CHAPTER SIX

Ethan

I stood by the door and looked at the readings on my tablet. “It seems like the rain has stopped. I’m not going to call it safe out there, but it shouldn’t kill us instantly now.”

Julia took a deep, steadying breath and slowly let it out. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

Despite her insistence that she was well enough to venture out, I wasn’t convinced. I could tell she was still hurting. She hadn’t once complained or asked for medicine, but it was obvious in every move she made. She was tough for sure, but I felt torn about taking her out onto the planet’s exposed surface. The last thing I wanted was for her to get injured further. Part of me wanted to convince her to stay, but I knew she’d insist on coming. That was the kind of person she was. I may have only known her for a few hours, but I’d learned at least that much about her.

Andy stood nearby holding a tablet in one hand and the rifle in the other. He was looking at me expectantly, waiting on orders.

“Be ready for when we return. I want you to monitor the area closely and be prepared to defend the ship if necessary.”

Andy nodded. “Of course.”

I wished desperately that we could take coms with us, but the interference would be too great. They wouldn’t work beyond a couple hundred feet. That was a far cry from the hundreds of miles they could normally reach. I didn’t like being so detached from the ship when there was danger, but I trusted Andy to take care of things.

Handing off my tablet to him, I looked at Julia. “Stick close. Hopefully they won’t have ventured out yet, but I wouldn’t bet on it. If we get separated, come straight back here. Remember to avoid any water. Got it?”

She nodded firmly and pulled her goggles over her eyes and her bandana over her mouth. “Understood.”

Visibility outside the cave had improved drastically since the rain had tamped down the dust and sand. The storm had done a number on the landscape, too. The terrain had shifted, and landmarks I’d used before were now different. Sand had piled in places where there used to be some semblance of a path. Sand dunes had shifted into different places, and in some areas it had blown away completely, revealing the hard rock beneath. I still knew where the sensors were—how far and which direction to go—but the change was disorienting.

I set off to the right at a moderate pace, eyes roving the landscape looking for any signs of danger. The sky was still overcast with thick, dark clouds, but no rain fell. I could almost feel a dampness to the air, but it didn’t burn my lungs to breathe. There was still the possibility of isolated pockets of rain that could crop up, so I kept a watchful eye on the sky.

We reached the top of a hill and Julia stopped to stare. A fire whirl burned on a ridge perhaps a mile away, twirling flames up into the sky. It was consuming what looked like a small tree. It was hard to tell from that distance, but I’d bet because of its elevated position that it had been struck by lightning and the wind had taken it from there.

Wind slapped against our backs and Julia teetered forward, but she caught her balance after a second. We didn’t have time to stare, so I took her gloved hand and turned towards our goal, away from the fire. A sensor stood on another ridge not far away.

The ground was covered in loose sand deposits, and therefore it slipped away easily underfoot. I clenched my jaw and slowed my pace to compensate. We had to descend down a hill, and my feet kept sliding out from under me. Julia had just as much trouble behind me. Her foot slipped and she slammed into my back. I crouched down to maintain my balance. Julia started to fall past me, so I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against me. A puddle of water lay just ahead and to the left, and I didn’t want her getting anywhere near it.

She grabbed my arm with tense fingers and quickly regained her feet, moving away from the water. At least she had seen it, and she obviously feared it. That fear would keep her alive. Our eyes met, silently making sure the other was okay before we resumed our trek.

Thunder rolled in the distance. It wasn't far enough away for me to be comfortable. My guess was that it was only a couple of miles away or so. That was too close. The last thing we needed was for one of us to get struck by lightning. I eyed the sensor we were closing in on and tried not to think negatively.

The wind whipped sand up into our path, and I slowed. Sand and dust whirled around in front of us, and although it didn't appear as though the wind had stirred up any water, I wasn't sure I wanted to chance it. Julia started forward, and I grabbed her arm as gently as I could and shook my head at her. Although she looked confused, she halted.

As soon as the sand dropped away, I started forward again, watching the ground carefully. Everything was tinted dark from the low light. I steered away from the more questionable spots as much as possible. There was just enough light to see the color variations in the sand, but it was still a struggle.

We reached the first sensor without much trouble. This one seemed to have survived the storm with no visible damage. I popped it free and did a brief check of it before turning to the next one. Julia stayed at my back the whole time and kept watchful eyes on the area around us. There didn't seem to be any signs of her pursuers, but I knew they had to be out searching for us. If they wanted her dead badly enough, I doubted they would allow a little inclement weather to interfere.

We made steady progress and rounded up two more sensors without any trouble. We spotted another fire whirl and what looked like a small pond of acid rain, but they were far enough away not to be a threat. When lightning flashed, Julia jumped and stepped closer to me. Thunder followed it instantly, and I frowned. I could feel the electricity in the air, and I cringed.

We weren't in a safe place. More thunder rolled ominously, and I watched as two more lightning strikes flashed nearby.

"We need to move, now." I urged Julia away from the lightning, towards a fourth sensor on another hill. She didn't argue.

As I picked my way down the ridge, my foot tripped on a root that was partially hidden by sand. I lost my balance and tipped forward. I couldn't recover quickly enough, and I cradled the sensors protectively as the ground rushed up at me. The impact hurt and knocked the air from my lungs. I rolled down the hill and kicked my feet out to slow my progress.

A hand grabbed my shoulder, jerking me to a stop. Julia dug in her heels beside me, holding my shoulder tightly until we both stopped. I sat down hard on my butt, and Julia dropped down beside me. I checked the sensors, and thankfully they didn't appear to be damaged by the fall.

Wind whooshed down, kicking up more dust and buffeting against our bodies. I took Julia's hand and squeezed it in silent thanks before standing up and continuing towards the next sensor. Like a trooper, she got up and matched my pace, skirting another wet patch of sand.

There were six sensors total, but my goal was only to get four. At least, if we got four, I would be satisfied. Five would be better, but four would suffice.

We reached the base of another hill and started the arduous climb towards the top. I didn't remember the hill being that steep before, but we couldn't stop. Julia grunted beside me, but she didn't complain. She kept going, hand over hand, and I focused on getting myself up the hill. I was in pretty good shape, and normally a climb like that wouldn't have been so taxing, but not under those circumstances and not while carrying three sensors. My breath started coming in gasps and sweat gathered on my forehead and spine. I clenched my jaw and kept going, ignoring the discomfort.

Finally, my hand touched flat ground, and I pulled myself onto it with a sigh. I helped Julia up beside me and carefully rolled onto my feet. I took a second to catch my breath and

scan the area. A burning tree stood a couple hundred feet away, and the wind whipped back and forth, turning the fire into spirals, but it hadn't turned into a full fire whirl yet. It was well on its way though.

Julia started to say something, but thunder boomed at the same time, drowning out her words. I winced at the deafening sound and turned to the sensor. I tried to disengage it from the rock, but it refused to budge. I grunted and knelt, trying to pry it loose to no avail. I growled and tried to wiggle it. There was enough give that it turned a fraction, but not enough for it to release. Impatient, I clenched my jaw and began the painstaking process of pulling it free inch by inch. Julia grabbed it higher up and pulled, lending her strength.

Wind pressed against my back, and I took a second to eye the burning tree again. We were safe for now, at least from that. *I think we've pressed our luck too much out here.* A bad feeling grew in the pit of my stomach.

Julia's hands were suddenly gone, and she shouted in surprise. I turned just in time to see a man lunge at me. I pushed backward with my feet, and he only managed to catch my arm instead of my midsection. I slammed into the ground hard enough that I'd have a bruise. I tried to pull away from the man, but his hand locked onto my arm, and he swiped at me with a knife. I jerked away, pulling him with me when he didn't let go. He lost his balance and dropped flat onto the ground.

Taking advantage of his fall, I threw my leg over him, rolled on top of him, and pinned his legs. I grabbed at the knife with both hands, trying to wrest the weapon from him. He grunted as his grip started to slip, but he stubbornly held on.

Gravity was on my side, and eventually he dropped the knife. I reached for it, but he punched me in the face before I was able to grab it. He swung at me again, but I rocked backwards and he missed. Instead of reaching for his knife, I swung forward, grabbed his throat with my right hand, and grabbed for my gun with my left.

Hurry, Ethan. You don't have time to waste on him.

He pounded on me with his fists, solely focused on the hand around his throat. I grabbed the hilt of the gun and jerked it free of its holster. Even though I tried to keep it out of his line of sight, his eyes tracked it. He bucked, trying to throw me off. I held on stubbornly, shoved the gun into his gut, and fired.

Pain exploded across his face, and he gurgled something incoherent. I jumped off him. He pressed his hands against his stomach and tried to mutter something. Knowing he wouldn't get back up, I ignored him.

Find Julia.

My head turned side to side, searching for her. She was wrestling with her own assailant a dozen feet away. She was on her side on the ground, her face inches from a shallow pool of water. A man was crouched on top of her, foot in her back, hand forcing her head towards the water.

Using my gun wasn't an option; I didn't want to hit Julia by accident. I ran at them, holstering the gun and grabbing my knife instead. He couldn't hear or see me coming. I swiveled and kicked him hard in the face. Blood squirted from his nose, and he fell backwards. He recovered quickly and jumped to his feet, pressing a hand to his face. He eyed my knife, but it didn't make him pause for more than a second before he lunged at me.

He was a better fighter than I had estimated. He deftly dodged my knife and tackled me to the ground. My hand bashed against the ground, the knife flew from my fingers, and we rolled across the sand. He pummeled me in the chest and stomach with his fists, knocking the wind out of me. Pain blossomed across my torso while he continued to pummel me.

Julia suddenly appeared over his shoulder. Her hand snaked around his neck below his jaw and jerked backward. She succeeded in pulling him away from me a foot or so and then she slashed her knife across his neck. I blinked and turned my face as blood splattered, staining the sand. She released his body almost as fast and dropped to her knees beside me.

Brown eyes full of concern and pain peered at me through her goggles. "Are you okay?" Her voice was muffled by the

cloth around her face.

Somehow, I nodded. My eyes strayed to the dead man's body. I swallowed and took a steady breath. "I'm okay. Are you?"

"Yeah." She stood up and offered her hand. "We should go."

I used her hand to pull myself to my feet. We weren't out of danger yet. I spun in a circle, checking all around us. I caught sight of three more men heading for us a couple hundred feet away. Unfortunately, they stood between us and the ship.

Julia spotted them at the same time I did. "Snails!" She scooped up the sensors on the ground while I grabbed the one still stuck in the ground and yanked. I threw all of my weight behind it, and this time it came free. Julia handed me one of her three sensors, and we took off.

Running on this kind of terrain was nearly impossible, but we did our best. Thankfully, our pursuers were having just as much trouble as we were. I kept one eye on Julia and one eye on the ground. We were running up and down hills now, so there was enough cover between us and them that they couldn't outright shoot us.

Electricity buzzed against my skin just as lightning streaked from the sky to a hill a hundred feet to the right. Julia and I both jumped and skittered to the side. Deafening thunder clapped, and we covered our ears. We were low enough that I doubted we were in any danger, not unless we had to run up another hill.

With no time to worry about it, I steered towards a path between two massive dunes. I glanced over my shoulder but couldn't see our pursuers. I took that as a good sign and tried to run faster.

A large pool of water stretched across most of the path. I braked hard and moved to the side, trying to skirt around the edges of it. Julia followed right on my heels. Once we were safely around the water, I stuck close to the hill on our left until the path branched out in front of us in three forks. I closed my eyes, letting my instincts choose a path. I reached

out with my left hand and swept it from left to right. Somewhere in the middle, my hand tingled. I opened my eyes and ran for the middle path.

The sandy dunes morphed into rocky hills, and vegetation grew along the paths and up the sides of the hills, though most of it was dry, decaying, and brown. It looked like the rain hadn't done much damage to the area. The hills grew into cliffs, and we descended into a valley. I kept running down the path. Julia tripped behind me and righted herself without needing help.

The path forked again, getting smaller as more vegetation and rock seemed to fill the valley. I slowed, and Julia nearly plowed into my back. She came to a full stop and readjusted her hold on the sensors, taking harsh breaths. I couldn't see any signs of pursuit. This was the time to get off the path and find a place to hide, if possible, before they caught up.

Looking at the wall of rock and knotted vines on the right, I walked down the path a few feet in that direction. Something caught my eye, and I maneuvered around a curtain of thick branches, vines, and roots that were growing up the rocks, being careful not to break any. "Julia," I whispered.

She appeared at my side almost instantly. "They're coming!"

I slid carefully around the branches and pressed my hand into the darkness. "There's a hole here." I tucked my body into the small opening, cautiously guiding the sensors inside as I went. The opening couldn't have been much bigger than the size of a window, but the inside was much more spacious. Julia said nothing while she climbed in beside me, propping the sensors on the inside wall by the opening.

Gingerly, I felt around with my hands until I found the back of the cave. It was only four feet deep or so. It was wide enough that I could comfortably lie down. The floor was dry, and I didn't feel any feces, so I presumed it was uninhabited. There were only a handful of animal species that could survive on the planet anyway, so that wasn't surprising. Most of the local animals were poisonous reptiles, and if we had invaded

the home of one of those, we would have a worse problem on our hands.

Julia stumbled around in the dark hole, and I took her gently by the shoulders and sat her down against the wall next to me. Some light came in through the entrance, but it wasn't bright outside and there were plenty of overgrown trees encircling the opening. The extra foliage made it dark, but it also made it much harder for someone to spot the opening.

Thunder continued to boom overhead, but it wasn't as deafening in the little cave. I took a slow breath, sending up a quick prayer of thanks to the universe for the shelter. I was hoping they wouldn't find us.

Footsteps and voices reached my ears, though they were faint. Julia suddenly had her gun in hand and was pointing it at the opening. Seeing the logic in that, I withdrew mine as well. Julia crouched silently, her whole body tense and ready for action. I supposed, as an IPF agent, she was at least familiar with these kinds of situations. I scooted forward a little, being as silent as possible, and peered through the hole, though I couldn't see much from my vantage point.

As the voices approached, Julia stilled completely. I caught a brief glimpse of a body moving past. Julia's gun was aimed right at them, and her attention never wavered. I held my gun in hesitant hands. I didn't know if attacking would be the smartest move, but whatever play she made, I would back her up. I waited for her to fire, to hear the gunshot that would echo viciously in the small space.

The noise never came.

Our pursuers passed by, muttering to themselves, and then they were out of earshot again. Julia relaxed and settled against the wall. I put my gun down and scooted back as well. We sat in silence for several minutes, just resting.

"Are you okay?" I finally asked, pulling my bandana away from my face.

Julia swallowed loudly enough that I heard it, but she nodded and removed her bandana as well. "Yeah. I'm a little

winded, but I'm okay. You?"

I mentally took stock of my body. "A few bruises, but nothing major."

"Thank you. For helping me."

I smiled faintly into the dark. "You did the same for me. Thank you. We don't make a bad team."

She chuckled and shifted beside me, though she didn't move away. We weren't touching, but we were close enough I could feel her body heat. "I suppose not." Her voice wasn't completely steady, and she cleared her throat. "That could have gone far worse."

There was fear underneath her words, though I could tell she was trying hard to hide it from me. I found her hand in the dark and engulfed it in mine. I squeezed gently, trying to reassure her. "But it didn't, and we're both okay."

She shifted, and I thought she'd pull her hand away. Instead, her hand turned up and she wrapped her fingers around mine. The connection soothed my spirit, and my shoulders relaxed.

The connection comforted us both, I think. Her hand shook ever so slightly, yet she held onto me like I was a lifeline. She wasn't alone in this. I wasn't alone in this. That was something. We were going to get through this together.

"So, are you in these kinds of situations a lot?" I asked lightly, trying to find something to say.

"What kind of situations would that be? Trapped on a desolate, hostile planet being chased by people who want to drop me into a pool of acid rain? Hiding in a cave with a meteorologist? Or climatologist, I mean." Humor threaded her words. Even though I couldn't see it, I felt her smile. "No. This is a new one for me."

I laughed. It felt good to laugh. "You know what I mean."

She started to shrug, but it must have hurt because she stopped almost immediately. "This isn't the first life-threatening situation I've been in. You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but I'm not. The adrenaline still messes me up

sometimes. The fighting still hurts. Running still exhausts me. The thought that I might die at any moment still petrifies me.”

“But you keep going.”

“Yeah, I guess I do. Someone’s got to do it. Protect others. Make a difference. Someone has to try to do the right thing.”

A whisper of a thought drifted through my mind. The universe often communicated to me through my feelings and instincts, giving me random insights about life. I rubbed the back of her hand absentmindedly as I quieted my spirit, trying to listen.

“You’re a bear.”

The words popped out before I could properly censor them. I winced when I heard them out loud. Julia made a noise in her throat. “What? I’m a *what?*”

I pressed my lips together and ran my free hand over my dreadlocks. “I didn’t mean it like that. I mean you have the spirit of the bear.”

“That doesn’t sound any nicer.”

I laughed again and gave her hand another squeeze. “No, it’s a good thing. A bear is protective, confident, and strong. To have the spirit of a bear means you are a courageous warrior, a grounding force, and a leader. You stand against the odds, firm in your belief that it’s the right thing to do. That’s the spirit of the bear. That is who you are.”

Seconds ticked away while she digested the information. I had no idea what was going through her head, and I hoped I hadn’t offended her somehow. I understood she might not be appreciative of me calling her a bear, but I hadn’t meant it negatively.

“Does that mean I should get a tattoo of a bear paw on my hand?”

Her voice was light, and I smiled, turning to look at her even though I couldn’t see her very well in the dark. “Only if you want to. I did it because I felt like I was supposed to.”

Even as I spoke, the tattoo burned against her hand. “It makes me feel connected to who I am.”

“You take all of this quite seriously, don’t you?”

I wasn’t offended by her question. I understood that not everyone shared the same worldview as my people. “I do. I’m not saying that I take it all literally, but there is a spiritual element to it that I believe in steadfastly. I meditate for a reason. I believe the universe—or cosmos, or God, or whatever you want to call it—does things for a reason. I don’t believe in coincidences; I believe in opportunities. I believe we are all connected and interdependent in some way. A life force is in each of us that we can recognize if we are looking for it. I trust my instincts, and I believe they come from my beliefs.”

“I wish I had faith like you.”

“You could.” It was my turn to shrug. “Just because you don’t believe in the spiritual doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. I think everyone believes in something, even if they don’t think so. I think some people believe in money and the power it holds. Some people believe themselves to be the only important thing in life. And other people believe in love, loyalty, and kindness.”

“I haven’t believed in anything in a long time.” Her voice turned wistful, as though recalling a better time. She cleared her throat. “Anyway, I think we should be getting back. It should be safe to go.”

I didn’t want to go, not yet. She didn’t make a move to leave, so I didn’t move either. “You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you?”

Silence. Then she sighed softly. “Yeah. Life hasn’t exactly been a cakewalk for me.”

Me either.

I didn’t say the words, didn’t want to belittle her suffering. We both had our own pain, and they didn’t need to be compared. Neither was pleasant; of that, I was sure.

After a few moments, I felt the urge to move again. Reluctantly, I reached for the GPS to see how far away from the ship we were. Surprisingly, we weren't as far away as I had feared. It was still a bit of a trek since we couldn't take a direct route, but it wasn't horrible.

“We aren't too far away. Are you ready to go back?”

She clicked her tongue, lifted into a crouch, and pulled her hand from mine. I immediately missed the contact. “No, but we need to.” She moved towards the opening to check if it was safe. I watched her climb out before moving to follow. I pulled my bandana across my face again and told myself to focus on my surroundings, not on Julia.

We left the cave, carrying our four sensors carefully, and turned towards the direction of the ship. It took a little bit of time for us to find our way out of the valley and back to flat land. The wind was horrible. It howled like some angry creature and threw dirt and grit at us. The clouds were still thick overhead, but the lightning seemed to have moved away from us. Julia and I exchanged hopeful looks when we left the rocky cliffs behind.

We both kept watchful eyes on the weather and terrain. After we walked for a while, we reached a place that felt familiar. A grove of gnarled, dried-up trees dusted with dirt sat to our left, and more sand dunes rose in front of us. I tried to dig up the willpower to climb some more, but it was hard. I stared at the dunes while I took a minute to gather some strength.

Julia didn't seem to mind the pause. “Are we almost there?”

“I think so.”

There was a noise from the direction of the trees, and I turned just in time to see a figure charging at me. I retreated immediately, trying to put distance between us. Julia drew her gun and aimed it at him. She fired, catching him in the arm. I danced away to keep out of her line of fire while still putting distance between him and me. His appearance was enough of a distraction that we didn't see a second man emerging from the trees. I caught the glint of a knife just as he reached Julia.

“Julia!”

She spun, but she wasn't fast enough. She brought one of the sensors down on his wrist and the knife dropped below chest level, plunging into her abdomen instead. She screamed. I shoved the man rushing at me, knocked him to the ground, and ran towards Julia. The wind pushed at my back, urging me to move faster. Julia was already lunging back at her attacker with her own knife since her gun had fallen to the ground. She caught his forearm with the blade, though it was barely a cut. Her left hand was wrapped protectively around her side, trying to hold the sensors as well.

I rushed at her attacker from the side, catching him off-guard and knocking him to the ground. I managed to hit him in the face with my fists a few times before he threw me off. I rolled to my feet and glanced back at Julia. She was unsteady but hadn't collapsed yet. The one she'd shot in the arm was back on his feet. He was approaching behind her with a murderous look in his eyes.

My instincts were telling me to run. Instead of attacking. I dodged away from my opponent. I scooped up the sensors on the ground, threw my arm around Julia, and pulled her away from both men, running in the direction of the ship. I heard them pursuing us, so I drew my gun and fired blindly behind me, trying to deter them. They shouted curses while I fired at them, but I didn't look to see if I had done any serious damage.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw more men running at us from a different direction. My heart rate tripled, and I pulled on Julia, trying to encourage her to run faster. She was starting to lag, and I realized she didn't have the strength to make it. We ran past another dune and the cave came into view. For the second time in two days, I lifted Julia into my arms. I dropped my gun in the process, though I was careful not to drop the sensors. I sped up as much as I could and ran full tilt towards the cave.

Gunfire rang out behind us. I didn't dare stop or even dodge to the side. I ran straight for the cave. Men shouted behind me,

and Julia groaned in pain, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. If I did, I knew we would die.

Once inside the cave, I still didn't stop. I could see the ship and the shield still around it. My heart dropped into my stomach. I ran towards it anyway, trusting in Andy to be there for us. He would see us and drop the shield.

A gun went off again, and my right ear burned. I flinched and my stride faltered, but I didn't stop. The shield suddenly disappeared, and I raced forward. I heard the *zing* as the shield went back up and I dropped to my knees and set Julia down carefully. I swallowed, gathered my courage, and stood up to face our pursuers.

Five men stood on the other side of the shield, guns still pointing at me, though they knew better than to waste their ammo by shooting the shield. A man with dark, hooded eyes took a step forward, scowling at me. A scar sat between his mouth and nose. He was obviously the man in charge. "Give us the cop."

My eyes stole to Julia. She was in no condition to even stand up. She was still looking at me, though, with pain-filled eyes that said she was ready for anything. A fighter even when wounded.

I looked back at the leader. "And why would I do that?"

His scowl intensified. "Because we don't want you. We want her."

"You mean you want to kill her."

He folded his arms. "That doesn't mean we have to kill you. If you turn her over to us, we'll let you walk away, unharmed."

My eyes went back to Julia, and I saw fear in them—fear that I really would turn her over. She didn't need to be afraid. I would never let them hurt her. They'd have to kill me first.

"Yeah, I don't think so. I don't believe you. Even if I did, I'm not handing her over to you. Walk away."

That wasn't the answer he wanted. He pulled out his own gun and lifted it until it was level with my head. I knew the

shield would protect me and that he was just trying to scare me, but I still had to fight the urge to flinch. Even though it unnerved me, I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing his scare tactic work. I held my ground and didn't look away.

“You are making a very stupid mistake.”

I snorted. “I don't think so.”

He cursed at me. “You can't get out of here! We know where you are. We will kill you and her, and all this bravado will have been for nothing!”

I took a step towards him. “Get out of here before I get another gun and shoot you!”

Fear flashed across a few of the faces of his men, but they didn't move. We all knew I could shoot them from this side of the shield. If I had a gun handy, I would have already shot as many of them as I could.

The leader spat into the dirt. “You're dead. Both of you.”

A rifle cocked behind me, and I looked over my shoulder to see Andy standing at the door of the ship, gun aimed at the men below. “You heard Ethan. Please leave. Immediately.”

While I knew Andy wouldn't shoot them, the men didn't. That was all it took for them to turn and run. Their leader lingered a moment longer than the others and shot me a dirty look. “We'll be back. And we'll kill you all.”

I watched them leave the cave before I knelt beside Julia. Her face was paler than normal, and her brow was creased in pain, but she was still conscious. There was blood soaking through her shirt even as she pressed against the wound in her abdomen.

“Andy! Help me get her inside!”

Immediately, the android put the gun aside and swiftly helped me carry Julia onto the ship. She bit down on her lip and grunted in pain but said nothing. Sweat broke out across her forehead as we maneuvered her into the lab. We set her down gently on the table, and she moaned in pain.

“Julia? Stay with me.” Her eyes were closed, and they fluttered open at my voice. Fear hit me suddenly. She was badly injured. This could be potentially life-threatening, and the idea that she could die terrified me.

The fear spurred me into action. “Andy, I’m going to need clean water, bandages, and antiseptic.” I tried to peer at Julia’s wound. Her hand was still clamped against it and the shirt was in the way. Gently but swiftly, I peeled off her shirt, trying not to aggravate her injuries more. She made a noise, and her eyes remained closed.

“Say something, Julia. I need you to stay with me.”

Her eyes blinked open again and met mine. She looked coherent, though still in pain. “I’m with you.”

Satisfied she wasn’t about to pass out, I turned my attention back to her body. Blood had seeped across her stomach and onto both forearms. Her free hand was lying against the table and her fingers twitched, drawing my attention. My eyes snagged on the inside of her elbow, and I blinked in surprise.

Scars marred the skin there. They were faint, obviously old, but they were still visible. A quick check of her other elbow showed the same thing. They were track marks, though if I was less familiar with them, I might not have recognized them. I had seen the same kind of marks enough times to know exactly what they were. She was a drug addict.

Recovering drug addict, most likely.

It suddenly made sense why she didn’t want pain medicine. Obviously. If I was a recovering addict, I wouldn’t want to chance using anything that could possibly push me into a relapse.

I wondered what had happened to drive her towards drugs. My guess was it probably had something to do with her being in the foster care system. Maybe something bad had happened and that was her way of dealing with it. Maybe someone else had gotten her hooked. There were a thousand possibilities, and I didn’t have time to speculate.

Those thoughts flew through my head in a handful of seconds. This wasn't the time to think about her past or her scars. I needed to focus on her wound. I wasn't about to let her die.

Refocused, I pulled her hand away from the knife wound. It oozed blood slowly, not like an artery had been hit. That was good. Andy appeared at my elbow, and I motioned to him. "Assess."

Andy might have been designed for scientific purposes, but he had still been programmed with medical training, like all androids, just in case something like this ever happened. He immediately bent forward to scan the wound.

"How bad is it?" Julia's breathing was harsh, but I could feel the strength and determination behind her words. She was a fighter.

Andy cocked his head to the side before straightening again. "The wound is shallow. The bleeding is slowing; however, any movement will aggravate it. There are no signs that an artery or organ has been punctured. You will require stitches."

Relief coursed through my veins. I took the bowl of water he held and set it down on the table beside her before fetching a clean rag. I dunked the rag in the water. "You're going to be okay, Julia. Take it easy and relax. I'm going to clean this up. Focus on breathing."

She obeyed, sucking in air and releasing it. Her eyes still held an edge of panic. "Stitches?"

I swallowed and glanced at Andy. "You should prepare for that."

"Yes." Andy began rifling through the medical bag, pulling out supplies.

Julia's eyes widened even further. "Can't you do it?" She whispered to me.

She was uncomfortable with Andy, I knew that, but he was the far better choice. "I'm not a medic, Julia. Andy has first aid and emergency medicine programming. He will do a much better job than I would. I promise."

Her eyes closed and her shoulders tensed. “Great.”

You won't be able to give her pain meds for this, Ethan. This is going to hurt.

“I’m ready.” Andy stood beside me, gloves on, with his tools beside him.

Julia’s eyes popped back open. “Kill me now.”

Andy’s head tipped to the side. “That is not allowed in my programming.”

I couldn’t hold back a snicker. “She wasn’t serious, Andy.” I set aside the rag and bowl, having cleaned up the area as much as I could. I moved aside so Andy could reach her wound. Julia fisted her hand into my shirt and pulled me back towards her.

“Don’t leave.”

“Never.” I stood by her head and carefully unclenched her fingers from my shirt and laced them in mine. “You’re not alone, Julia.”

She tipped her head back to meet my eyes, and I smiled softly at her. Some of the panic eased from her face, and the corners of her mouth lifted a little. Not enough to be an actual smile, but it was something.

“I’m going to begin.”

Julia squeezed my hand tightly, and her lips pressed into a flat line. She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. I used my free hand to smooth the hair from her forehead. “You’re doing great,” I murmured.

I watched Andy move steadily and efficiently, hooking the curved needle through her skin and pulling the thread through. Julia whimpered, but she didn’t fight him. I brought our joined hands to my lips and kissed her knuckles. “Talk to me, Julia.”

Her nostrils flared as she shoved the air from her lungs. “Kind of hard to focus right now.”

“Tell me about your little sister.”

“Alexi?” Julia’s eyes fluttered open. “She’s sixteen and is at that age where she thinks she knows everything. She gives me attitude every chance she gets.”

I smiled. “I remember being that age.”

“She’s a good kid, though. I don’t exactly make life easy for her since I have to travel all the time for work. She does her schooling on the net, and most of her friends are on the net, too.” Her voice broke as Andy pulled the needle through her skin again. “Snails!”

“Snails?” I asked, hoping to keep her talking.

She snorted softly. “My attempt to curb my language. Once I got custody of Alexi, I tried to do everything I could to be a good parent. That included changing my language to something more kid appropriate.” She smiled, though pain still crinkled the edges of her eyes. “Snails was the best thing I came up with.”

“Finished.” Andy clipped the thread and stepped away.

Julia relaxed a little more, though she didn’t release my hand. “That’s good.”

“You’re strong, Julia. You handled that well.” I rubbed her hand, and I stepped closer to peer at her wound again. “I’ll finish cleaning this up and bandage it.” I glanced back at Andy. “Get to work on those sensors. I’ll call if I need you.”

Andy nodded to me while he finished putting the supplies away. He glanced at Julia before leaving. “I hope you recover quickly, Agent Carter.”

She hesitated before nodding. “Thank you.”

I scrubbed my hands and forearms in the sink before putting gloves on. I didn’t want to get any sand or grit in her wound. The last thing either of us needed was for her to get an infection. I cleaned the area around the wound as best as I could before dabbing at the cut itself. Andy had done a good job with the stitches. Definitely better than I would have done. There was some sand visible, so I irrigated the wound with water.

Julia hissed in pain, and I shot her a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry. I’m almost done.”

Though she still seemed to be in a lot of pain, her breathing had settled. “I know. I’ve been through this kind of thing before.”

I frowned as I grabbed some clotting powder. “You have?”

“Was stabbed in the back once. I’d only been out of the academy for a few months. A carjacker thought he could take me on. He had a chance to run, but he didn’t. Took a swipe at me with his knife. I ducked, but he caught me in the back of the shoulder. It hurt worse than this. Sliced through the muscle. I had to go to a special clinic to get the damage repaired. Surgery and physical therapy. I was benched for six weeks.”

I tipped some powder on the wound before reaching for the bandages. “Did the carjacker get away?”

“No. Jordan shot him. He was going in to stab me a second time, to finish the job, but Jordan got him first.” She half-smiled. “He saved my life. It was the first person he’d ever killed. Tossed his lunch on the pavement right after he called for backup and an ambulance.”

“He sounds like a great partner.”

“The best. I wouldn’t want anyone else riding shotgun.”

I finished wrapping her up and took a deep breath. “That looks a lot better. Are you hurt anywhere else? How are you feeling?”

She closed her eyes. “Honestly, everything hurts. I don’t think I have any other important injuries. I feel exhausted.”

“Sleep is the best thing for you right now anyway.” I went back to the medical kit and pulled out some antibiotics. I retrieved a glass of water and brought both over to her. “Take these. They’re antibiotics. In case there’s any infection starting.”

She eyed the pills warily, but after a moment she took them. I cradled her head so she could drink some water. She gave me

a grateful look when she was finished. “Thank you. Could you move me to a bed? This table is extremely uncomfortable.”

I laughed and nodded. “I’ll try not to hurt you.” Mindful of her stitches, I carefully lifted her up and carried her into the closest bedroom. I set her down on the bed and gently pulled the blanket over her. She still looked pale, but she was already looking stronger. “Stay in bed. Rest.”

“What about those men? What are you going to do?” She didn’t try to move, though she looked ready to jump up at a moment’s notice.

“Don’t worry about them. They’re gone for now, and we have a little time before they come up with a plan. They’ve still got to traverse their way back to wherever their ship is. Andy is working on the sensors and then we’ll be looking for a way off-planet. Okay?”

She gave me a mulish look. “I don’t like being injured and stuck here.”

“I know, but you aren’t strong enough. Gather your strength and rest, so you’ll be able to help when the time comes.”

I was sure she would argue, but after a long moment she simply nodded. “Okay.”

Feeling a little less worried about her, I smiled and impulsively kissed her forehead. “We’ll check in on you soon.”

She looked like she was fighting off sleep before I even left the room. I hoped she would sleep, and I hoped she would be okay. Even though the wound was stitched, cleaned, and bandaged, I wasn’t sure it was enough. I wasn’t a medical professional, and having limited knowledge of field medicine didn’t make me one either.

Worrying wasn’t going to help with anything, so I tried to set it aside. I headed to the cockpit where Andy sat with all four sensors on his lap, adjusting them. “How’s it coming?”

Andy didn’t look up from his work. “I am almost finished. There is one more to reprogram after this one.”

“Good.” At least he was fast.

“How is Agent Carter?”

“Resting, hopefully. That wound is not good.”

Andy paused to look at me. “A medical professional should tend to her injury. The sooner we leave this planet, the sooner we can get her the proper medical attention she requires.”

His calmness helped me feel a little better. “She can make it until then, right?”

For several seconds, he said nothing, and I realized he was calculating the probability in his mind. “She has a fair chance if she remains inert and does not attempt anything strenuous. Would you like an exact estimation of her chances?”

“No,” I answered quickly. I didn’t think I could stomach the idea of giving her survival an actual percentage.

Andy simply went back to work on the final sensor. I closed my eyes and breathed in and out slowly, trying to calm down and find my center. *Right now, she’s okay. Right now, I need to focus on doing everything in my power to get us off-planet so she can get some help.* That was my priority.

“You are injured.”

I opened my eyes and stared at Andy, not comprehending what he was saying. I didn’t think I was injured. Then I remembered the laser catching my ear and touched it gently. Blood was running down my neck. Now that I thought about it, I realized the ear was burning. I got up and found a mirror. I had to clean off the blood before I could see the wound. It looked like I was missing a small chunk from the side, but it could have been much worse. I bandaged it and popped a few painkillers before returning to the cockpit.

After a few more minutes, Andy stood up and held out the last sensor to me. “They are ready.”

“Excellent.” I took the sensor from him and reached for the other three. “Then these need to go back outside.”

He nodded. “Yes. Preferably in a high place close by. Perhaps on the hill above the cave. Set each one up facing

north, south, east, and west, with the head tilted at a forty-five degree angle towards the sky. That should elicit optimal coverage.”

I nodded and then turned to one of the storage cabinets and pulled out a communications earpiece. The range wasn't going to be good, but I hoped that if I only went a few hundred feet they would still work. I handed one to Andy. “Listen, I'm going to go set these up and then stand watch. I want you to monitor the sensors constantly until we find a safe path out of here. Alert me immediately. I want you to check on Julia, often. Try not to disturb her but monitor her health. If she starts getting worse, let me know. Okay?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

Satisfied, I took the sensors and headed for the door. I pulled my goggles back over my eyes and lifted my bandana up again. I shoved the earpiece in and then opened the door. *Time to go back out into the unforgiving wasteland.*

There were no signs of Julia's pursuers as I surveyed the vicinity from the mouth of the cave. That was a good sign, I supposed. I hefted the sensors against my shoulder and struck out, searching for a way up the hill. It took a few minutes, but I was able to pick out a steep path. The wind had died down a little, which made it easier. Once I reached the apex, I paused to catch my breath. Looking around carefully, I scanned what parts of the land I could see, but there were too many dunes to see very far. I couldn't see any immediate threats, so I went about erecting the sensors.

I tapped my earpiece. “Andy?”

After a few seconds, I heard the android's voice crackle in my ear. “Yes?”

“Just testing to see if this would work.” There was some interference, but not enough to render the device unusable. It would work well enough if I didn't wander too far.

I set up the sensors and adjusted them to the correct angle, trying to get the best view of the sky. It took me longer than I

had anticipated, but I wanted to get it right. We needed this to work.

Finally, I stepped back and clicked on the earpiece again. “Sensors are set up. Are they working?”

“Yes.” Andy responded promptly. “I’m monitoring the particle density levels, but so far, they are too high. We would disable the entire ship if we attempted to fly through the atmosphere right now.”

“Continue monitoring them. The second we see a break, we’re taking it. I’ll stand guard for a while.”

“Very well.”

I made my way carefully back down to the entrance of the cave. I could have tried to stand watch from up top because of the vantage point, but it was too dangerous for a variety of reasons. It would be a lot easier for me to be spotted up there, and it would take too long for me to get back to the ship if something were to happen. Instead, I set up not far from the mouth of the cave, where I had cover if I needed it but could still see most of the area around us.

I avoided a few water puddles and pulled out my spyglass to scout what I could see. Using a spyglass was low tech, but it was smaller than military grade binoculars. I didn’t want to lug around a ton of gear, and my spyglass worked just as well while being a fraction of the size.

Everything looked quiet. For now. I settled in, knowing I would be out there for a while. If anyone tried to sneak up on us, I was going to catch them. There was no way I was going to let anything happen to me or Julia.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ethan

Time passed so slowly it was almost painful. Two hours went by with no sign of the enemy and no word from Andy. I checked in with him, and he reported that nothing had changed with the sensors and Julia was doing well enough. I wanted to check on her myself, but I couldn't be in two places at once. I felt better keeping an eye out for an attack. I knew one would be coming soon. They already had our location. All they needed to do was come up with a plan of attack and wait for clear enough weather to fly their ship in.

Whoever those people were, they were determined. They didn't look like mercenaries, either. They moved and fought differently, like they were better trained. It was a subtle difference, but it was enough that I noticed. *If they aren't thugs, and they aren't mercenaries, then who are they?*

Julia hadn't said anything about what case she was working on. Not even what kind of case it was, just that important evidence was now in the possession of the people who were trying to kill her. They'd obviously tortured her. The scars on her arms weren't the only marks I'd seen, though they were the ones that had caught my attention at the time.

It was hard to picture her as a former drug addict. She seemed so disciplined and controlled. She must have been young when it happened. I could only imagine the struggles she must have gone through, and how difficult it must have been for her to get clean. Those marks were old. She must have left that life behind a while ago. It made me wonder what else she'd gone through. *There is a lot more to her than I'd first thought.*

She wasn't going to be happy if she found out about my past. I touched the necklace still concealed under my shirt, glad I had decided to keep it hidden for now. Once all of this was over, maybe I would tell her about it. We needed to work as a team, and I doubted she would trust me if she knew where I had come from or the things I had done.

Perhaps she would understand. If she was involved in some illegal things in her past, maybe she wouldn't hold it against me. Or maybe her involvement had been involuntary. There was no telling. The only way to know was to ask her, but there were more pressing things to worry about.

I still found myself thinking about her, despite my desire to focus on my surroundings. I don't know what it was about her, but she captivated my attention. When I was around her, I could feel myself being drawn to her energy. She was strong, independent, and capable. She had a sense of right and wrong, and she wanted to help people. Her outer beauty complimented her inner beauty, and I liked her for both.

Focus, Ethan. Pay attention. Think about her later.

Knowing I needed to focus, I shoved thoughts of her away and assessed my surroundings. I could feel the weather calming somewhat. That was both good and bad. Good because we could get out of there sooner, but bad because it meant her abductors would be coming after us once it was safe. Well, not *safe*, but safer.

Pondering our options, I did another scan of the horizon. Something shifted in the distance, and I lifted the spyglass up to my eye, banging it against my goggles because I forgot I was wearing them. I sighed and focused on the little spot in the distance. Immediately, my heart sank. It was a ship.

Knowing it would not be friendly, I shoved the spyglass away and tapped on the earpiece. "Andy. We have company."

"Coming from which direction?" was his instant response.

"South. Fire up the engines. We can't remain in the cave like sitting ducks."

"Understood."

It only took another minute or two before I was back on the ship. "Andy?"

"Firing up the engines." His voice came from the cockpit.

"Good," I yelled down to him. "Get us out of the cave and head in the opposite direction."

“Ethan?” Julia’s voice came from the bedroom, sounding worried.

I detoured into her room. She was struggling to sit up, and I quickly stilled her movements. “Relax. You can’t do anything now. Andy and I will take care of getting us out of here. Just relax. You don’t want to rip your stitches.”

Her face was still pale, and she seemed weak. However, she also seemed determined. She gave me a fierce look. “I can help. There must be something I can do.”

“You can stay here and rest.” I pushed her down, and she glared at me.

“I’m not a child.”

“I never said you were.”

The ship shuddered, and it felt like we were backing out of the cave. I felt torn between staying with Julia and going to help Andy. He could pilot the ship fine, but he needed orders. And someone should probably man the weapons.

“Look, I’m fine.” She glanced at the door and then back at me. “I can help.”

I knelt beside her. “Julia, you are going to be fine. But if you get up and start running around you will only hurt yourself. There is nothing more you can do right now. I’m going to go help Andy. Stay here.”

She gave me a mulish look but didn’t protest. “For now.”

Good enough.

Satisfied with her answer, I jogged down to the cockpit and dropped into the seat beside Andy. I pulled up the outboard sensors and scanned the data being transmitted from the sensors above the cave. I searched through the weather data, trying to pick out a safe place to go.

Andy steered us away from the other ship. The outboard sensors were still fighting major electromagnetic interference, but they showed the general area of the other ship, and it was far too close for my comfort. Andy banked and steered us in the same direction the storm was heading. I pulled up the old

topographic maps we had. I had planned on taking scans after the storm had passed to compare the topography with the new landscape, but that wasn't happening anytime soon. The old maps wouldn't be the most accurate now, but they would have to do.

“Go this way and then loop around in the opposite direction.” I pointed out a path on the map. “Stay low. Hopefully we can hide behind these dunes. Stay away from this area,” I motioned to a section that was showing a high density of particles.

Andy made the necessary adjustments, and I started calibrating the weapons systems. All weapons would need to be aimed manually because of the storm, but it wouldn't be impossible to do. I focused on breathing to calm my anxiety. I usually didn't get stressed in high pressure situations, but this was about more than just the risk to my life; Julia's life was in danger too.

I glanced over to where Andy had up the readings from the sensors, showing us the density of the particles overhead. The levels were still too high. At least the range of the sensors was broad. I knew if we ended up flying too far away from them, they'd be useless.

The terrain outside the window was still hilly, but it wasn't going to give us enough cover. I spotted the other ship out the window and fought back a burst of panic. Andy dropped us lower, but I doubted they had missed us. “Are shields still up?”

“Affirmative.”

I scanned the windows to see if I could spot the ship anywhere but saw nothing. I checked the sensors, but the readings were wildly inaccurate. I growled in the back of my throat and kept my hands on the controls as I peered out at the hostile landscape.

Up ahead, there was some sort of hazy patch and I squinted at it, trying to figure out what it was. We were heading right for it.

“Bank left!” I yelled as soon as I realized it was the tail end of the storm. “Avoid the rain!” The shield would protect us, sure, but it would still drain the power, and we couldn’t afford that.

Andy instantly banked left, bringing us up and over a dune to avoid the rain. The other ship suddenly appeared a few hundred meters ahead and off to the left. “Andy, take us to the west.”

The android turned us in a neat circle, moving us away from the other ship and away from the storm. I tried to get a read on what kind of ship it was, but without the sensors I couldn’t tell. Visually, it didn’t seem like a large ship, but it was definitely bigger than us.

“Any idea what kind of ship that was?”

Andy blinked, a sign that he was processing information. “There is insufficient data to narrow down the list of possible models.”

The ship jolted, and an alarm went off. I slapped a button on the dashboard to silence it. “We’re taking fire.”

“Beginning evasive maneuvering.” Andy’s voice never changed, nor did his expression, and he began to weave and bob in the air. I watched him closely, feeling nervousness rise the longer he was silent. I started to wish that he was more like a human so I could have read from his expression how bad our situation was. On the other hand, having someone who could handle the situation calmly made me feel much less panicked.

We turned, and I caught sight of the other ship again. I engaged the missiles, following the manual aiming guides, and fired. The other ship’s shields were up as well, but they took a direct hit. I’d bet their scanners weren’t picking up anything either. That would come in handy for us.

Andy steered us towards the south and a hillier area. I frowned. “If you go too far, we’ll lose range of the sensors.”

He didn’t respond, but I knew he understood. More alarms went off and a more distinct shudder went through the ship.

We were still taking fire. I checked the shields—they were holding, but we wouldn't be able to take fire forever.

Andy suddenly pulled the ship straight up, as though we were going to leave the atmosphere, but he kept going so that we made an upside-down loop. The world spun outside the windows, but the artificial gravity compensated, and I barely felt anything. Suddenly, we were level with the horizon again and the other ship appeared in front of us. Immediately, I began firing on it.

They started evasive maneuvers, but I tracked them, anticipating their movements. They pulled a tight turn to the side, trying to circle around behind us again. Andy stayed doggedly behind them while we flew in between dunes and through deep valleys.

“Ethan?”

Julia's voice came from directly behind me. She sounded nervous. I didn't take my eyes off the ship in front of me. “You need to stay in bed.”

“I don't think that's going to happen.”

The ship in front of us fired a rear-facing missile and Andy dropped down to avoid it, but he wasn't fast enough. A tremor went through the ship, and I grunted.

“Snails!” Julia's voice was quiet and afraid, but there was still an underlying layer of strength. None of us would give up without a fight.

“You better sit down and buckle up.”

She didn't reply. Instead, I heard her press a button on the wall, and another seat unfolded. She sat down and buckled in. I heard her feet tapping against the bar that anchored the chair to the wall, as if testing its strength.

Andy pointed at the screen. “There's a weak spot where the particles are less dense.”

I took a few precious moments to study it. “That's barely below critical levels, and the gap is small. Can we fit through that?”

“Yes. I can fly us through it. There is a high probability that the ship will be seriously damaged, but it should still be flyable.”

“Is the risk greater than us fighting with these guys until a safer path appears?”

He was silent for several seconds. “We stand a better chance if we go now versus waiting for another weak spot.”

I drew in a deep breath. “Then let’s go.”

Andy gave up his pursuit of the other ship and immediately steered us in the opposite direction. The other ship turned and began firing at us again, but Andy managed to avoid a good deal of their firepower.

Within moments, he was pointing us towards the atmosphere. I checked the sensors. They were still scrambled, but they gave a general idea of where the other ship was. It looked like they were hanging back. Obviously, whoever was piloting the ship knew flying through the storm would render the ship inoperable and they’d fall to their deaths. I prayed Andy’s calculations were correct and we could make it through intact.

As the dark clouds crowded the view outside the windows, I took a deep breath and held it. Andy pressed buttons and switches, and I watched him out of the corner of my eye, looking cool and composed, and tried to tell myself not to be afraid.

Once we hit the cloud, the whole ship shuddered. Alarms went off all over the board. I watched the power level for the shields drop steadily. They were keeping the worst of it at bay, but it was draining everything we had. The ship shuddered and bucked.

“We’re not going to make it, are we?” Julia whispered behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder at her. She’d grabbed another of my shirts, but this one she hadn’t bothered to tie up and it hung loosely on her. She looked in pain and still horribly pale, but there was tenacity in her eyes. I wanted to reassure her, but

I didn't know what to say. I held my hand out to her, which she immediately took. We held on tightly to each other, and the connection calmed me down considerably, smothering my fears. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I felt that, somehow, we were going to be okay.

We broke through the clouds and suddenly we were in the upper atmosphere. Sunlight streamed through the windows, and I breathed a sigh of relief. "We're through."

Andy was pressing buttons and didn't respond. I focused back on the dashboard and checked the ship's systems. "Shields are at five percent. Life support is at thirty-five. Weapons are dead. Communications are at twelve percent." The numbers were bad. Worse than I had anticipated. "The shield failed in a few places. We took some heavy damage to the rear parts of the ship."

"What does that mean?" Julia asked.

Andy answered. "The ship won't hold out much longer. I am calculating scenarios. The ship cannot stay in hyperspace for long before all the systems will fail."

I scratched the back of my neck as I looked at the hyperdrive system. "We're at twenty percent for the hyperdrive. That won't be enough."

"If we divert all remaining power to the hyperdrive, we should be able to reach Esmuna. That is the nearest planet. Hestia is the next closest, but it is too far. We cannot reach it."

Esmuna was not the ideal place to go, but it didn't seem as though we had a choice. I'm sure Julia had no desire to go there, but I couldn't think of an alternative. "We've bought ourselves some time. It will still be a few hours before they'll be able to safely leave the planet. They have no way of knowing which sections of the storm are passable and which ones are not. They'll have to wait it out. We'll fly to Esmuna and get alternate transportation from there."

Aggravation colored Julia's voice. "Esmuna, the one bloody place in the entire universe that is *not* part of IPF jurisdiction

and openly despises the IPF? Of course, my luck would not be any better.”

There was resignation in her voice; she knew we didn't have a choice. I nodded to Andy. “I'll begin funneling power now.”

“Oh, wait!” Julia leaned forward and huffed in pain.

“What?” I turned around to face her, concerned.

“Do we have communications? Enough for me to make a call? Once we get to Esmuna we won't want them to trace our calls, but out here it doesn't matter.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, but I pulled up the communications interface. “You won't have much time, and we'll need whatever power we can save to divert to the hyperdrive. Keep it quick.”

“Okay.” She rattled off the ID number she wanted to call, and I pulled up the overhead holographic screen so she could see. After a few moments, the video came up. A young girl with dark hair peered back at us. Julia smiled. “Alexi.”

“Jules!” The girl nearly screamed. Relief washed across her face. “We've been so worried about you. Are you okay? Where are you? What happened?”

“Listen Lex, I don't have much time. I don't know who kidnapped me, but they took me and the memory stick. I need you to pass the word along to Abbott and the others. They took me to Cadium, but we're leaving now.”

There was a noise in the background, and Alexi looked offscreen. She was sitting on a bed, and she scooted over to make room for a man to sit beside her. Blond hair peeked out above a bandaged forehead.

Julia sucked in a deep breath. “Jordan! You're okay.”

So, this is her partner and sister. I tried not to pay attention to their conversation, but it was impossible not to.

Jordan grinned. “Of course. It'll take more than a little knock to the head to put me down. What about you? You look injured.”

Julia's hand covered her side protectively, but she shook her head. "I'm okay. It's nothing serious."

"Where are you?"

"We're on our way to Esmuna."

Jordan frowned severely. His eyes moved between the two of us. "Why are you heading there? And who are you with?"

I eyed the power levels and tried not to wince. "Hurry it up, Julia."

She ignored me and spoke to her partner. "It doesn't matter. Our ship is damaged, and we can't make it any farther. I don't know who kidnapped me other than they work for the ones who targeted Barrows. They were after the memory stick, and they have it. They're trying to kill me."

Jordan shifted as though he wanted to move to action. "I'll come get you. I can be on the first flight out to Esmuna."

"No." Julia shook her head and then abruptly stopped. She looked dizzy. "I'll figure out a way off Esmuna. You'll never make it to the planet, not as an IPF agent. And I want you to stay with Alexi. Keep her safe."

Alexi rolled her eyes. "I'm fine, Julia. You're the one who needs help. Esmuna is a bad place. Plus, you're hurt."

"I'll be fine. I'll find a way off-planet and contact you again. I won't be able to contact you while on the planet in case they are tracing calls. I have to cut this short, but I wanted you to know I'm okay."

Jordan didn't look happy. "Do you have anything that will help us track down whoever is after you? A name? Anything?"

She shook her head helplessly. "No. Everyone just called the leader 'boss'. They kept me in one room the entire time. I'll find a way to contact you in a few days."

His look turned agitated. "Who are you going to find on Esmuna who'd be willing to deal with an IPF agent? Give me coordinates. I'll find a way to get you out."

“There’s no guarantee either of us could make it to the rendezvous. Trust me, Jordan. I’ll be safe. Now, you keep my sister safe.”

Although obviously unhappy, Jordan nodded. Julia looked at her sister. “Do whatever Jordan says. I’ll be home before you know it. I love you.”

Alexi’s eyes watered. “I love you too. Be safe.”

Julia nodded. “You, too.”

I cut the link and promptly funneled the power into the hyperdrive. Andy swiftly plotted coordinates into the computer and engaged the hyperdrive. The ship shuddered, and I wondered briefly if it would fly apart, but it remained intact. At least for now.

Julia leaned her head back and closed her eyes. I unsnapped my seatbelt and went to kneel in front of her, touching her arm. “Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

She didn’t look well. “I feel stressed and in pain and not liking the idea of going to Esmuna.”

“There are pain killers in the lab if you require some,” Andy interjected.

“No,” I answered for her. “Focus on diverting the necessary power we need to make it to Esmuna intact, please.”

Andy went silent and I looked back at Julia. She still looked worried. I reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “We’ll come up with a plan. It will still be a few hours before we reach Esmuna.”

“Esmuna is a death sentence for IPF agents. An outside police presence of any kind is treated with hostility. They’ll kill me outright.”

“They have their own government and police force. It’s not completely lawless.”

She sneered. “It’s all a farce. The government actively keeps laws in place to favor criminal activities. That’s the place you go to get away with illegal things. There are no extradition agreements with any planet. They were openly hostile to the

IPF when it was first established. If they find out I'm a cop, I'm as good as dead."

"Then we'll just have to keep them from finding out."

"Let's say we accomplish that; how am I supposed to find transportation off-planet? For all the legal routes I would need to use my identity. Either that will tip people off that I'm IPF or it will alert the people tracking me. I know they *have* to be monitoring my movements, bank accounts, calls, everything they can. And I have no money to purchase illegal means of transport, and I don't have contacts on Esmuna. What am I supposed to do?"

Tears gathered in her eyes. She had tried desperately to hold it together for her sister and for her partner, but she was obviously struggling now that she wasn't talking to them anymore. She was scared.

It was my turn to be strong. "Listen, we will figure it out. They don't know who I am yet, so I can pull money to use for passage off-planet. As for contacts, we'll find someone. There are always people willing to do anything if you have money, no questions asked."

She closed her eyes. "I can't ask you to help me. I've already ruined your opportunity to collect your data and we had to leave your sensors behind, and I know they're expensive, not to mention your ship is practically destroyed. When we reach Esmuna, we should go our separate ways. They'll forget about you."

I lifted my eyebrows at her. "You forget; the ship isn't mine. It belongs to my company, as do the sensors. They'll replace them. And we still managed to collect a lot of data. I can always return when we are finished to collect the sensors and map out the new topography. Job saved. You, on the other hand, are alone, injured, and in serious danger. I'm not about to leave you. No matter what."

Slowly, she blinked at me. "Those are all the reasons why you *should* leave me."

I smiled and gave her hand another gentle squeeze. “No. I’m going to help you. The universe didn’t cross our paths so I could simply deliver you to Esmuna and leave your fate undecided. It brought us together so we could help each other. You don’t have to do this alone. We will figure it out.”

“You might die.” Her words were quiet.

“There’s always that possibility. I’ve long since accepted my mortality. There are some things that are more important than simply living and dying. What’s the point in living if we stand by and let other people suffer?”

We watched each other for a long time. Her eyes stared at me like she was trying to probe my very soul. This was an important moment, I realized. It was the moment when we would decide if we really trusted each other. Up until that moment, we hadn’t had a choice. Fate had thrown us together and we had adapted. But now there was an opportunity to part, to continue our journeys separately.

I didn’t want to separate. I felt drawn to Julia, as though we were connected by something intangible. I had felt it from the moment I had seen her being dragged from that ship. I was *supposed* to be there with her.

But I wasn’t sure if she felt the same way. I waited for her to decide for herself. She looked from my eyes down to where my hand still lay on top of hers. After a long, suspended moment, she flipped her hand around, laced our fingers together, and squeezed. “You’re right. Thank you. Thank you for everything.”

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face. I leaned forward and kissed her cheek quickly but gently. “We’ll figure this out together. Even on a planet full of criminals, there must be someone who can help us out. Every person on the planet can’t be lawless, not even every criminal.”

Julia blinked rapidly as though a new thought had dawned on her. “You’re right. Even among criminals there are a few who are honorable.” Then she grinned. “I think I have an idea.”

“Ethan.”

I turned to look at the back of Andy’s head. “What is it?”

“I’ve been running calculations. We do not have enough power remaining to reach Esmuna.”

“What?” I stood up and leaned over the back of his chair to look at the power levels. “How do we not have enough?”

“Is it because I made that call?” Julia’s voice trembled slightly.

“No. We would not have had enough power either way. It appears that part of the hyperdrive system was damaged when we left the planet. Even if we diverted the power from all systems, there would not be enough life support to make it all the way to Esmuna.”

Fear tried to force its way back into my system and I took a deep, steadying breath to force the debilitating feeling to the back of my mind. “What can we do? What are our options?”

“There is no other viable destination within range. There is no way to repair the damage to the hyperdrive while it is in use, and we do not have the proper tools to make repairs even if we were to drop out of hyperspace.”

Julia pressed her fingers against her forehead. “What about a distress signal?”

“It would be a great risk. We could drop out of hyperspace and relay a distress beacon. We could even attempt to contact authorities on Esmuna to ask for assistance. But there is a great risk that our pursuers would reach us before help could be acquired.”

I tugged at the little hairs on my chin. “That’s not a great plan. Are there no other options?”

“There is one other viable option. If I were to connect my power source to the ship, I would give it enough power to reach Esmuna.”

I frowned. “Drain your battery? How much would we need?”

Andy finally looked up at me with his unblinking eyes. “All of it.”

Julia’s jaw dropped. “Are you saying it would kill you? Absolutely not.”

Andy swiveled his chair to face her. “It would not be killing me. It would merely be draining my power reserves. I would remain inert until such time as I could be recharged. It would not kill me. It would appear to you as though I was sleeping indefinitely.”

She didn’t seem convinced. I rubbed the back of my neck. “Are you sure there are no other options?”

“Yes.”

I sighed and nodded. “Go ahead. I’ll recharge you as soon as I am able.” Androids had specially made battery cores that were designed to run for years without needing to be recharged. As such, recharging him wouldn’t be as simple as plugging him into an outlet, but that was a problem to figure out once we were safe again.

Andy nodded back and got up to leave the cockpit. Julia frowned at me. “What? You’re going to let him sacrifice himself?”

Andy paused to tilt his head in confusion. “It is not a sacrifice. I will merely be powered down, like a computer when it is turned off. Besides, I am not human. It is not a sacrifice.”

She blinked and watched him walk away. She looked at me questioningly, and I shrugged. “He’s right. It’s not the first time I’ve seen him powered down. He’ll be okay.”

“This is weird.” She rubbed her arm. “He’s an android and I know it. He isn’t human. I didn’t even like him before. But it feels like he’s going to his death.”

I understood where she was coming from. “You thought of him as a computer until he saved your life, until he helped you and tended your wounds. Now, he suddenly doesn’t seem like a computer anymore. He seems like a real person with a real personality and feelings.”

“Kinda, I guess.” She sighed. “It’s stupid.”

“No, it isn’t. I used to feel the same way. I’ve been traveling with him for a while now. I’ve gotten used to him. It’ll be okay. He’ll be okay.”

I could see him at the end of the hallway, pulling open a panel. He would have to connect himself manually to one of the power cells. “This is what he was programmed to do: put the needs of humans before his own.”

After a slight hesitation, Julia nodded. “I understand. I just wish we weren’t in this position.”

“I feel the same way.” I rested my hand on her shoulder. “Now listen, we still have a few hours before we reach Esmuna. You need to rest. Once we reach the ground we’ll have to move. We should have a plan ready to go.”

She nodded wearily. “Yes. You’re right.”

“What’s your plan?”

“It’s a long shot, but I might know someone on the planet who can help us. There’s no guarantee he’ll be there, but if he’s there I know a place where we can find him. First, we’re going to need new clothes, so we don’t look like war refugees. And we need money. Once those men get off Cadium, they’ll figure out we went to Esmuna. They’ll track your ship down and figure out who you are from that. We need to get cash once we land and then get far away from wherever the ship is docked. We’ll find my friend and barter a trip off-planet.”

The plan sounded straightforward. “And if your friend isn’t on the planet?”

“Then we start asking around until we can bum a ride off-world.”

I didn’t have a better idea, so I nodded. “Okay. Right now, you should go back to bed for a little bit.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

I slipped my arm under her shoulders and helped her stand. She could walk on her own, but I didn’t want to chance it. If anything happened to her stitches, I couldn’t stitch her back

up. *Maybe we should see a doctor while we're on Esmuna, too.*

We made our way to her room. I pulled the covers back and helped her into bed before checking her dressing. It didn't look as though she was bleeding again, which was the best I could hope for. "I'll be right back."

I went into the lab and started looking through the medical kit. There had to be something in there that could help speed up the healing process that didn't have any pain medicine in it. I should've had a more sophisticated medical kit, but I never thought I would need one. Treating a gunshot had never made my list of possible emergencies I could encounter. And it wasn't like I could afford those expensive nanobots that could heal anything.

Instead, I managed to find a serum that was supposed to decrease the healing time. I'd never used it before, but I figured now was as good a time as any to try it. I took that and got Julia a glass of water before I went back to her room. I helped her drink before I handed her the medicine to look over. "It's a serum. No pain medicine. I'm not even sure how much it'll work, but I figured it couldn't hurt."

She looked it over before nodding. "I'll try it."

I followed the directions and administered the serum via injection, and then set it aside. "Is there anything else you need?"

Julia shook her head carefully and deliberately. "No. Though I want you to wake me up before we get there. I'm going to need to eat and wash all this dirt and dust off. I don't think it will be good if we show up looking like we just came from Cadium."

"You're right." I swiped at some of the dirt coating my pants. "That might not be prudent."

She almost smiled, but it didn't fully form. "Thank you, Ethan, for everything you've done. I mean it."

I nodded and gave her hand another squeeze. "We're going to make it through this."

“How do you know?”

“It’s a feeling I have.” I shrugged. “I guess I have faith.”

“You should rub some off on me.”

I laughed quietly. “If only it were that easy. Get some rest. I’ll be waking you up before you know it.”

Her eyes drifted shut, and I closed the door behind me when I left. I eyed Andy where he sat on the floor with a wire running from his side into the terminal. It was sad for me to see him like that and know he would be off for a while. I liked the android.

“How are you?” I asked.

Several seconds passed before he responded. “I do not understand the question. The power transfer is going well. I should be fully drained in another five minutes.”

I smiled sadly and sat down against the wall opposite him. “That wasn’t what I meant, but it’s okay. Thank you for doing this. Giving us your power to survive.”

“You do not need to thank me. My job is to assist you in whatever ways I can.”

“Do you always have to talk like an android, Andy?”

“But I am an android.”

I shrugged. “Do you like me, Andy? Do you like working with me?”

Andy merely stared at me. “I am an android. I do not have feelings.”

“Do you feel any differently about different people?”

“I do not feel,” he repeated.

There was no getting an answer out of him, so I sighed and leaned my head against the wall. “I like working with you. I’m sad you’ll be off.”

There was silence, and then Andy blinked. “Thank you.”

Whether he was a computer or not, he was still a friend of sorts, and I didn’t have many of those. “I hope to see you

again soon.”

“And I hope to see you again soon as well. I must completely power off now. You may disconnect the wires in approximately four minutes. There will be enough power to get the ship to Esmuna.”

I nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Goodbye, Ethan.”

“Goodbye, Andy.”

His eyes stared off to the side, and he stopped moving. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I stayed there on the floor for ten more minutes, trying to focus my mind, to clear it of all worries and distractions. I would need to take time to refocus for the next part of the journey. It was going to be dangerous, without a doubt, and Julia would need my help. I was sure of it.

I looked at Andy, my friend the android, unmoving, and I let myself feel sad until it didn’t feel quite so awful. Then, I got up to finish preparing. There was a lot to do before we reached Esmuna.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Julia

My side throbbed. My whole body hurt. Every time I moved, something else ached. The wound in my abdomen hurt constantly, distracting me from everything else. I just wanted to lie down and sleep for a month, but there wasn't time for that. I managed to get a little sleep, and that would have to be enough. I also managed to clean up, with some help from Ethan, and borrowed yet another set of clothes from him. I felt clean and I smelled better, but that was the end of the list of positive things I could think of.

The ship shuddered when the docking clamps locked onto it. I tried not to flinch when it jarred my side. I leaned my head against the seat and took a few more seconds to rest while Ethan finished the docking procedures and shut down the engines. I watched him from the corner of my eye as he flipped switches and typed on the computer interface. He had showered as well and was dressed in a dark green shirt and brown pants. His dreadlocks were pulled back and secured loosely by a band. Part of a tattoo peeked out from the neck of his shirt, and I wondered if it was another animal tattoo.

I had the irrational desire to ask him to show me all of his tattoos. Tattoos were considered a cultural ritual to the Novem, and it wasn't polite to ask about them. But curiosity begged me to ask anyway. I had never cared much for tattoos before, but I found my eyes continually drawn to the ones I could see on him. I'd seen another tattoo on his left hand—this one a chain that encircled his wrist and led down the center of his palm to a key. At least, I thought it was a key. I only got glimpses of it here and there.

Now isn't the time to think about tattoos. We were landing on a hostile planet while being pursued by people who wanted us dead. Or, at least, wanted me dead. We had much more important things to think about.

Ethan unfastened his seatbelt and stood up. "We're here. Are you ready?"

My side twinged at the thought of moving, but I nodded anyway. It wasn't like I had a choice. Staying put would likely result in my death. I needed to move, and I couldn't afford to show weakness. They would likely be searching for an injured woman and a Novem tribe member. Ethan would stand out enough on his own without adding my visible injury to the mix.

He was obviously waiting for me to get up first, so I slowly got to my feet and tested my strength. I felt tired, weak, and in far too much pain, but I could move. I walked to the outer door with my hand on the wall for support. The pain lessened a little bit the more I moved.

Ethan snatched a bag off the floor and slung it across his shoulders. I eyed it as I waited for him by the door. The gun he had given me was tucked into my back. Extra ammo was in one of the pockets in the baggy pants Ethan let me borrow. It was a good thing my belt had survived everything so far or I'd never be able to keep the pants up.

Ethan opened the door, and we climbed down the steps to the tarmac. We had landed in Abington, which was one of the larger cities on the west coast. The planet had one continent, which was roughly liver-shaped, and it was also called Esmuna. I had never been to Esmuna before, nor did I know much about the geography. I had a vague picture in my head of where the major cities were, and Dothan, the capital, was in the center of the continent, but beyond that my mind drew a blank.

The first thing I noticed was the cold. I shivered involuntarily and the aching in my side increased. I gritted my teeth against the pain and started walking towards the terminal. I didn't hurry, but I tried not to walk too slowly either. Ethan matched my pace.

“Why is it so cold?” I whispered through clenched teeth.

“It's winter here. See the snow over there? They've cleaned out most of it but there are still patches around.”

Now that he mentioned it, I noticed the scattered piles of snow against the building. Of course, we would have the

unfortunate luck to fly to a place in the middle of winter. I personally didn't care for the cold.

Ethan must have noticed because he wrapped his arm carefully around my back. It wasn't much, but when I leaned into his side, the cold wasn't as bad. He accepted my weight without complaint.

We stepped into the terminal, and a wave of warmth washed over me. I relaxed my hunched shoulders and looked around at the bustling crowds of people moving up and down the massive walkways with purpose. It felt strange to be so on edge and in fear of dying while life continued like normal for everyone else.

Enough of that. Focus on what's important right now. "Bank terminal."

Ethan pointed to the right. "Looks like there's one over there."

There was a bank kiosk not far away, and I withdrew whatever cash I thought I would need. Ethan stepped up when I was finished and withdrew money as well. I frowned at him but didn't say anything. It was a good idea for him to get money out too. I didn't have much, not on an IPF salary, and I wasn't going to dip into my savings account. That was for Alexi's future. If I died, she'd need the money.

That thought depressed me, so I turned my attention towards other things. "I need to get new shoes."

"What?" Ethan gave me a questioning look.

I smiled faintly and scanned the signs for the shops down the side corridor. "The acid rain ate through most of the soles on my shoes."

He glanced at my feet, but I didn't look. I already knew what he would see. They looked pathetic. The sides were scuffed, chunks were missing, and the soles were barely still attached.

"Oh. I didn't think about that."

“You probably have special shoes that are resistant to such things like acid.” I had said it jokingly, but Ethan’s sheepish look told me I was right. I rolled my eyes, attempted to hide a smile, and pointed to the left. “There’s a store that way. Let’s go.”

Thankfully, this spaceport had autowalks. We stepped onto one, and I leaned against the banister while we glided down the walkway. After a couple hundred feet, we stepped off, and Ethan steered me towards the shoe store. Within a few minutes, I had found a pair of sturdy boots in my size. I paid for them, and Ethan helped me switch them out.

He held up one of the ruined shoes in his hand and whistled. “That is bad. Sorry about your shoes.”

I wanted to shrug but was afraid it would hurt too much. “It’s okay. They’re just shoes.” I discreetly transferred my badge into one of my new shoes to hide it. It wouldn’t be the most comfortable thing in the world, but I figured no one ever thought to check inside shoes. It was the safest place I could keep it. I wasn’t willing to part with it, even if it meant I was possibly putting myself in more danger.

Once my feet were securely laced in my new shoes, Ethan helped me stand back up. “Where next?”

I scanned the area around us. “I need a computer.” I spotted a public computer interface and headed for it. I pulled up the net and started running a location search. I knew the place we needed to go, but I didn’t know *where* it was. I wasn’t sure if my plan was a good one, or if it would even work, but I was desperate. Emerson was the only one I could ask for help. Although the thought of asking for help from him goaded me, I would do it. He wasn’t as bad as he pretended to be. I know his motivation for helping me track down Santiago had been to protect Kit, but he had still helped. We had worked together well enough, even if it had only been for a short time.

Even though he had grumbled and complained the whole time about my presence, Emerson had still given me protection on his ship even though I was an IPF agent. We hadn’t told anyone who I really was except for Reuben, his

first mate, who had protested my presence heavily. We had told the rest of the crew I was a locator and could find things no one else could. The crew hadn't been surprised that Emerson was trying to find Kit.

While I was on Emerson's ship, I kept my mouth shut and my ears open. I learned a lot about him, including one of his favorite stomping grounds right here on Esmuna. He often frequented a bar by the name of White Fox. Apparently, he knew the owner and had a base of operations somewhere close by. The problem was I didn't know what city the White Fox was in.

A quick computer search brought up a location. Ethan peered over my shoulder at the map and sighed. "That's about two thousand miles away."

I nodded. "That'll be good for us. Abington is where they are going to start their search. They'll probably think we'll look for a way off the planet from right here. They'll hit up all the local smugglers and coyotes first before expanding to other cities."

"Yes. It would make sense for them to search nearby first."

"So, what we need is transport to—" I scanned the map again to find the name of the city, "Concordia. Something that won't require IDs."

Ethan and I both fell silent. I wasn't entirely sure where to find transport. If we took a shuttle, they'd scan our biometrics. If we took an old-fashioned airplane, we would need to purchase tickets, and we'd need identification to do that. If we went by ground, it would take us days to get there.

Ethan gave my shoulder a light squeeze, making the skin tingle. "I think I have an idea." His eyes were focused on something across the walkway, and I turned to see what he was looking at. There were two Novem men standing against the wall outside a restaurant. They were chatting with each other, but they didn't look like travelers. They weren't dressed like travelers, they had no luggage, and they didn't seem to be in any rush.

“Do you know them?”

“No, but they’re Novem. We look out for each other. Wait here while I go talk to them.”

The Novem were a tight tribe. If Ethan could convince them to help us, then more power to him. I spotted an empty seat and gently sat down in it. My side throbbed more, and I tried not to feel depressed. I’d never realized how debilitating pain could be.

Part of me didn’t like the idea of him going over there by himself, but that was just paranoia. There was no way my kidnappers were here already, and as far as I knew no one else was out to kill us. I may not like being left alone, but he was still in eyeshot if anything happened.

Ethan reached the other two men, and, after a few seconds, they were deep in conversation. I tried to read their expressions, but I was too far away. I didn’t see any hostility or suspicion in their overall body language, so that was a good sign. Ethan was talking animatedly, and I’d bet he was talking in their native tongue. The Novem had their own language and culture, and they worked hard to preserve it and pass it on to their children.

The Novem were native to Fairfax, which was a rural planet. There were higher levels of poverty and few economic opportunities. The government structure was weak, leaving a gap in power and allowing gangs to take over sections of the planet. The Novem tribe was only one of many, but it was one of the largest. The tribes were tight-knit groups who took care of their own, from what I’d heard. I didn’t know much about tribe dynamics beyond that, but I thought Ethan might have a chance at getting some help from these men.

They chatted back and forth for several minutes. I saw Ethan briefly mess with his shirt collar, and then both men lifted their chins, as though he had said something important. I fidgeted slightly, worried, but then both men smiled. I tried to relax, but I wasn’t ready to celebrate just yet.

They talked for a while longer before both men nodded. One of them split off and hurried away, and then Ethan turned

and walked back to me. He was smiling, and the knot of anxiety in my stomach loosened.

“What did they say?” I asked as he approached.

“They’ll get us transportation to Concordia, no problem. We need to meet them at their ship.”

“What kind of transportation is it?” I stood up carefully, wincing slightly despite my best efforts.

“Shuttle. We can be in Concordia in an hour or two.” He took my arm gently and I leaned on him for support. I wanted to be strong, but it was hard. I was so tired.

“Is it a commercial flight or what?”

“No.” He turned me in the direction of the shipping terminals, and we started walking. “They import spices from Fairfax. Exotic stuff. They agreed to take us to Concordia.”

My gut said he was leaving information out, but I couldn’t imagine what, and I was in no position to ask about it. We were desperate and in danger. If these two were willing to give us a ride, then I wasn’t going to ask for any more details.

Once we had made our way down several long autowalks and deep into the heart of the shipping terminals, Ethan steered me towards a staff only door. I frowned, but before I could say anything, it opened and one of the Novem men appeared and waved us through.

We followed him down a series of hallways and then out onto the tarmac. Ships of all kinds were being loaded and unloaded, and we bypassed several before stopping in front of a modest shuttle. There were three other Novem men loading crates into the back of it, and they barely spared us a glance before going back to work. The one who led us out there, a stocky man in his mid-thirties, spoke rapidly in what I assumed was their native tongue. Ethan said something back and the man nodded.

He led us through the back of the shuttle, and we weaved around various crates until we reached the front. The smell inside was so pungent my nose immediately began to itch. I couldn’t differentiate between the smells to pick out the

individual spices. I tried, mostly out of curiosity, but I sneezed. Pain ricocheted through my body, and I groaned. Ethan wrapped his arm around me and helped me into one of the seats.

The other men walked back and forth, shifting crates around to fit as much as they could. I watched them for a moment before I looked at Ethan. “If they import spices from Fairfax then why are they loading them onto this shuttle?”

He was also watching the men work, but he spared me a glance. “They ship in bulk to Abington and then divide up the shipments here to take it to other cities. Lucky for us, this shuttle is heading to three different cities close to Concordia. They agreed to drop us off there.”

“This just happened to be their redistribution day?” I sounded suspicious to my own ears, and Ethan frowned at me.

“Yes. This is a gift from the universe. I know these people, if not personally. We have friends in common. I would trust them before I would trust anyone else. We are among friends.”

I sneezed again. I tried to brace myself so it wouldn't hurt as much. It wasn't as bad, but it still hurt. I sniffed and leaned into the chair. I needed to stop complaining and being so suspicious. It was the cop nature in me. But things didn't feel right. I was missing some context somewhere. It was probably the language barrier. I was used to being in control, but now I had to rely on Ethan to arrange everything. I wanted to know every detail, and I knew I couldn't. I was an outsider here. I had to trust Ethan.

After a few more minutes, they finished loading the shuttle. The two men Ethan had originally talked to came up to the pilot and co-pilot seats. The doors closed, trapping the smell inside the tiny confines. I pressed a finger under my nose to try and alleviate the urge to sneeze, but it didn't help much.

The slimmer of the two men caught the look on my face, reached into a pocket, and withdrew some cotton. He held it out to me.

I blinked at the cotton. “What is that for?”

He tilted his head back and pointed at his nose. I squinted and finally noticed he had a little bit of cotton sticking out of his nostrils.

“It’s for the smell.” Ethan was buckling up. “They use it to keep from sneezing all the time. This stuff is potent.”

“Oh.” I took the cotton from him. “Thank you.”

He smiled at me and went back to work powering up the shuttle. I eyed the cotton before I leaned closer to Ethan to whisper. “Do you think it’s used?”

He let out a surprised laugh and grinned. He shook his head. “No. It’s not.”

“Good.” I carefully rolled the cotton and then gingerly shoved it up my nose. It helped immediately. I had to breathe through my mouth, but if it kept me from sneezing, I wasn’t going to complain. I held out the excess to Ethan. “Want some?”

“No, thank you.” He shook his head. “The smell doesn’t bother me.”

“How in the world could it not bother you?” It wasn’t that the spices smelled awful; they were just strong. Though I hadn’t seen Ethan sneeze or react to the smell at all. “The people who move this stuff around all the time think it’s too much.”

The shuttle lifted off the ground and I heard some chatter from the control tower, giving us permission to take off and directions for a clear route. Ethan dropped his bag between his feet and squirmed in the chair, trying to find a comfortable position. “It just doesn’t. Maybe I’m weird.”

The pilot, the stocky one, spoke to Ethan again, and he answered with a smile. I didn’t know any of the language, but I tried to listen to see if I could pick any of the words out. I couldn’t. They chatted for several minutes, and I resigned myself to resting while we flew. I wouldn’t be able to sleep, but I could rest. That would help.

We lifted into the air and shot upwards, leveling out once we were high enough. There wasn’t much to see out the front

windows, and there weren't any other windows for me to look out, so I watched the clouds for a little bit. The co-pilot turned partially in his seat to look at us. When he spoke this time, his eyes were on me.

He sounded curious, and I looked from him to Ethan, hoping for a translation. Ethan eyed the other man for several seconds before he looked at me. "He is asking for your name."

I smiled at the co-pilot. "It's Julia."

The co-pilot smiled and repeated my name, and I nodded. He rattled off something else and then said, slower, "Conan."

"Your name is Conan?" I asked.

We both glanced at Ethan, who nodded. Conan said something else, looking at me, but Ethan answered, a sharp edge in his tone. Conan seemed surprised either that Ethan answered or that he sounded sharp. It sounded like he asked Ethan a follow up question. Ethan shook his head.

"What's he saying?" Curiosity got the better of me.

"Nothing. Just asking questions about you."

"That's not nothing." I looked at Ethan from the corner of my eye. His eyes focused intently on one or the other of the two men in front of us. I don't know if he was upset or bothered, but he seemed off.

The co-pilot gave me another curious look before he turned back to the controls. He seemed friendly enough to me, but Ethan was acting like Conan had said something he shouldn't have. Ethan wasn't thrilled with the questions, that much was plain. No one seemed hostile or angry, but the atmosphere felt awkward now.

I poked Ethan in the arm and whispered to him. "Is everything alright?"

He smiled at me, but it didn't seem quite genuine. "Yes. We'll be in Concordia before you know it."

The rest of the flight passed mostly in silence. Occasionally the two sitting up front would converse, but it was in their language, and I couldn't follow it. Ethan didn't speak; he just

watched everything. While his posture said he was relaxed, his eyes were hard. It was unnerving when compared to his normally calm demeanor.

Finally, the pilot said something to us, and Ethan gave a single word answer before straightening up. “We’re landing.”

I nodded. I caught glimpses of the city outside the window, but I couldn’t see much from my seat. The pilot was good at his job, and we landed smoothly, without irritating my injury further. Ethan was up and ready in seconds, bag swung across his back, and a hand extended to help me up.

My pride told me to stand on my own, but practicality urged me to accept his help. I took his hand and stood carefully. Almost immediately, my hand started tingling. I swear, every time I touched him, I felt like I had a physical reaction. We walked around the crates towards the rear doors. Conan followed us and opened the doors so we could exit. He and Ethan spoke rapidly in their language while the ramp extended down.

To my surprise, we weren’t at a spaceport, but at a large mall parking lot. The shuttle was small, and therefore it could land comfortably and safely in the lot, but I wondered why we didn’t land at a port. Since this worked out in our favor, I decided not to ask about it.

Conan said something to me. Before I could ask for a translation, Ethan snapped an answer back at him. Conan’s head dropped, and he took a step backward.

I frowned and my eyes jumped between the two of them. “What was that about?”

Ethan seemed agitated. He turned his back to Conan. “We need to go.”

I looked at Conan, whose eyes were still on the ground. “Goodbye, Conan.”

His eyes lifted hesitantly, but he smiled. “Goodbye, Julia.”

As Ethan took my elbow, I sent Conan a little wave. Ethan steered me down the ramp. He was cautious of my injury, and his grip was gentle, but I was a little irked by his controlling

behavior. As soon as we touched solid ground, I shook his hand off. Then I shivered because of the cold.

We walked to a safe distance and watched the shuttle take off. Once it was out of sight, I turned to Ethan with a glare. “What was that all about? Seriously? What are you not telling me?”

At least he had the decency to look guilty. “He was overstepping his boundaries. I know you don’t understand because you don’t know what he said, but he was being disrespectful towards you.”

I blinked. “Really? He seemed like he was trying to be friendly.”

Ethan scowled, turned towards the mall, and started walking. He walked slowly enough for me to keep up, but he didn’t look at me.

I wasn’t going to let him off the hook so easily. I folded my arms to conserve body heat and kept pace with him. “What did he say?”

Irritation flashed in his eyes, and he kept his eyes straight ahead. “The Novem aren’t always accepting of tribe members mixing with outsiders, particularly in anything beyond acquaintanceship.”

I felt like he was hinting at something, but I wasn’t getting it. “Okay. And?”

“And Conan was asking personal questions about you that were far beyond rude.”

We reached the side of the building and began walking towards the taxi stand, skirting a pile of snow. I knew that, in Novem culture, certain things were considered rude that many other societies didn’t think were problematic. I couldn’t help but wonder if this was that kind of situation. “I’m not following.”

Ethan stopped walking and finally met my eyes. “I told them we were friends in need of a ride off the grid to Concordia. Conan took that as an invitation to ask you inappropriate questions about the nature of our relationship.

He called you a *breyga*, a derogatory term used to describe women who hang around Novem men with the intention of snagging one into marriage. It gives the feeling of someone wanting to be in an exclusive club, like a groupie following a band around.” His eyes rolled around for a moment as he searched for words. “It’s like the equivalent of a badge bunny. He wasn’t trying to be disrespectful, but it bothered me. I told him as much.”

I blinked, trying to understand what he was saying as well as what he was leaving out. Badge bunny was a term I understood well. There were certain people—mostly women but also some men—who would exclusively date cops. They tended to frequent popular cop hangouts, and they weren’t thought of too highly in the community. “He thought you were lying about the nature of our relationship, didn’t he? He thought we were sleeping together.”

“Yes.” Ethan looked away, obviously aggravated. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and the anger slowly left his body. “I haven’t been around my people in quite some time. I sometimes forget how they view others.”

I reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. “We all have a tendency to forget the negative things about our families.”

He smiled softly and we resumed walking. He didn’t let go of my hand. Being connected to someone like that felt nice. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt connected to another person. With Jordan, maybe, in the middle of a pursuit when we could talk to each other without words. We were in sync and knew what the other was thinking. But it wasn’t the same kind of connection. There was something a little bit different about the way Ethan made me feel.

We hailed a hovercab and climbed in. The White Fox wasn’t far. I settled back in the seat carefully. Ethan stared at the window, and I caught another glimpse of the tattoo of the key on his left hand.

“What does that tattoo mean, if you don’t mind me asking?” I just couldn’t help myself. Curiosity was killing me.

Ethan glanced from me down to his hand. He smiled. He pulled his sleeve up so I could see how the chain encircled his whole wrist and led to the key in his palm. “This tattoo I got a few years ago, after I met a special old woman who told me that I, and I alone, held the key to my future. That every decision I make is my own. I can change anything I want if I just make the decision. I didn’t have to be what anyone else wanted me to be or told me I would be. The key to change is always in my hands. This reminds me of that.”

Before I could think better of it, I touched the key. His hands were cool to the touch and the tattoo didn’t feel any different from the rest of his skin. Even though it was just a tattoo, it fascinated me.

“Do all your tattoos have stories behind them?”

“Yes. I don’t see the point in getting one if there isn’t a reason for it. Not all of them mean as much to me, but each one has a reason behind it.”

“How many do you have?”

He smiled, drawing my eyes to his face. “I have many. I’ve never counted.”

For an inexplicable reason, I blushed. I pulled my hands back to myself and turned to my window to pretend to watch the city below. “We should be almost there. What time is it, locally?”

“A little after three in the afternoon.”

“Good. The bar should be open, but not necessarily busy yet.”

“What’s our plan?”

“There isn’t much of one.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “We go in and strike up a conversation with the bartender. Ask if he knows where Emerson is. Bribe him, if possible. Most of it I’ll play by ear. With any luck, we’ll get a location.”

“Let’s hope so.”

The cab dropped to the ground below and we climbed out. I passed off some credits to the cabbie and took stock of the

street. There were a few people out walking, but the cold probably chased the rest away. The street itself didn't look rundown or ghetto, so I took that as a positive sign. There were some legit looking businesses up the way, and what looked like apartment buildings across the street.

In front of us stood a two-level building with a black wooden sign with "White Fox" written across it in white letters. Some of the edging was done in deep orange, much like a fox's coloring. Windows covered most of the front wall, though they were tinted, and it was hard to see the interior. I couldn't distinguish more than a few dark shapes.

There was no need to waste any more time, so I strode towards the door, forcing the pain to the back of my mind. I walked carefully but tried not to look like I was favoring my side. This was not the time to show weakness. I pushed the door open and took a few seconds to scan the room. A few patrons sat at a table in the left corner, beers at the elbows and a game of cards in full swing. Two buff men were playing darts on the opposite wall. A few others sat at the bar. A server was cleaning off a chair in the corner, and a bartender stood behind the bar, mixing up a drink.

Taking all that in, I headed straight for the bar. I felt eyes on me as I walked, but I ignored them. Ethan walked in right behind me, and even though he wasn't the biggest or most imposing man in the room, he still had a presence. If anything happened, he could hold his own; I had seen as much already.

I climbed onto a barstool, which hurt like nobody's business, and leaned against the bar. Ethan followed suit. I watched the bartender as he finished mixing his drink. He was in his fifties, with snow-white hair and weathered skin. He had a sizeable belly, but it looked like it was because he ate too much good food and not because he wasn't active. I watched his hands and arms as he moved, and there was noticeable power in them. He might have been a bartender, but I was confident he could fight, too.

After a few minutes, he moved over to us, sizing us up with sharp eyes. "What can I get you?"

“Bourbon. On the rocks.” I didn’t hesitate. If I wanted something from him, I needed to be a paying customer.

His eyes moved silently to Ethan.

“Same.”

Without a word, he turned and grabbed a bottle of bourbon and began pouring our drinks. I tried to study the area behind the bar to glean any information about the man that I could. It was neat and clean. Messes were confined to specific areas, and the glasses were kept aligned. It appeared as though he liked to keep things neat and orderly. The floor was clean, and there were no personal belongings or pictures or anything like that.

Our drinks were placed in front of us precisely, without spillage and without fanfare. I took a sip and let the alcohol burn through me. I hoped it would help dull the pain a little. I didn’t want to have much, because I needed to be clear-minded, but I thought a little couldn’t hurt.

My eyes met those of the bartender. He hadn’t moved away, and he was looking at us like he was drawing on patience. I lifted my eyebrows at him. “Yes?” I asked.

He tilted his head to the side. “What do you want?”

I wagged my drink at him, making the ice clink. “A drink. I got it.”

“What do you really want?” He wiped his hands on a dish towel hanging over his shoulder. “I’ve never seen you in here before. There’s something you’re after.”

I debated with myself internally. I could pretend I had no idea what he was talking about, but he didn’t seem the type to appreciate me dragging this out. I tapped a finger against the side of my glass, considering my options. *It can’t hurt to be honest at this point. He already knows I want something.* “I’m looking for information.”

The bartender smirked. It disappeared quickly though. “What do you want?”

“I want to know where Captain Emerson is.”

“Who?” There was a subtle shift in his shoulders, a tightening, that told me he knew exactly who Emerson was.

I smiled at him, trying to soften him up a little. “Oh, don’t play coy. I know you know who he is, and I bet you know where he is, too.”

His whole body went still. I focused on his face as I took another sip. “Is he planet-side?”

There was a slight twitch around his mouth and cheeks. My hopes rose. “He is. Good. I bet that means you know where I can find him.”

“Who are you?”

“Diverting the conversation. Nice stalling technique.” I set my glass down carefully, keeping my senses alert to my surroundings. “Name’s Carter. Emerson and I are acquaintances. He has something of mine, and I want it back.”

It was a boldfaced lie, but I had learned long ago how to lie well. The bartender blinked suspiciously at me. “He’s never mentioned you.”

At least he was admitting he knew who Emerson was. “I bet he doesn’t tell you everything. But he did tell me about this place, and how much he likes your house lager.”

His chin lifted and his body puffed out slightly. *Pride.*

My eyes swept the area again, looking for anything I could use, something that would tell me a little bit more about the bartender’s personality. I didn’t see anything remotely useful. “He mentioned how he likes to come here when he’s in the area. Kind of has a soft spot for you I think.”

“I don’t know where he is.”

Liar. I saw the light swallow, the flicker of the eyes. He was a bad liar. Normally, I wouldn’t be able to glean anything from a stranger knowing as little as I did about his baseline, but he was signaling so strongly that he was lying that there was no way I could miss it. I took another sip. “Emerson and I worked a job a while back. Helped find a friend of his. Kit.”

The name registered, just like I was hoping it would. He blinked, his eyebrows lifting in surprise. I'd bet Emerson had discussed his former girlfriend before, or he might have even brought her there.

I pretended to study my nails. "It's a shame the two of them broke up. I mean, Kit is a free spirit and all, but Emerson practically worshiped the ground she walked on. Poor sap. Thought he might be willing to move past her with me, but he wouldn't bite. She goes missing and he practically opens a black hole to find her." I let derision leak through my voice, trying to feed him the perfect amount of emotion to form a connection.

The bartender grunted, a ghost of a smile on his lips. He agreed with me. "He was always head over heels for that girl."

Smiling, I nodded. "Look, I left something...personal with him, and I want to get it back. He won't pick up my calls, and every time I've almost tracked him down, he's slipped away. I was hoping I'd get lucky here. Can you help a girl out?"

For a long moment he looked torn, battling within himself. If he decided I couldn't be trusted, then I would never get the location out of him. I took a gamble and leaned back. I slipped backward off the stool. Ethan grabbed for me instantly, catching my side and keeping me from crashing to the floor. The bartender was almost as fast, catching my outstretched hand. Both men helped me right myself in the seat. All the eyes in the room were on me, but I ignored them. Embarrassment was inconsequential at that point.

I couldn't help but wince, and my side flared up in pain again. I pressed my arm across it and focused on breathing.

"Are you okay?" Ethan sounded genuinely worried. "You have to be more careful," he whispered. He kept his arm around me, though I could tell he was holding back from what he really wanted to do and say.

"Yeah, I'll be okay." I patted his knee to reassure him.

The bartender's brow furrowed, as though he was worried about me, too. "Are you sure? You look hurt."

“I’m okay. Really.” I tried to make my eyes look as vulnerable and in pain as possible while I looked up at him. “I just need to get my stuff back from Emerson. I promise I have no ill intentions towards him. Can you help me? Please?”

My act appealed to his masculinity. After a few more seconds of hesitation, he reached for a napkin and jotted down an address. “He’ll be here in about twenty minutes. He’s meeting someone, but I don’t know who. I think he’s planning on heading off-planet after that, but he didn’t say. He was in here last night and was unhappy with something I presumed was work related. I overheard him talking with his second mate about the meeting.”

I accepted the napkin from him with my best smile. “Thank you, so much. You have no idea what this means to me.”

“Just don’t tell him I’m the one who sent you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I took out some credits, more than enough to pay for the drinks, and slapped them down on the bar. “We’d best hurry.”

“Good luck.”

Ethan helped me down from the barstool, but I refused to let him help me walk to the door. Faking that fall had hurt, but it was worth it. My hunch had been right. The bartender was a sucker for a dainty female.

As soon as we were on the street Ethan touched my elbow. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” I smiled at him, pretending I wasn’t in pain. “He fell for it, hard. Seems even you believed it.”

His jaw dropped and his steps faltered. “You did that on purpose?”

I nodded. “I had a feeling he’d be a sucker for a damsel in distress. Worked like a charm. We need to hurry if we’re going to catch Emerson. He’s all the way across town.”

We hailed another cab, and before long we were zooming above the city again. Ethan rubbed his jaw and studied me

with probing eyes. “How did you do that? Manipulate him like that?”

I flinched at the term manipulate, but I couldn't argue against it. “I know how to read people. When I joined the— university,” I almost said IPF, but managed to cut myself off at the last second, “I tested well for a psychological program. It sparked my interest. I studied psychology and deception. I learned a lot.”

“You can tell when people are lying?”

“Usually.” I couldn't elaborate on it without the cabbie overhearing us.

Ethan seemed impressed. Or a little worried. Perhaps it was both. Most people were a little unnerved when they discovered I was basically a walking lie detector. People didn't like knowing I could see through their words.

The ride across town took longer than twenty minutes, but not by much. I figured Emerson would still be there. I was a little concerned about the fact that he was meeting someone, but there was no way I could wait outside until he was done. I had no way of knowing where he would exit, and I couldn't chance missing him. If I had to crash the party, then so be it.

The address turned out to be an old car manufacturing factory. It seemed abandoned, but there was no way to tell for sure. There were several signs warning against trespassing, but the building itself still seemed in decent shape. I surveyed the area around it, looking for any signs of Emerson.

“So, what's the plan now?”

I shrugged, rubbing my hands to keep them warm. *Never thought I would want a coat so much in all my life.* “We go in. Follow my lead and don't say anything unless you absolutely must.”

“Julia.” He caught my hand and I turned to face him. He hesitated before giving my hand a squeeze. “Be careful. I know you think this Emerson guy will help you out, but there's no way to be sure. I know we are stuck in this situation and don't have a choice, but don't do anything rash.”

Part of me warmed at his concern, but the part of me I showed to the world—the Agent Carter part—wasn't going to be cowed by danger. I forced myself to smile and nod resolutely. No weakness allowed. "We'll be okay. I won't do anything stupid. Emerson will help us."

I didn't know that for sure. There was no way to know. Sure, we had managed not to kill each other before, but that was because we were trying to find Kit. We had argued and fought like cats and dogs, but no blood had been shed. Not that we hadn't both threatened to do just that. I had told him next time I saw him I would arrest him. He had said next time he saw me he would shoot me. At the time, I think we had both been half-serious, but I'd had the opportunity to turn his location over to other IPF agents and I hadn't done it. It wouldn't have been hard for me to track him down if I had put my mind to it. But I just hadn't wanted to.

Not everyone on the wrong side of the law was a bad person, just like not everyone on the right side of the law deserved its protection. That was just how the universe was. I had been on both sides before. Not everything was black and white. I hoped Emerson would see it that way.

But there was no guarantee, and it was quite possible I was walking Ethan to his death. I swallowed and glanced at the building behind me. "You could still leave if you wanted to. I don't know what will happen once we go in there. I won't ask you to come with me. You could easily buy safe passage out of here or contact your boss to get someone to fix your ship. I can manage on my own."

Ethan pulled me towards him and wrapped his arms around me. It surprised me and I froze. I wasn't sure what to do. He hugged me for a short moment before leaning back, resting his hands on my shoulders. His breath puffed out, and he sniffed against the cold. "I don't want to leave, Jules. I can handle a little danger. It's not time for us to part ways yet. This is where I'm supposed to be."

How he could know that with such certainty was beyond me, but I knew he believed it. His face was serious and he kissed my cheek. "Don't worry about me."

Ethan seemed far more comfortable expressing himself physically than I was. It was the second time he had kissed my cheek. Maybe it was, in part, a Novem thing to be more physical in interacting with others, but I barely knew him. I wasn't bothered by the kiss, necessarily, but it made me feel out of my element. Of course, I felt close to him because of what we had been through together, and yes, I thought he was attractive. Under normal circumstances, I might have wanted to get to know him better and go on a date, but these weren't normal circumstances. I didn't know how to react to him.

Pushing my uncertainties out of my mind, I nodded at him. "Okay. If you're sure."

"I am."

I couldn't stop myself from smiling at him. "Thank you. For everything."

"Anything I can do to help." Ethan almost shrugged, his shoulders lifting up less than half an inch before dropping. "The universe brought us together. I'm not turning my back on you."

My chest warmed to the point my face reddened as well. I cleared my throat and pushed the uncomfortable feeling away. "Okay then. Let's go find Emerson."

CHAPTER NINE

Julia

Looking around, I noticed a cut-out section of the fence surrounding the factory. I took Ethan's hand and led him over to the hole. He pulled the wire away and I quickly ducked through it and proceeded to hold the fence for him while he slipped through. The building itself was several levels tall and made from brick. Based on the decrepit exterior, it had been around for a while. There were a couple of doors on this side of the building, but the first two we tried were locked. The one at the very end finally opened, and I peered into the darkness inside. It looked like an empty hallway.

Ethan and I exchanged glances before stepping inside. He kept right behind me, quiet and watchful. The hallway was dim and stretched out on both sides. I didn't know which way to go, so I picked a direction at random and started walking. I pulled the gun from the small of my back and kept it ready by my side. I had no idea who Emerson was meeting, and I had no idea if they were going to be friendly or not.

I started opening doors and peeking inside, trying to get some bearings. Most seemed to be storage rooms or offices. One looked to be a break room. All of them were empty.

The hallway made a curve up ahead, and I checked it carefully before stepping around it. This hall also appeared empty. More doors revealed more empty rooms. I was starting to feel like the bartender had given us the wrong address after all. It would have made sense if he just wanted us to just leave, but I didn't think that was the case.

A gun cocked behind us, and I froze.

"Weapons on the ground."

Slowly, I turned around. There were three men, all pointing weapons at us. There was no other option but to comply, so I carefully set the gun on the ground and kicked it towards them. I didn't recognize any of them from my time on the *Hawk* with Emerson. They looked like goons and not like

Emerson's men. I tried to draw up some patience. Ethan and I exchanged looks, but there was nothing we could do.

They patted us down thoroughly, taking all my weapons and what I guessed were all of Ethan's weapons as well. The good news was they never bothered to check inside my shoes, so my badge remained hidden. That was something at least.

The one who appeared in charge stepped forward, waving his gun in our faces. "What are you doing here?"

I took a steadying breath before speaking, trying to come off as nonchalant and in control as possible. "We're here for the meeting. Duh. We're a little late."

He frowned, as though puzzled by my words. I lifted an eyebrow and then rolled my eyes in an exaggerated manner, scoffing in the process. "What, no one told you? Of course not. The bosses never tell their people anything. Take me to your boss and Emerson." I put as much command in my voice as possible.

The goon hesitated. I sighed. "Look, the worst that will happen is your boss will say I'm lying and then he'll order you to kill us. But if you kill me now and the boss wanted to see us, then *you're* dead. So. Your choice."

My words must have made sense to him because he jerked his head down the hall. "That way. Go. Now."

Feeling relieved that they hadn't killed us outright, I obeyed. Ethan tried to walk close to me, but one of the men grabbed his arm and pulled him away. I don't know what they thought we could do by simply walking next to each other, but they were either paranoid or overly cautious. Either way, it proved they weren't completely stupid.

We were led down another hall and through a door, which opened onto the manufacturing floor. Large machines filled the floor space in an assembly line pattern. Metal scraps were heaped in scattered bins, screws littered the area, and I had to step around a dubiously colored liquid staining the concrete floor.

“I don’t care what your excuses are, Emerson, I want my shipment. I don’t care if you were robbed, or if the IPF confiscated it, or if your ship fell into a black hole! I want my product.” That voice did not seem happy. Irate was a better description. “You will find my shipment, or I will take what I am owed from you and yours. Is that clear?”

Emerson’s voice reached my ears. My shoulders relaxed ever so slightly. *He’s here.* “We were set up. If it wasn’t by your men, then it was by your supplier. Either way, this wasn’t my screw-up.”

“I don’t care whose screw-up it was. I’m holding *you* responsible.”

We came into view, and heads turned our way. There were eight men gathered in a loose circle in the center of the room. All talking ceased abruptly. *You had better be sure this was a good idea, Jules.*

A tall man on my right with a thick neck and a bulky frame seemed to be in command. He was dressed in a suit, though he wasn’t wearing a tie. He didn’t have any visible weapons, and he seemed noticeably displeased by our interruption. He glared at us and shifted his feet. Four armed men stood directly behind him, watching us with more wariness than anger.

Emerson stood across from him, not quite as imposing, but standing his ground, nonetheless. His blond locks sat in more disarray than normal, and his jaw was clenched in obvious anger, making his scar stand out more. His arms were folded in front of his chest, but he looked more than ready to act if the situation called for it. Two men stood on either side of him. Though I didn’t recognize either of them by name, their faces looked at least a little familiar.

“What the devil is this about?” The man on the right gestured at us angrily.

One of our escorts stepped forward, obviously deferring his authority to his boss, but not acting like a coward, either. “We found these two sneaking around. She claims they were invited.”

Emerson's eyes landed on mine and surprise appeared on his face and disappeared almost as fast. That was good, since everyone was looking at me and not him. I couldn't exactly sell that I was invited if Emerson looked surprised to see me there.

The leader growled. "I have no idea who they are. Find out why they're here and then kill them."

I smirked, though my insides were trembling. Guns lifted in my direction, and I put my hands out in a placating motion. "Easy there. I was invited to the party, don't you worry." My eyes went from Emerson back to the other boss. "I'm sorry to have crashed in like this, but I was a little later than I intended to be. Emerson invited me."

All eyes went to Emerson. He kept his normal, hard expression on his face, but his eyes were locked on me. I lifted my eyebrows at him, urging him to say something. He looked from me to the other major player in the room with a half-shrug. "I didn't expect her to show up so fast."

Inside, I melted into a pool of relief. Thank goodness Emerson could act better than most people and was willing to play along. The other man looked between the two of us. "What is this, Emerson? Who is she?"

"The name's Carter." I stepped forward and held out my hand. Guns cocked around me, and some of the men shuffled nervously. I lifted my eyebrows at the boss, daring him to have me shot. I left my hand outstretched, but he didn't take it. I finally tilted my head to the side and dropped my hand with a dramatic sigh. "Emerson asked for my help."

I knew Emerson would throttle me for saying it, but I didn't have a choice. This was the best play. If he wasn't going to give me away as being an IPF agent, then he was in this with both feet.

He sneered. "Why would he need your help?"

"Because I'm a tracker."

He didn't seem impressed. Emerson spoke from behind me. "She's good at finding things. And people. I've worked with

her before.”

Thank you, Emerson. I owe you. I smiled again, feigning a confidence I didn't feel. My fingers trembled, and I linked them behind my back. “I gather you have a problem on your hands.” My mind whirled, trying to pool together what little knowledge I had about their situation and his arrangement with Emerson. “A missing shipment is not good for anyone involved. Emerson has a reputation to uphold, so he hired me to help locate your merchandise.”

The leader sneered again. “And he needs you to help find it? Little red-haired vixen won't be able to find a missing hairbrush, let alone my shipment.”

The smile disappeared from my face, and I glared. “Don't insult me. Big things come in small packages. And Emerson didn't lose it; he was set up, and you both know it. He doesn't have to help you find anything, but he's going to because that'll keep his reputation intact.”

He eyed me for a long moment. I held my ground even though my heart was pounding. He could crush me with one word. It wouldn't be hard. I'd have no way of stopping him. But I was betting he would want his shipment—whatever it was—more than he would want to kill me.

“Emerson, you vouch for her?”

I glanced over my shoulder. Emerson was looking at me with eyes that said I was in serious trouble, but he nodded. “I vouch for her.”

He gave me another long look before glancing at Ethan. “And him?”

“He's with me,” I answered.

He scowled. “Emerson, do you know him?”

Emerson hesitated. Unfortunately, the hesitation was enough of an answer for Emerson's employer. “Kill him.”

My heart stuck in my throat and adrenaline flooded my limbs. Before I could do or say anything, the guard directly to Ethan's right shuffled, looking torn. “Uh, sir?”

“What?” He sounded impatient.

The goon trembled slightly, but he motioned to Ethan. “He’s wearing a Goliath necklace.”

For several seconds, the world around me seemed to freeze. I could only stare at Ethan, not believing what I had heard. It must have been a mistake. Either I had heard wrong, or the guard had been mistaken. Ethan couldn’t be associated with Goliath. That was one of the biggest gangs on Fairfax, whose specialty was selling and exporting drugs off-planet.

Everyone else seemed just as surprised as I was except for Ethan. His face looked like granite, hard and unyielding. The guard went to touch him, and Ethan slapped his hand away. Guns lifted, but no one dared fire on him. Ethan’s eyes practically bore holes into Emerson’s employer. “You heard him, Lyle Archuleta.”

That name rang a bell. I blinked, trying to cover my surprise. Lyle Archuleta was a high-level crime boss known for running guns and drugs to places like Lithios, Desoto, and Arcadia Prime. He was based on Esmuna, and that made it next to impossible to arrest him. I knew a few agents in organized crime, and he was one of the big fish they all wanted to catch. He was a career maker.

How Ethan had recognized him was beyond me.

Archuleta seemed unhappy by the fact that Ethan had named him, but he also seemed unwilling to call him on it. Ethan brushed his sleeve off and stepped forward, closer to me and Archuleta. He reached inside his shirt and pulled out a necklace I hadn’t noticed before. A pendant hung at the end of the chain, and I recognized it immediately. It was the symbol for the Goliath gang.

“I know who you are, Lyle, and I know who supplies you with your drugs. Not only am I one of Goliath’s men, but I’m also third-in-command. Ethan West. You can call Goliath to verify. He’ll tell you who I am. He’ll also tell you it will be *very* detrimental for your business if you kill me. Goliath supplies the bulk of your drugs. I know a lot about your operation, and I know it would be a crippling blow if you lost

your relationship with him. Stop ordering people to kill me. Is that clear enough for you?"

I shivered at the deadliness in his voice. I had never imagined he could talk like that. I still couldn't believe his words were true, but I couldn't come up with another explanation. He couldn't have concocted a cover story like that out of thin air. Was the climatology thing a lie? It couldn't be. There were too many ways it could unravel. Plus, he had one of Goliath's symbols. Those were specially made and only given to the top ranking in the gang. I didn't work drug enforcement, but Jordan had worked there for a while after I had moved to diplomatic security. I learned a fair bit about Goliath from him.

Archuleta didn't seem happy, but he didn't challenge Ethan. He simply turned to Emerson. "Find my merchandise. I want it back—now!"

Emerson met his gaze coolly. "You'll get it back when I find it. Harping at me won't make it happen any faster."

"Don't press me, mercenary." Archuleta growled at him. He turned and marched towards the door. The men who had divested us of our weapons dropped them on the floor and followed their leader out.

Ethan watched them go with disdain in his eyes. In that moment, I could see him as a high-ranking member of the Goliath gang. Doing what needed to be done, protecting the business. It all suddenly made sense. Goliath was a Novem gang. They could legally grow a number of drugs on Fairfax. Exporting them was illegal, but they didn't have to hide the rest of their operation. They could grow and manufacture drugs openly. Their product was considered one of the highest qualities out there. They were packaged with a brand marking them as Goliath, so you knew you were getting the real deal.

I used to buy Goliath's products. It had given me the best high. It smelled sweet when I smoked it, and the high was euphoric. But that hadn't been enough for me. I had quickly moved on to harder drugs. Hypodermic needles had become my best friends.

Mentally, I forced myself to push away the memories. I couldn't afford to go there right now. My side was still throbbing insistently, and it would be far too much temptation to remember what it was like to exist without pain. Drugs were not the answer, not for me, not anymore.

The thought of Ethan being part of the world that manufactured those drugs hurt. It hurt deeper than I thought it would. I felt tears pricking the back of my eyes and I turned my back on him, focusing instead on Emerson. I couldn't fall apart now. We certainly weren't in a safe place for me to break down. *Show no weakness.*

I forced a smile onto my face. "Emerson. Good to see you again."

There was almost a note of humor in his flat voice as he answered. "Carter. I could almost say the same of you."

Ethan moved behind me, drawing up next to me. I refused to look at him. I suddenly needed to get out of there. I needed to get away from *him*. "Shouldn't we be going?"

Emerson looked from me to Ethan and then back. He didn't comment, but questions were swimming in his eyes. Instead of voicing them, he turned and headed for the door. "I see we have much to discuss."

"Like how we're going to track down your client's missing merchandise?" I kept my voice light, continuing to play along.

He grunted. "Among other things."

Ethan and I grabbed our weapons and followed, saying nothing as we walked. Emerson's two men seemed more than a little curious about our sudden appearance, since Emerson obviously hadn't told them we'd be showing up, but they were smart enough not to ask questions. They looked familiar, and I was sure I had seen them the last time I was on Emerson's ship, but I couldn't remember their names. I wasn't about to trust them with my real identity, so any conversation Emerson and I were going to have would have to wait until we were alone.

Outside the building sat a large SUV hovercar with black paint and tinted windows. It was such a stereotypically criminal car I couldn't help but roll my eyes. I got in without commenting. I was just happy we had finally tracked Emerson down. Ethan climbed in beside me, and I shifted away from him. I turned to look out the window. Anything to not look at him. I couldn't. I just couldn't deal with him yet.

No one said a word as we drove. I didn't ask where we were going. I didn't want to know. All I needed to do was get Emerson alone and see if he would help me. There was a good chance he would help me get to Viridis just so he wouldn't have to deal with me, though it did seem as though I had kind of forced myself into helping him locate this shipment of Archuleta's. It was not something I had any desire to do, but when push came to shove, I would do it if I had to.

Before long, the car landed. I peered out the window at the large, suburban-looking house with snow piled up along the corners. I glanced around at the surrounding houses, surprised to realize we actually were somewhere in suburbia. I hadn't even noticed we'd left the city.

Everyone piled out of the car. I waited before opening my door and climbing out. Ethan appeared in front of me, offering me a hand. I hesitated, but finally took it and pulled myself from the vehicle. I released his hand and brushed past him.

Up by the front door, Emerson waited, not looking patient. I merely gave him a dry look in response to his annoyance. There were few people who could actually intimidate me. He opened the door and ushered us inside. Past the front entryway was a formal living room to the left and a dining room to the right. I could partially see into the kitchen beyond the dining room, but the sightline wasn't straight through. A den opened past the living room and then a set of grand steps led up to the second floor.

Part of me wanted to take a moment to look around, but we didn't have time for that. Emerson moved past me, tossing a jacket across a chair in the hallway. "Jack, keep watch of the door. Ezra, contact Reuben and see if he's made any progress. Tell him to keep at it, and I'll talk to him shortly."

Both men nodded and disappeared, leaving the three of us in the hallway. Emerson eyed me for a long time. I met his gaze, though I was too tired to fight him and in too much pain to care who won. He simply shook his head and went towards the stairs. "Let's go. Seems we need to have a conversation."

Boy, do we ever.

Trudging up the stairs was going to be a feat, but I had no choice. I focused on one step at a time and didn't rush. Ethan stayed patiently behind me, as though he was ready to catch me if I fell. The thought both pleased and annoyed me at the same time. I still refused to look at him.

Once we finally reached the top of the stairs, I stopped and leaned against the wall. Ethan frowned at me, concern in his eyes. He touched my elbow. "Are you okay?" He whispered.

I shoved his hand away. "I'm fine. Just go." I motioned him in front of me, wanting him to go as far away as possible. He blinked and frowned as though he was hurt. He moved down the hallway, but not before sending me another concerned look. I tried to clamp down on my emotions, to shove them away so they wouldn't affect my decisions, but it was hard. I couldn't believe Ethan was part of Goliath's gang. I couldn't wrap my head around it. How did the climatology thing fit? That couldn't have been a lie, not with all that scientific equipment. It wasn't like he set the story up for me from the first second we met. That didn't make sense.

Nothing made sense, so I tried to stop thinking. I followed the two down the hallway, and Emerson opened the door to an office. A desk sat opposite the door. It was made of dark mahogany and had an intricate pattern carved around the lip. Thick legs tapered down to clawed feet. It was an unusual design for a desk, but it worked surprisingly well. Dark brown curtains lined the windows and complimented the cream-colored walls. A low sofa sat against the wall to the left, and a bookcase filled with wood carvings stood to the right, close to the desk.

Emerson walked straight to the window behind the desk and peered through the curtains. Ethan stopped in front of the desk.

I only stepped a few feet inside the door before stopping. I wasn't sure I had it in me to go any farther.

"Nice place." I tried to insert sarcasm in my voice, but I didn't quite manage it. The place really *was* nice. He had better taste than I had given him credit for. Although, in my defense, his quarters on the *Hawk* were a lot more masculine and stereotypical of a mercenary captain than his personal home appeared to be.

"Thank you." Emerson sounded tired and less friendly than I was hoping. "What are you doing here?"

"Gee, nice to see you too, Emerson. No pleasantries here." I ran a hand distractedly through my hair.

Emerson sounded as annoyed as I felt. He turned around and gave me an exasperated look. "I thought last time we parted ways we both agreed if we saw each other again we'd kill each other."

I shrugged, but it hurt, and I stopped halfway through the motion. "What can I say? You're the only mercenary I know. No other options. Trust me; I don't want to be here anymore than you want me to be."

My instincts burned, and I went completely still. I must have felt movement behind me. I didn't hear anything, certainly didn't see anything, but I felt it. The softest rustle against the carpet under my feet. A hand moving against a gun. I could have imagined it, but my instincts were rarely wrong.

Emerson glanced discreetly behind me, but he displayed no fear or any other emotion. He didn't make a move for a weapon. *He knows whoever is behind me.*

I gave him a flat look, feeling even more irritated. "Call off your dog, Emerson."

Ethan turned around at that, eyes wary and alert. I didn't have to turn to know someone was behind me, but I looked anyway, needing to assess the threat. An imposing figure dressed in all black down to his boots stood with a gun aimed at the back of my head. Black hair was pulled back into a knot

and hard eyes watched me, seeing every movement. He was lean and tall, and he'd obviously been trained in stealth. My guess was military training. He was too good-looking for his own good, but there was a look in his eyes that made me want to run from him. This was a serious opponent, someone even scarier than Lyle Archuleta. He was the kind of man who could slit your throat before you even knew he was there, and he had probably done so dozens of times before.

Fear was not an emotion to display, not in this situation, and never in front of this man. Whoever he was, he was the most dangerous man I'd ever laid my eyes on. I had no tangible evidence of that, of course, but I'd been around enough criminals to recognize the truly dangerous ones. This guy looked like he could kill me easily and painfully if he wanted.

Ethan responded first, reaching for a weapon. The man lifted his gun an inch or so, still keeping it aimed at my head. "I wouldn't do that." His voice sounded smooth, like rich honey, a contrast to his deadly appearance.

My stomach rolled, and I squashed the panic rising in my throat. Ethan paused, his eyes flickering over to me, and his hand dropped away from his weapon. *Show no fear, Julia.* I looked from him to Emerson, raising my eyebrow. "Well?"

With a sigh, Emerson folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "Put it down, Steel."

Steel didn't obey. "She's a cop. Walks like a cop, talks like a cop, smells like a cop."

The fact that he didn't obey Emerson immediately was worrisome. Most of Emerson's men listened to him without question. Since this guy didn't drop his gun, it meant he wasn't under Emerson's control. But the fact that he could peg me as a cop in seconds was even more worrisome. It was terrifying. I swallowed, trying not to stare at the gun pointed at my face.

Emerson nodded. "I know she's IPF. Put it down."

Steel's left eyebrow lifted, but this time he did as Emerson said and lowered his gun. He didn't put it away, however. He

and Ethan eyed each other, but neither made any threatening movements. Steel finally looked at Emerson. “I take it your meeting didn’t go as planned?”

“No. Not even slightly.”

“Your job isn’t over, then.”

Emerson rolled his eyes. “It was supposed to be easy money. In and out. Get the shipment and leave. But no. Someone betrayed us. I’m not sure if it was one of Archuleta’s men or one of his suppliers. Either way, I lost three men.”

Steel nodded and stepped forward, offering his hand to Emerson, who promptly shook it like they were old buddies. That was good, at least. If they were friends, then Emerson could hopefully keep Steel on a leash.

“Well, I didn’t expect my visit to be uneventful, whether you were between missions or not.” Steel smiled, but it was still the look of a predator. It was terrifying. He looked at me again, and I had to force myself not to back up a step. He looked like he could read my mind and he half-smirked before turning away. “What’s with the IPF entourage?”

Needing to gain some sort of control in the situation again, I crossed my arms and put a bored expression on my face. No matter how afraid I was, I would die before I showed it. “And what’s with the assassin lap dog?”

Steel speared me with amber eyes. Emerson looked surprised and he shifted his gaze to mine. He lifted a questioning eyebrow at me, and I rolled my eyes. “Come on. It wasn’t a big leap. Walks like an assassin. Talks like an assassin. Dresses like an assassin. I’m not stupid.”

Emerson smirked and nudged Steel. “Losing your touch, man.”

Steel gave him an annoyed look. “Want to put that theory to the test?”

“Can we focus here, Emerson?” I couldn’t keep the exasperation out of my voice. “We need to talk. Without your assassin.”

“Retired.” Steel turned and pushed papers and knickknacks out of the way on Emerson’s desk before plopping down on top of it. Somehow, he managed to do it gracefully and with precise movements. It was disconcerting.

“Retired?” I hadn’t meant to ask that aloud, but it popped out anyway.

Emerson glared at Steel’s back as he pulled out the chair behind the desk and sat down. “He fancies himself retired. I personally think it’ll only last as long as his girlfriend sticks around.”

Steel’s look turned icy. I never saw his hand move, but he suddenly had a blade in front of Emerson. Not touching him, not super close, but obviously a threat. “Watch your words, Captain.”

The warning caused Emerson to sober up, and he gingerly pushed Steel’s arm away from him. “You never used to pull knives on me until she showed up.”

“I never thought you warranted it until you threatened her.”

“Hey, I never threatened her.”

Steel snorted. “Don’t even try to lie.”

Ethan finally spoke, taking a slight step forward. “Can we return to the subject at hand?”

Steel eyed him, as though trying to figure him out like he had so easily labeled me. He said nothing, though, and Emerson nodded, leaning back in his seat. “Why are you here, really? You’re lucky I vouched for you, or they’d be scraping your remains off the floor of that factory right about now.”

His words chilled me, but I pushed them aside. I took a slight step forward, until I was basically in the middle of the room. I couldn’t back down or show fear, not even to Emerson. My side positively ached, and all I wanted to do was to lie down and sleep. I knew my face had to be pale again, but there was nothing I could do to hide it. If this conversation took much longer, there would be no hiding how badly I was holding up.

“It just so happened I found myself on Esmuna and thought I’d look up an old friend.” The words were flippant, and we all knew they were lies.

Emerson at least looked amused. “Really? An IPF agent on Esmuna? I don’t think so.” He stood up and crossed in front of the desk until he was standing directly in front of me. He was trying to intimidate me, but it failed. “Why shouldn’t I let Steel kill you?”

“You already told Archuleta I’d help you retrieve his merchandise.”

He shrugged. “I could simply tell him you were killed in the process. He already doesn’t think you can hack it.”

I jutted my chin out. “Listen carefully, Emerson. I could have given your whereabouts to the other IPF agents I know and let them arrest your sorry backside long before now. But I haven’t. Obviously, because you’re still a free man. I didn’t bring a bunch of agents here to arrest you on your multiple warrants. I think we’ve moved past the wanting-to-kill-each-other bit.”

Steel interjected, sounding more than a little curious. “Is she the one that had you all messed up, Emerson?”

Confusion, and then irritation, passed through his eyes. “No, Steel, she’s not.” He turned to give Steel a disgusted look. “I know better than to fall for an IPF agent.”

Steel had an amused look in his eyes, though it didn’t spread to the rest of his face. I curled my lip at him. “You think I’d fall for a mercenary captain? No.”

Emerson made an aggravated noise and walked away from me, as though putting space between us could distance himself from Steel’s ridiculous question. “What are you doing here, Carter? I’m tired of people not cooperating with me.”

Even knowing the truth was the only thing that would suffice, I still hesitated to tell him. It wasn’t that I didn’t think I could trust Emerson; it was Steel’s presence that had me hesitating. He was an unknown. I didn’t want to spill my story

to a stranger, even if he already knew my most dangerous secret.

“You can trust him to keep his mouth shut.” Emerson must have seen through my hesitation. “He’s my friend and I trust him.”

Although that trust didn’t necessarily transfer to me, I was without any other options. So, I settled on an abbreviated version of the truth. “Work took me to Viridis. I got my hands on a piece of evidence that would break my case wide open, but before I could even get a look at it, my partner and I were attacked, I was kidnapped, and the evidence was stolen.”

Emerson sighed. “What is it with everyone I know getting kidnapped?”

Ignoring his rhetorical question, I continued. “They took me to Cadium to...interrogate me. Eventually they decided to kill me. I was rescued by...” I gestured to Ethan and hesitated, not sure what to label him. What he told me the first time I asked him would have to suffice. “By a meteorologist. They’ve pursued us ever since. We finally got off Cadium, but the ship was damaged in the process. Esmuna was as far as we could go. There’s no way for me to get off this bloody planet without someone finding out I’m IPF and killing me.” I shrugged. “You’re the only criminal I know. Well, the only criminal I would ask for help.”

“How did you find me?”

“Promised I wouldn’t tell. Let’s just say in the time we spent together I learned a lot about you and your habits.”

Steel was looking at Ethan now, rather intently. “There’s no way you’re a meteorologist.”

Ethan raised his eyebrows at him, seemingly offended by his words. “Racist much? And I’m not exactly a meteorologist. I’m a climatologist. I have a degree in meteorology.”

“It has nothing to do with race.”

“Then what? Because anyone can be a climatologist. There’s nothing special about me that would cause someone to think that I couldn’t possibly be a climatologist at all.”

Steel's eyes narrowed. "You've got the look, the one that says you've killed before. I know it well. It's instinct."

"So, your *instincts* are racist then."

Emerson rolled his eyes. "Drop the act, Novem. We all know you're a drug slinger. No need to act all high and mighty."

Ethan's jaw tightened, but he said nothing. Steel at least had the decency not to comment. Emerson shook his head and looked back at me. "What do you expect me to do? Fly you to Viridis?"

I hesitated but shrugged. "At least off-planet. How else am I going to get off Esmuna?"

"Not my problem."

I sighed. *I guess I didn't expect him to immediately agree to help me, but he's determined to make me work for it.* "Have a heart, Emerson. I wouldn't have asked if I had any other possibility, even a remote one."

"No. The answer is no."

"You owe me."

"I don't owe you anything." He turned away from me. "We worked together and then went our separate ways. As far as I'm concerned, we're square."

"I'll help you find Archuleta's shipment."

That made him pause. I didn't think that would be the thing to hook him, but his situation must have frustrated him enough to be willing to accept my help. He watched me with narrowed eyes for several seconds while the gears turned in his mind. "If you help me reacquire his shipment, then I'll get you off-planet safely. You have my word. And you'll owe me one."

Well, that's a relief. I couldn't help but let some of my muscles relax. I nodded. "Deal."

He still didn't seem happy about it, but he nodded back. "I'm going to regret this, aren't I?"

Steel stood up from the desk and my muscles tensed again. He walked over to me, looked me up and down, and then walked around me in a slow circle. I swallowed while he was behind me so he couldn't see it and forced myself to project confidence. "Stop sniffing me out. It's creepy."

He ignored me, instead glancing at Emerson. "So, she's an ally? That's what we've decided?"

Emerson looked between all three of us before answering. "Yeah, something like that. She's a friend of a friend. Leave her be."

Steel didn't seem upset by the pronouncement, which surprised me. My impression was that he was waiting for an excuse to kill me, and I expected him to be upset when Emerson took that option away. Instead, some of his predatory bravado disappeared. I realized then that he was putting on just as much of a front as I was, and I felt foolish for not realizing it sooner.

"Then you need to sit down." Steel reached for a chair and pulled it over in front of me. "You're wounded."

I sighed. I thought I'd been hiding it well enough. I looked from the chair to Steel and grudgingly sat down. "How could you tell?"

"You're pale, and it's not from fear. When you walk, you move sluggishly and favor your side. It wasn't hard to guess."

Ethan's concerned look returned. "You need to rest."

Emerson walked over, his eyes sweeping over me. "What happened?"

I loathed admitting the weakness, but I didn't have enough energy left in me to keep up pretenses. "Knife wound. Bad enough I needed stitches. That was after all the torture and running and fighting."

Steel reached for my shirt. I flinched away from his hand, but he ignored my reaction and lifted the hem. He and Emerson peered at the wound. After a few seconds, Emerson rubbed his hand against the scar on his jaw. "Steel, do you have any of your girl's special blend with you?"

Steel nodded and produced a needle virtually out of nowhere. *His hands are fast.* The sight of a needle caused me to tense up all over. Ethan stepped forward, suspicion in his voice. “What is that?”

Steel’s voice was cool when he answered. “Nanobots in a special solution designed for rapid cell growth.”

Emerson laughed. “She’s rubbing off on you, isn’t she? You sound like her.”

“Nanobots?” That was the word I latched onto.

Steel nodded. “They’ll fix you up quickly, like you were never hurt.”

“Is there anything else in it?” Ethan asked. “Pain medicine, anything?”

“No. Just nanobots.”

“Inject me.” I didn’t hesitate. I almost didn’t care if there was pain medicine in it or not at this point. I was so tired of being in pain.

Steel administered the nanobots, and I leaned back in the chair, trying to relax and let the little bots work. “Your stitches need to come out.” Steel stood up and moved away. “You won’t need them in a few minutes.”

“They’re that fast?” I couldn’t believe it. I knew nanobots were cutting edge, but that seemed a little far-fetched.

“Yes. The woman who made the solution is the best at what she does. Those are the best nanobots out there.”

Pieces started falling into place. “She’s your girlfriend, isn’t she?”

His jaw tightened slightly. “She stays out of this. Off limits. Clear?”

I lifted my hands in surrender. “I’m not a threat to her. I promise.”

Emerson rolled his eyes. “Steel gets a little overprotective when it comes to Cass. Apparently, it’s true love or something.”

“Shut up, Emerson.” Steel sounded irritated.

I ignored their bickering. “Can someone take my stitches out?”

Steel and Emerson exchanged looks. Steel sighed and started clearing off the desk. I shifted in my seat, suddenly realizing I’d just asked an assassin to come near me with a sharp object. I swallowed and looked at Emerson. “You can do it.”

He gave me a flat look. “Steel has far more experience with this kind of thing than I do.”

Once the desk was sufficiently cleared, Steel walked over and lifted me into his arms. I sputtered out a few protests, but he ignored them. He was far gentler than I thought he’d be. He didn’t seem like a gentle sort of guy at first brush. Perhaps there were more layers to him than what I could see.

He set me down on the desk and looked at Emerson. “Scissors?”

I swallowed, feeling panic rising. “Listen, maybe this wasn’t a good idea. The stitches will be fine. They’ll come out on their own.”

Both men ignored me, and Emerson dug around in the drawers of his desk until he produced a slim pair of scissors. Steel frowned at them. “We should sterilize them.”

“I’ll wash them in alcohol.” Emerson left the room, presumably to locate some alcohol.

Deciding I needed to take more proactive measures, I sat up, surprised when my side didn’t react as violently as I expected. I still winced though. Steel pushed on my shoulder, forcing me to lie back down. “Stay still.”

There was no hiding the fear now. “I’m fine. Really. They’re just stitches.”

Steel shook his head. “They need to be removed. If the skin grows over the stitches, they’ll hurt a lot more coming out.”

I started to say something else, but Ethan took my hand, moving closer to me. His presence calmed me almost

immediately, and my reaction only irked me further. I clamped down on my lips and stared up at the ceiling.

“They’re going to help, Julia.” Ethan’s voice was soothing, and his thumb rubbed circles on the back of my hand.

Emerson reappeared and passed off the scissors to Steel. He lifted my shirt and bent over the wound. I went completely still, knowing that moving now would only cause more pain. *This is almost as bad as Andy stitching me up in the first place, except now I’m less desperate.* I held Ethan’s hand tightly, drawing strength from him, and counted to ten in my head. Steel’s fingers were warm and quick whereas the scissors were cold and terrifying. I hated having someone so dangerous near me while I was in such a vulnerable position.

When the scissors clipped the stitches, I closed my eyes and tried to focus on breathing. I felt the thread move through my skin and I braced myself against the awful sensation. There were only three stitches. I kept telling myself that. Only three. *It will be over soon.*

“You’re doing great, Julia, just hold on for a few more seconds.” Ethan’s voice filled my ears and helped settle my nerves a little.

Finally, Steel leaned back. “Done.”

My eyes flew open, and I put my hand over the wound. I sat up, surprised again when it didn’t hurt nearly as much. I swallowed, trying to get myself back under control. Steel didn’t look at me or say anything as he took the thread and tossed it in the trash before handing Emerson back the scissors.

Ethan peered at the spot for a moment before nodding. “It looks a lot better.”

Steel spoke. “Those stitches were good. Who sewed you up?”

My fingers were trembling, and I grabbed the edge of the desk to hide it. “An android.” I didn’t want to remember how much it had hurt when Andy stitched me up.

Steel almost seemed impressed. “Before long, you’ll feel brand new. You’ll probably still have a little scar, but it shouldn’t be bad. The nanobots are little miracle workers.”

I’d had enough of thinking about me and my problems. I got off the desk, walked back to a chair, and dropped into it. I speared Emerson with my eyes. “If I’m going to help you track down this shipment, I’m going to need details.”

Emerson rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “Well, you already know who Lyle Archuleta is, so it’s not going to come as a surprise that I was escorting a shipment of guns from Desoto to Esmuna. It was supposed to be a simple job: pick up the merchandise and bring it to a warehouse. Archuleta’s men were supposed to meet us there later. As soon as we landed at the warehouse, we were ambushed. We were unloading the guns and they appeared out of nowhere. I lost three men and the shipment. It had to have been an inside job.”

I frowned. “Why were you running guns for Archuleta? Doesn’t he have people he employs solely for that purpose?”

“He does. Word on the street is he’s looking to expand. He contacted me and offered good money.”

I chewed on my lower lip. “Who’s the supplier?”

Emerson hesitated. “I’m not supposed to know, but I did a little digging. The supplier is someone who works for Whitney Tech. That’s how they have access to the guns. Whitney Tech has ramped up their manufacturing exponentially in the past year or so. Someone is sneaking extra out the side door. From what I gathered, Archuleta has worked with these people before, but they aren’t his regular supplier. I was supposed to fly to the designated coordinates and pick up the crates.”

“Did the supplier have any idea where you were taking the goods?”

“No. None of my men said a word. Pickup went smoothly.”

“But Archuleta’s men knew all about it? Where the pickup would be and where you’d bring the guns?”

Emerson shrugged. “No. The plan was to call them once we had the guns offloaded at the warehouse so they could come

pick them up. We chose the warehouse ourselves. Archuleta was trying to keep information to a minimum on all sides. I don't know who in his organization would even know about the run."

Ethan frowned. "You don't know much about his organization, do you? Aren't you considered part of his people since you're working for him?"

Emerson scowled at him. "I belong to no one. I take jobs that pay and then I leave. It's called independent contracting."

I interrupted. "Was this a one-time deal with you and Archuleta or are you contracted for other jobs too?"

"This was supposed to be a trial run for the both of us. If we liked working with each other then we would talk about future jobs. As it stands, we haven't done a good job of impressing him."

Some things weren't adding up, but I couldn't pinpoint the problem. "Why you? Why did Archuleta contact you?"

"Recommendation. I've worked with some of his contacts before. The initial meeting was arranged through a third party. The job seemed lucrative, so I took it."

Steel folded his arms. "And none of your men stick out as a possible traitor? No leaks anywhere else? Any new people?"

"I haven't recruited since you were last on my ship. Besides, only a handful of us even knew what we were doing or where we were going. I haven't had a problem with any of them. I think it's more likely that someone followed us."

"You should still vet them all. Anyone who might have known." Steel sighed. "There are a lot of possibilities."

Emerson's eyes landed on me. "You should interview my men."

"What?" I tried to push my surprise away. "Why? Conducting interrogations would be like waving a flag saying 'I'm IPF!'"

"You have that deception detection stuff." He waved his hand at me dismissively. "I saw you work last time, and you

were scary accurate. We'd have never found the mercenary that fast without you."

The praise was nice, but I still didn't want to do it. "I'm sure my expertise can be put to use elsewhere."

"If you're worried about coming off like an IPF agent, then Steel can do the questioning and you can observe. All the men are scared of him."

Steel gave him a hard look. "Not scared enough."

"You slit the throat of one of their own in front of their eyes, not to mention what happened to the other one. They had to clean up the bodies. I think they have a healthy fear of you."

The talk of murder was unsettling. "I don't need his help. And I don't think he needs mine. I'd rather chase down leads of another sort."

Emerson's look turned hard. "You will do as I ask. You will talk to my men and find out if any of them are involved in this. If you want my help, then you need to do what I say. Steel will ask the questions and you'll sit there and watch. Any suspicions will be reported to me. Clear?"

My rebellious streak tried to push to the surface. It took me a minute to gain control of it and shove it down. Regardless of my feelings, I needed to rely on Emerson to survive. He was calling the shots, and I had to do what he said, even if I didn't like it. I glared at him, but I managed to nod. He nodded back before looking at Steel. "If you want to help, then this is what you can do. Retired or not, you like a good challenge. And this doesn't involve killing anyone. Think you can manage?"

Steel seemed amused by the sarcasm in his voice. "So much for this being a vacation."

Emerson snorted. "I thought Cass kicked you out?"

He scowled. "No. She's working on an important project. It's taking up a lot of her time. I'm a distraction."

"So, she told you to leave?"

"No. I suggested maybe I could check in on you. For some inexplicable reason, she seems to find you tolerable and

thought it would be a great time to visit old friends. So here I am.”

Emerson looked doubtful. “Are you sure you didn’t fight?”

“We didn’t fight. Let it go, Emerson.”

He lifted his hands in surrender. “Fine. I just wondered with you talking about starting up this new security thing if you were back on your own. I’m sure we’ll talk about it later. You won’t hear me complain about the visit or the help.”

Steel glared at him. “You’re making me regret offering you a job if you ever quit being a mercenary.”

Emerson shrugged. “I may take you up on it one day.”

Ethan spoke again, interrupting them. “And what is it I’m supposed to do?”

“You can call up some Goliath contacts and see if they’ve had any problems with Archuleta or any of his men, or if there’s been any word going around about what happened. Think you can manage that?”

The hard look came back to Ethan’s face. He said nothing.

“Good.” Emerson looked back at me. “I think you need to get some rest. Both of you.”

“I’m feeling much better.” I tried not to scowl.

“I’m sure you are, but you still need to rest. I need to make some calls, talk to Archuleta, and get in touch with Reuben. He’s with the ship. We’ll meet up with him tomorrow and you can start the interrogations. There’s nothing else you can do until then.”

Arguing against him was fruitless, so I sighed. Sleep did sound amazing. Even though I was feeling a lot better, I was still tired. Mentally, if nothing else. A break sounded nice.

“Fine.”

“The next door to the right is the bathroom, and there are two bedrooms on the left from here. You two can have your pick.”

I glanced down at my clothes. Or rather, Ethan's clothes. At least they had survived the day intact. "Do you have any spare clothes? Maybe something more my size?"

He eyed my baggy clothes and nodded. "In the master bedroom's closet there should be some of her stuff. You can give them back to her next time you see her."

Kit. I rolled my eyes. "You need to get over her."

"Shut up." He scowled at me. "I'm over her. Do you want my hospitality or not?"

I lifted my hands and stood up. "I'm going, I'm going." Without waiting for any further comments, I headed for the door. I moved carefully, but it was far easier to walk now than it had been just minutes earlier. I noted the bathroom and the two bedrooms and then headed straight towards another door that stood partially open. I assumed it was the master bedroom, and I wasn't disappointed.

Emerson's room was not necessarily what I had expected. All his personal space on the *Hawk* had been marked by decidedly masculine colors and furniture pieces. Dark wood and red walls made up his office. Most of his furniture was oversized and imposing, meant to make others feel intimidated or awed.

His house, on the other hand, was vastly different. I had already noted what good tastes he had in art and décor in the rest of the house, and his bedroom was no different. Modernized black pieces made up the furniture. The room itself was large, but the furniture was not oversized and had sleek curves, making the room flow. Books filled several shelves along the wall, and an oil painting hung above the bed, which was the largest thing in the room.

My first reaction was to stare, and my second was to snoop. It was the cop instinct in me, but I refrained, deciding I should be a polite guest since Emerson was doing me a favor. Instead of perusing the books or snooping through the small desk in the corner, I went straight for the closet. I slid the door open, and my eyes roved through the large variety of styles and colors he had. I pressed my lips together to keep from smiling.

I would never have guessed Emerson was this metro outside of his captain persona.

I relaxed a little, feeling better about my situation. I believed that Emerson would keep his word and help me. Steel, on the other hand, was a wild card that kept me on edge. He could kill me and not even blink. I was nothing to him. I just couldn't shake the feeling that he was the most dangerous man I had ever met. I had dealt with a lot of criminals in my time with IPF, and none of them had ever instilled this level of fear in me. Except my kidnapper.

Struggling not to think about how close I was to being killed in the near future, I pawed through Emerson's clothes until I found some feminine things. My choices were limited. I frowned at two leather ensembles and sighed. Definitely Kit's clothes. I would never feel comfortable wearing something like that. I finally found a pair of black, cotton pants and settled on an emerald blouse with long sleeves and a scooped back. I wasn't going to complain, because at least these clothes would stay up on me.

I took the clothes and slid the closet door shut. As I turned to head back into the hallway, a frame on the nightstand caught my eye. It was a picture of Emerson, a woman, and a young girl, maybe three years old. I slowed down and studied it. I wondered if they were related to Emerson, or if it was an old love. It was hard to tell from the context of the picture. As far as I knew, he hadn't dated anyone since Kit, but it could also have been a sibling or a cousin or something. I didn't know hardly anything about his personal life or family.

Ultimately, it wasn't my business, and I wasn't going to pry into his personal life. I went to the bathroom, washed up, and decided I would sleep in the clothes I was wearing and change into Kit's outfit the next day. I wasn't sure what time it was, but I honestly didn't care. I needed sleep, and if Emerson needed me before the morning, he'd wake me up.

Muffling a yawn, I stepped back into the hallway and headed for the bedroom on the right, the one furthest from the office. I wanted to put as much distance between Steel and me as possible. I could still hear the murmur of voices coming

from the office, though I refused to look in that direction. I wasn't ready to talk to Ethan. I wasn't ready to accept whatever answer he would give. I couldn't process anything else tonight. My brain was fried.

The bedroom door stood open, and I peeked cautiously inside before entering. The room was sparsely furnished, but it was functional. I dropped my newly acquired clothes onto the only chair in the room and toed my new shoes off.

There was a soft rap on the door. "Julia?"

My back was to the door, but I recognized Ethan's voice. I braced myself and turned around. "Yes?"

He looked hesitant, with a deep crease between his eyebrows. He didn't enter the room, choosing instead to stand in the doorway with an uncomfortable look on his face. "Did you find clothes?"

"Yes." I gestured to the chair. "Not the best, but they'll do."

"Good." He hesitated. "Look, I know I owe you an explanation—"

"Not right now, Ethan." My voice sounded more tired than I expected. I rubbed my forehead and refused to look him in the eye. "I'm not up for a chat. I'm just not. Besides, there's not much else to say. You're a drug dealer. I was a drug addict. Pretty sure that covers it."

Ethan blinked at my bluntness, but I didn't apologize. I already knew he'd seen the scars on my arms, and I wasn't going to be embarrassed by them at this point. I was a strong person, and I would not be made weak because of my past.

"There's more to it than that."

"Then we can talk about it some other time. I'm tired." I walked over to the door. "Goodnight, Ethan." Without waiting for an answer, I shut the door and threw the lock. I leaned my back against it. I focused on breathing and tried to alleviate some of the stress I was feeling.

After a few moments, I heard Ethan move away, and then another door shut. I relaxed marginally and crawled into bed.

In the morning, I would listen to whatever he wanted to tell me. I owed him that much. Even though he was part of Goliath's gang, he had still saved my life on multiple occasions. Not every criminal was evil, and I was willing to believe Ethan wasn't either. But the fact that he was a drug dealer was hard for me to accept after everything drugs had done to me.

Why did it have to be Goliath?

Sighing, I pushed all thoughts from my mind and tried to sleep. My problems could wait until the morning. I was too tired to deal with anything else tonight. It had been a long few days, and I was pretty sure there would be a few more long days before I would be home safe again.

CHAPTER TEN

Ethan

I sat cross-legged on the floor and tried to relax. I hadn't slept much, so it was still early. My spirit was restless, and it robbed me of peace. I knew it was because Julia was upset with me. She had every right to be angry with me; I had kept something important from her. Telling her about my involvement with the Goliath gang would have ruined her trust. That's why I had hidden the necklace from her. I was hoping that she understood I was still on her side and wanted to help her. I hoped I hadn't lost her trust permanently.

She had looked so broken when I tried to talk to her about it. I had wanted to tell her everything right away, but the slumped set of her shoulders had stopped me. She didn't want to hear my excuses. I needed to be patient.

I tried to meditate, but I was troubled. Meditating was usually easy for me, but not this time. I sat there for a long time, trying to settle my spirit, but I couldn't. I opened my eyes and stared at my shirt and shoes on the bed, debating if it was time to get up and get dressed. I was anticipating another stressful and difficult day, and if I couldn't meditate then there were other things I should be doing. I should call Sosa and ask about Archuleta's guns.

Whatever I needed to do to help Julia get back to Viridis safely, I would do it. Our lives were connected. It was a truth I felt in my gut. I knew she didn't necessarily believe in the universe or fate like I did, but I knew we crossed paths for a reason.

I was still contemplating what that reason might have been when there was a knock at the door. My eyes opened, and my heart thumped in my chest, but I didn't move from my position on the floor. "Come in."

The door opened, and Julia's face appeared. Something in me settled when I saw her, as though her presence was calming to me. *If she's here, then she probably wants to talk.* If

she wanted to hear what I had to say, then there might be a way to mend the trust I had broken.

She took a small step into the room. Her eyes dropped from my face to my bare chest, and she cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

I blinked, taking in the vibrant green shirt she was wearing. She looked good in it. “You are not interrupting. I’m not finding it easy to meditate today.” I carefully stood up. I remained where I was, hoping I wouldn’t scare her away. I felt like that was a real possibility, like one wrong move would send her back out the door, and she’d never come back.

Julia nodded. Her fingers laced and twisted, as though she was nervous or searching for words. “It’s been a crazy couple of days.”

“True. How are you feeling?”

“Like new again. I must admit, those nanobots were amazing.”

“That’s good news. I’m glad you’re feeling better.” I pressed my lips together, not sure what to say now that I had the opportunity. So, I said what I thought was most important. “I’m sorry.” Her eyes jumped to mine but slid away after a moment. She didn’t speak, and she didn’t have to. “I lied to you. At the very least, I kept something important from you. Once I learned you were IPF, I knew if you found out about my past you would never trust me. So, I hid it from you.”

“You were right about that. I never would have trusted you. I would have abandoned you at the first opportunity and tried to strike out on my own.” She sighed. “You’ve been nothing but kind and helpful to me, and you’ve put your life in danger for me. I owe it to you to at least listen to whatever you have to say. Tell me the truth. About everything.”

I took a deep breath and prepared to plunge into the story of my past. “Everything I’ve told you has been true. I grew up on Fairfax in the Novem tribe. My grandfather raised me, but he was a cruel, angry man. The boys I grew up with became like brothers to me. We did everything together. Once we became

teenagers, it was easy for us to join the Goliath gang. I grew up only a few miles from their fields. We were young, and there weren't a lot of other options out there for us. It's not an excuse, but I didn't see another path at the time. Joining the gang was just what you did unless you wanted to work for the farmers for a pittance.

“Five of us grew up together and joined the gang together. We were the best of friends, but Sosa and I were *rinwayo*—brothers not of the same blood. Nothing will separate our bond. I can't even describe with words how important he is to me. As the years progressed, we moved up the ranks. It didn't take Sosa long before he became Goliath, the head of the gang. He always had a knack for leadership, and he kept me by his side as his second.”

I remembered those days and everything that happened, both good and bad. I turned away from her, ashamed of my actions. “I was a punk kid, but I liked the life. I didn't care about selling drugs, and I certainly didn't care that half of what we did was illegal. We rarely had troubles with the cops, and Sosa kept most of them well compensated for their inaction. We faced little opposition on Fairfax. Life was grand.”

When I fell silent, Julia spoke. “What changed?”

I smiled fondly, though the memory was bittersweet. “There was this old woman, not even Novem, who came into our territory. She was ancient, small, and wrinkled, and she walked with a cane. Our territory was dangerous for outsiders, so I asked her why she was there. She said she was looking for her grandson. He was a drug addict, who spent all his free time with the Novem. I offered to help her find him. And we did. She took him home, and a week later he was back, and so was she. Every time he came back, she would come and look for him.

“Every time she came, I'd help her find him. He'd say he wouldn't come back and that he was finished with drugs, but he always found his way to us again. And she always came back for him. I asked her why she kept coming for him, even though it was obvious he would never stop doing drugs, and she said anyone could change.”

I touched my left palm and gazed down at the key I had gotten tattooed there. It felt like ages ago now. “She told me each person holds the keys to their own fate. We each have the power to choose. We spent a fair bit of time together. She asked me why I was in the gang and what I would do if I could do anything in the whole universe. I told her about how I loved nature and the weather, and she told me I could go to a university and study meteorology. No one I knew went to university. It just wasn’t done. The Novem has a long history of being shunned from higher education opportunities. I wasn’t sure I believed it was possible, and I doubted I could afford it even if it was. I didn’t understand the concept of saving money back then. I was an idiot kid who was flush with cash compared to everyone else. I grew up poor so you can believe I spent every dollar I earned. All the money I took in went right back out the door.”

Julia took another step into the room and leaned her hip against the bed. “She convinced you to go to university?”

“Yes. It took a while, though. I had to deal with some hard stuff before I realized I didn’t want to live my whole life in a gang. And then she stopped coming, for several weeks. She turned up again one day and I asked her if she wanted me to help her find her grandson, but she said no. She said he was in a treatment center and was making remarkable progress. She had stopped by to thank me for helping her find him all those times and she hoped never to have to come back.”

That old woman was one of the best people I’d ever known. “That’s when I realized she was right; we control our own destinies. I went to Goliath and asked to leave. No one ever left the gang unless they died. That was just the way it was. But I told him my plans—that I wanted to go to university and study meteorology—and he agreed to release me.” I’d never forget what Sosa had done for me. It meant everything to me that he loved me enough to allow me to do what I loved.

My hand went to the necklace I never took off. “I’m an honorary member. Third-in-command is merely a place of honor, not power. He always said the door was open if I wanted to go back, but I didn’t. I don’t. I went to university

and busted my butt working and taking classes, and I graduated and was picked up by Centric Enterprises almost immediately to be a climatologist. And I love my job now. I got out of Goliath and out of the drug business.”

Julia stared at me, and I could see her mind working behind her eyes. “Those Novem, who brought us here, to Concordia, they also work for Goliath, don’t they?”

“Yes.” I wouldn’t lie to her, even if it was a hard thing to admit. “I know the distribution lines quite well, and when I saw those two, I had a suspicion that they worked for Goliath. I confirmed it when I talked to them.”

She rubbed her forehead with one hand. “They use the spices as a cover.”

“The smell makes it nearly impossible to detect the drugs. Some places still use canine units to sniff out illicit drugs, and the spices make it nearly impossible for them to detect anything.”

I had been nervous about bringing Julia onto a shuttle with them. If we hadn’t been desperate, I wouldn’t have even considered bringing her around them. She was a cop and could easily destroy Goliath’s operation. I didn’t want to cause problems for Sosa. That was the last thing I wanted. Ignorance had been my only saving grace. I had seen she was suspicious, but she hadn’t had any context as to what the issue really was. But both our lives were in danger, and I had taken a risk that had, thankfully, paid off.

“So that shuttle was packed full of drugs.”

It was a statement, not a question, but I confirmed it anyway. “Yes.”

She looked agitated as she turned to the side, facing away from me. “You do understand that it’s my job to arrest criminals, right? I am duty-bound to report crimes and not aid criminals. I could be fired, arrested, and imprisoned for that.”

She was right, and I knew it. “I know. And I’m sorry to put you in that situation. I didn’t have a better idea.”

Looking pensive, she was quiet for a full minute before she spoke again. “But,” she hesitated, “it’s a little hypocritical for me to say that while I’m currently working with a wanted mercenary captain to find a missing batch of illegal arms.” She sighed and her shoulders sagged. “I’m in quite the mess, aren’t I?”

I wanted to comfort her, but I wasn’t sure how. “You are in an impossible situation. No one will blame you for doing whatever you must to survive. I’m sorry for keeping all of this from you. I knew if you were aware of my past, you’d never let me help you, and I don’t want you to die, Julia.” My heart ached at the thought. “I know this must hurt a lot more, considering your past, and I’m truly, deeply, sorry for that.”

Julia was quiet for a long time. Then, slowly, the fight drained out of her. “I can’t hold it against you. It’s your past, and it isn’t perfect, just like my past.” She paused, pressing her lips together. “My mom was a drug addict. After my dad died, she turned to drugs to cope. I was young, but not so young that I don’t remember what it was like before. She went through boyfriends often, most of whom beat her. She never let them touch us, but she was fair game. I don’t think she cared as long as she got her fix. I hated it. My sister and I were eventually taken into foster care, and most of those homes were just as bad, if not worse.”

She licked her lips. “One foster father beat me severely. I went to Dennis, that cop I told you about, and he helped get us out. He arrested my foster father and brought me down to the station to give a statement. I was talking with Mariah, my social worker, when Mom showed up. She’d found out about the attack somehow. She took one look at my face and went ballistic. She was high, of course, and she tried to kill my foster father while he was in custody.”

Julia paused, taking a deep breath. I waited, knowing she had more to say. “She couldn’t get near him in a building full of police, but she tried. She hugged me and cried and promised me she would protect me. My foster father was released on bail a few days later, and in a week, he was dead. No one

could prove it was her. Her boyfriend gave her an alibi, and there were no witnesses. I never asked her if she did it.”

She took another deep breath. “I focused all my energy on making sure Alexi was fed and safe and happy. There’s a nine-year age gap between us. Keeping her safe was the most important thing. I would protect her from the abusive foster families, and I made sure she didn’t know how bad things really were. But then we were placed with a good family.

“You’d think things would’ve been better then, but they weren’t. I didn’t know what to do with myself. I didn’t have to keep Alexi safe. I *knew* she was safe; I knew this family cared for her and me both. All the stress caused by my mom had nowhere to go, nothing to hide behind. When this kid I knew asked if I wanted a smoke, I said yes. I mean, if it was so great that Mom would choose it over her family, then I thought the high must have been the best feeling on earth. Why else would she destroy her family?”

My heart hurt for her. She sounded so sad. I could only imagine the things she’d gone through as a child. “You got hooked.”

“Yes,” she nodded. “It felt good, at first, but it wasn’t enough. I started trying other stuff. I was good at hiding it, for well over a year, but, of course, my behavior was eventually noticed by my foster family. They tried to get through to me, but I ignored them. They called Dennis. He found me at a party and busted me. He and Mariah came down hard on me and knocked some sense into me. I went into a program and got clean. But I’m still an addict. I’m just an addict on hiatus.”

I swallowed and moved to stand in front of her. “Breaking an addiction is one of the hardest things you can do, and you did it.”

She refused to look at me. “I didn’t break it. One day I will relapse. It’s inevitable. Once an addict, always an addict.”

Her words sounded perfunctory, as if she had convinced herself a long time ago that they were true. She’d already let them defeat her. I frowned at her. “You don’t know that. You’ve gone how long sober? You never have to go back.”

“The only reason I stopped was for Alexi. Dennis told me if I was on drugs, I could never get custody of her once I was old enough. I couldn’t handle that. That’s what keeps me clean. I love Alexi so much, and she needs me. One day she won’t need me anymore.”

“That’s not true.” I put my hand on her shoulder and gave it a light squeeze. “She will always need you. As long as you have a reason to keep clean then you’ll never go back. You are in control of your life, not an addiction. You need to believe you’re strong enough to beat it.”

She sniffed. She didn’t seem convinced. “I don’t know. I usually try not to think about it. Mom has been addicted for so long I know she’ll never come back from it. Why should I be any different?”

“You aren’t her. You’re your own person. This may have defeated her, but it doesn’t have to defeat you. I believe you can do it. I believe you can do anything you put your mind to. You are a strong person, Julia. I’ve met few people stronger than you. Look at what you’ve been through, and here you stand, still fighting for what’s right. Why did you decide to be a cop?”

Her eyes closed. “Dennis. If it wasn’t for him, I know Alexi and I would be dead. He made such a difference in my life. I wanted to be able to make that same difference in someone else’s life. I wanted to do something to make the world a little bit better.”

I touched her chin, tilting her face up until her eyes met mine. “And that means you have a beautiful soul and a kind spirit. You are strong, and you’ve already helped people, and you will continue to do so. You won’t ever touch another drug. I believe that, unequivocally.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she blinked. “Why would you believe in me like that?” she whispered.

Words failed to come together to answer her. I smiled and shrugged. “Because I can see who you are. I can see the core of a person. It’s something I’ve always been able to do. I have faith in you.”

A tear leaked down her cheek, and I swiped it away with my thumb. I clasped her hand in mine, hoping to make her understand how serious I was. “Don’t let anyone ever make you feel weak. Your strength runs too deep.”

Neither of us spoke. We stared at each other, as though both waiting for the other to do or say something. I didn’t release her hand, and she didn’t take it back. After a few seconds, her eyes fell to my chest. They moved back and forth, studying my tattoos. Then, slowly, she lifted her free hand and traced one with her finger. It was a combination of symbols for wind, earth, and fire, and it was one of my favorite tattoos.

“What does this mean?” Her voice was quiet as she spoke.

“Balance. Wind and earth and fire. Each one has its place but when they combine, they enhance each other’s strengths. It is what it means to be Novem.”

Her eyes lifted back to mine. She inched forward and lifted her head. I knew she was going to kiss me. I didn’t stop her or try to encourage her. I waited, knowing instinctively that this was a step she needed to take herself.

And then her lips touched mine, light as a feather, and she lingered in my space. I touched her face and smoothed her hair back. I didn’t try to kiss her again, but I didn’t back away from her, either. I didn’t want to put space between us, but I also knew she needed to decide what she wanted, without my influence.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and stepped back from me. She tried to pull her hand free, but I held onto it. “Don’t let go yet.”

Her hand stilled, and she gave me a torn look. “I shouldn’t have done that. I’ve already put you in a precarious position, and I know it’s easy for feelings to develop during traumatic events, and the last few days certainly qualify. Things like that almost never last.”

“Julia.” One side of my mouth quirked up. “Stop trying to talk yourself out of how you feel.”

A blush stole across her cheeks. “I just...I don’t do well with this kind of thing.”

“Well, I can’t say I do either.” I tugged her closer and wrapped my arms around her in a hug. “One step at a time. Okay?”

“Sounds good to me.” She gave me a squeeze before releasing me. I scratched at the base of one of my dreadlocks and cleared my throat.

Julia nodded, as though agreeing it was time to move on to other things. “We ought to go join the others. I’m sure Emerson will want Steel and I to start interrogating his men as soon as possible.”

Some of my light mood diminished. “Be careful around Steel. Darkness follows in his wake.”

She shivered. “I agree. He’s dangerous.”

“He’s a panther.”

“A panther?”

“Panthers are powerful guardians; he’ll protect those he loves with his last breath. Death lives in their shadows. I have met a few of them, and he is by far the deadliest. I’m not sure he’s an enemy, but he is certainly not safe.”

“Agreed.” She rubbed her forehead. “I’m heading down to get something to eat. Are you coming?”

I shook my head. “There’s something I need to do first, but I’ll be down before long.”

She nodded and moved to the door. When she set her hand on the knob, she paused and looked over her shoulder. “I understand why you didn’t tell me about your past. I...I don’t like the fact that you are connected to something that brings me such pain, but I know you and drugs are not the same thing. I know you are changing your life, and that means more than your past. Thank you for telling me.”

I nodded to her, grateful she understood why I did what I did and could still forgive me. “Thank you for telling me about your past too. Seems we are both trying to change ourselves.”

A faint smile settled on her face, and she left, closing the door behind her. I dropped back onto the bed and let the air out of my lungs in a rush. I felt confused now, and I wasn't sure how to fix it. I rubbed my jaw and sighed. I was drawn to her, and more than just a little. It had been a long time since I was attracted to someone, and I wasn't sure what to do about it. There was so much going on, and she was right about feelings developing in situations like this. Often, they didn't last.

But there was something different about her. I'd felt it from the beginning. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I didn't think my feelings were produced by adrenaline. Although I didn't understand my feelings, I couldn't deny that there were feelings there. And she had feelings for me, too.

That thought made me smile and I touched my lips. Her kiss had been light. I wondered if she was afraid. She probably was. With our pasts, I couldn't blame her for being unsure about the attraction between us.

This wasn't the time to pursue a relationship, so I knew I needed to set it aside and be patient. There were more important things to worry about. Like the fact that people were still out there trying to track Julia down and kill her, and now me as well. That needed to take precedence. And we were also trying to help a mercenary track down a shipment of weapons that was stolen before he could turn them over to a mob boss. That certainly complicated things.

My part in all of that was to check in with Goliath and see if he knew anything about what was going on with Archuleta. That was something I could do. I grabbed a tablet I had borrowed from Emerson off the chair and clicked it on. I sent a message to Sosa telling him I needed to call him as soon as he was free.

He messaged me back almost immediately saying he was free, so I clicked the call button. It took only a few moments for him to answer, and his face appeared on the screen. "Ethan. *Da mein*, my friend."

I couldn't help but smile when his familiar features filled the screen. "*Da mein*. What have you done with your hair?"

Sosa chuckled and ran his hand over his skull. Where long dreads used to be there was now a scant two inches of hair. “I made a change. It was past time for it.” He turned his head to the side so I could see where the lower half of his scalp was completely shaved. “What do you think?”

“You look like a punk. Like when we were fifteen and you decided to go bald. That didn’t last long.”

He squinted at me, making his already dark eyes look black. “You’re just jealous.”

I laughed. “That’s exactly what it is.” I peered closer at the tattoo that stretched up his neck and touched the sides of his face. “I see you’ve added another bit to your tattoo.”

“You like?” He turned his face the other way and poked at his skin. “The branches are finished and most of the leaves are done. I only have one more session until the tree is complete.”

The tattoo did look pretty good. “I like it. Fits you well.”

Sosa smiled, flashing white teeth at me. It looked like he was in a den or a living room. He dropped onto a sofa and propped his face on his fist. “What’s up, *rinwayo*? You aren’t using your normal account. I thought you were on some dried-up planet chasing the rain?”

Some of the humor left me. “Well, I was. Something happened, and now I could use a little help.”

He sobered up immediately. “Anything, E. What’s going on?”

I licked my lips and tried to sort out exactly what I should and shouldn’t tell him. “I was on Cadium, working, when some men appeared with a woman and tried to kill her, right in front of me.”

“Let me guess: you saved her?” Sosa almost smirked. “Always the gentleman.”

“Yes, okay, I got her away from them and back to my ship. We don’t know who they are, but they want her dead. Badly. We had a few close calls on the planet, but we got away, though they damaged my ship severely, and we could only

make it as far as Esmuna, and she needs to get back to Viridis.”

Sosa gestured with his hand to the side. “Done. I can get you transportation there in a few hours.”

I cringed. “Julia’s not going to accept Goliath help. In any form.”

His eyebrow lifted. “She’s one of *those* types then.”

“No, no.” I waved my hand to try and remove that notion. “It’s not like that. She knows a mercenary on Esmuna who’s helping us, named Emerson. But he’s in the middle of a job for Archuleta.”

Understanding dawned on his face. “I heard a big shipment was stolen from him the other night.”

“Yes. We’re trying to help him locate it. That’s what I was calling about.”

Sosa pressed his lips together. “I don’t know who stole it. Nothing has come my way about it.”

That wasn’t the answer I was hoping for. “What do you know about Archuleta right now? I’m a bit out of the loop. Catch me up to date.”

“Archuleta is expanding his reach. I’ve heard a lot about that, since his orders have also gone up. The boys have heard a little talk about some unrest in his organization. Some guys have been running their mouths about a regime change. I’m not sure I believe those rumors, but I think after this theft that someone is out to sabotage Archuleta to take over his operation.”

Interesting. “Got any names?”

He shook his head. “No. Nothing has been passed along to me. I can put some feelers out, though. Someone surely knows something.”

I nodded. “I’ll take any help I can get. We need to locate the merchandise, so if you get wind of anything about where someone might be trying to offload it, give me a heads up.”

“Of course. I’ll ask around. I bet Archuleta is losing his mind over this.”

“Yes, I think he is.” I remembered how angry he had been. “Your name saved my life, by the way. Archuleta wanted to kill me.”

Sosa smirked. “The Goliath name still comes in handy for some things. We’re always here for you. Anything you need, *rinwayo*.”

Hearing him call me brother lifted my spirits. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“What are brothers for?” Sosa tapped a finger against his elbow. “You’re sticking around to protect this *galida*?”

Annoyance turned in my chest and I bristled. *Galida* was a derogatory term for someone who disliked Novem. “Don’t call her that. She isn’t like that.”

“Well, you haven’t exactly told me what she *is* like, this Julia.”

Trying to describe her to him seemed virtually impossible. “She’s...independent, protective, and strong. She knows her mind and sticks to it. She isn’t bigoted, and she isn’t a *galida*.”

Sosa whistled. “She’s your *amitulo*, isn’t she?” He shook his head. “It’s past time you found someone.”

I shook my head. “Labeling her isn’t that simple.”

“But you care for her. Come on, E, I can see it plainly. We’re brothers. You can’t hide anything from me.”

He was right about that. I never could hide anything from him. “It’s complicated, Sosa.”

“Isn’t it always?” Sosa grinned. “I should come meet her. See if I approve.”

That didn’t sound like a good idea. “She’d probably arrest you.”

The grin disappeared. “She’s a cop?”

I nodded. I hadn't necessarily wanted to tell him that, but I would never lie to him. "IPF."

Sosa's face shuttered. "Drug enforcement?"

I frowned. "She hasn't said what department."

"But is she dirty? You said she knew a mercenary and she's helping Archuleta. We've nothing to fear from her, right?"

"Julia isn't a dirty cop. Far from it. She's only doing what she must for survival. She'll die on Esmuna if anyone finds out she's a cop."

"Does she know you're Goliath?"

"Used to be Goliath. And yes, she does."

Sosa made an aggravated noise. "Ethan, come on man. Befriending a cop? She can arrest you or use you to get to us. What were you thinking? Part of you not being in the business any more was keeping silent."

"It's not like I planned this, Sosa. I couldn't leave her to die out there."

"And now?" Sosa shook his head. "You could leave her right now. But you haven't. Why?"

I closed my eyes, feeling guilty for putting my brothers in jeopardy. "She needs me, Sosa."

He scoffed. "That's assuming a lot on your part, brother."

"You don't understand. We were meant to cross paths. I'm meant to help her. Or she's meant to help me. Or both, I don't know. All I know is it was fate."

"I didn't think you believed in fate."

"I believe in fate, but I believe we still have the choice. Our paths were brought together, and it's our choice whether or not we continue on the same path. But Sosa, I feel it, deep in my soul, that I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. I am choosing to stay here, with her. There's a reason."

Sosa sulked, but some of the fire went out of him. "You've always felt things more deeply than I have. I understand that,

but be careful. She may be your *amitulo*, but that doesn't mean you are hers. It doesn't mean she won't come for us. We're your family, E. We're *rinwayo*, remember? Brothers."

The word meant more than just brothers; it meant a bond that went beyond blood. Sosa was more than family to me. He was important to me, just as I was important to him. There wasn't a soul out there I cared about more than him. At least... there hadn't been.

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. "*Rinwayo*. I remember."

"Don't let a woman, a cop, destroy that."

My heart felt torn. "Don't ask me to choose, Sosa."

"I'm not." He put his hands up. "I'm not going to ask you anything like that. All I'm asking is for you to be careful. Sure, you may feel this connection to her now, but what about later? What about when this mess is cleaned up and she's back to being a cop? What happens then?"

No answer came to mind. I dropped my head, feeling depressed. "I believe things will be okay. You don't understand, Sosa." My right palm burned, and I pressed my fingers against the tattoo. "My spirit is drawn to her. In ways beyond words."

Sosa sighed. "Then don't let her go. But don't let her destroy your family."

"I won't. I promise you."

"Keep that promise." He rubbed his head again. "I will do everything I can to help you from here. I'll let you know if I turn up anything."

"Thank you." I pressed my lips together again. *This conversation didn't go the way I planned.*

"Be safe, Ethan."

"You, too."

I cut the transmission and set the tablet aside. He was right. I knew he was right, but I knew I was right too. Julia was important to me now, but she could destroy my family simply

because she was IPF. I wasn't sure what she was going to do when this was all over with, but she wasn't a dirty cop. She wouldn't be bought off, nor dissuaded, if she decided to bring Goliath down. I didn't know what I would do if she tried.

Even though what Sosa was doing was illegal, he was family. I would stand by him, no matter what. Even if that meant going to jail. Or trying to keep him *out* of jail. I would stand by him even if it meant I had to give up Julia. I didn't want it to come to that, and I would do anything to keep that from happening, but Sosa was my brother, and I would protect him no matter what.

Even if it broke my heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ethan

When I finally went down to the kitchen, Emerson was pouring a cup of coffee for Steel, who had changed into black pants and a pale blue shirt. His hair was pulled back into a knot, and I could see hints of weapons on his person. He looked like he was ready to go to war.

Amber eyes met mine over the rim of his coffee cup. I tried not to feel intimidated. It was hard, though. Everything about Steel screamed that he was dangerous and that I should run the other way. He hadn't done anything to assure me that we were safe around him. He might be on our side for now, but how long would that last?

"We were wondering if you were ever going to join us." Emerson deadpanned, pulling out a bar stool next to Julia and taking a seat at the counter. Julia was practically inhaling a plate of eggs and sausage. Her eyes met mine briefly before returning to her plate. I could see her watching Steel out of the corner of her eye, making sure he was either far away from her or Emerson was between them. I think she felt the same caution I did concerning Steel.

"I was talking to Goliath."

Emerson gave me a curious look. I ignored it and poured myself a cup of coffee. It wasn't my favorite drink, but it sufficed. I took a sip and sat down on the other side of Julia, turning my chair so I could see everyone in the room.

"And?" Emerson motioned for me to elaborate.

"He doesn't know anything about what happened to Archuleta's shipment. He said he would ask around. He did say there have been rumors about dissenters among Archuleta's men. He said he wouldn't be surprised if this had something to do with that."

Emerson sighed and rolled his eyes. "That's not helpful."

Julia gave him an irritated look. “Every piece of information is helpful. How do you think a cop works a case? Piece by piece, until a whole picture forms. This helps us figure out motivation.”

He grunted. “This isn’t a picture, sweetheart; it’s real life. And keep talking like that and everyone will peg you for a cop. Act like a criminal. Talk like a criminal. Surely that isn’t beyond your skills.”

“Someone’s grouchy today,” Steel smirked.

“I’m not grouchy,” Emerson snapped back.

Steel set his cup aside and leaned against the counter, folding his arms. “You were fine until she walked in here with those clothes on. Bring back memories?”

Emerson’s chair crashed to the ground as he shoved himself to his feet. “Do you have something to say, Steel? Because I’m sick of you making jokes about love like you aren’t head over heels for your scientist. Can you imagine what it would be like if Cass one day says she loves you, but you aren’t soulmates and she’s done? Walks out the door and barely even speaks to you unless she’s in trouble. Because that’s what happened, Steel, and don’t think what you two have is so special just because she doesn’t mind your profession.”

Steel’s jaw tightened, and his nostrils flared. Julia sat still as a statue, fork halfway to her mouth, watching both men with wary eyes. I wasn’t sure what to do. This was between the two of them, but I didn’t want the blowback to hit Julia or me.

After a tense minute, Steel looked away. “Fine. I get it. Touchy subject.”

Emerson growled, and his fists clenched, but he didn’t swing at Steel. “I’m not in love with her anymore, despite what everyone thinks. I’ll always care about her, yes, but she left me, and I got over it. And no, I don’t like being constantly reminded about it. Fair enough?”

Steel nodded, sticking out his hand. “We cool?”

After a slight hesitation, Emerson shook his hand. “Yeah. Lay off, man.”

Steel nodded, and Emerson picked his chair up and sat back down in it. Julia looked between the two of them and then finished her bite. “Now that you ladies have worked through your drama, can we get back to the problem at hand?”

Emerson glared at her, but I caught the corner of Steel’s mouth twitch. At least one of them was amused. I leaned back and tapped my fingers against the countertop. “We need a plan.”

Steel took another sip of his coffee. “I agree. Emerson, what’s the play? How do we approach this?”

“You and Carter are going to vet all the people on my ship.” Emerson speared Julia with a look, shutting down any argument she was about to give him. “Be thorough. If anyone has any information on what happened or was involved in any way, I want to know about it.”

Steel nodded. “And you?”

Emerson looked at me. “Ethan and I are going to do a little digging around on our own. Whoever stole those guns will have to offload them to someone. There are several fences around town we can check out. Shake the tree a little.”

Julia frowned and pushed her plate aside. “What about Archuleta’s men?”

“We’re going to deal with mine first. Once I know who on my crew is loyal, we can look at some of his people. I want my house in order first. And who knows? If you find out one of my men is involved that might provide us with a lead.” He eyeballed Steel. “So, no premature killing.”

Steel gave him a mulish look. “You act like I live to kill.”

“No, you just do it so effectively. I want you to intimidate and interrogate, not dismember and decapitate. Okay?”

“Whatever you say, Captain.”

Emerson rolled his eyes but looked at Julia. “Don’t let him get out of line. And please, don’t let anyone on the crew know you’re a cop. If that happens, I make no promises about

keeping you safe. If word got out that I was helping an IPF agent, I would lose all credibility. Clear?”

“As a bell.” Julia nodded. “I’ll be good. I managed on your ship before without anyone suspecting.”

“That’s because most of the crew thought we were sleeping together.”

I nearly spat out a mouthful of coffee. Emerson lifted an eyebrow at me, amused by my reaction. “I had to keep her safe somehow. Laying a claim is the easiest way. No one messes with the captain’s girl.”

Julia rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe anyone would think we would sleep together. Just goes to prove that your crew is blind.”

“Watch it, Carter.” Emerson stood up and set his cup in the sink. “You want food before we go, Ethan?”

“No, I’m good. Thank you.”

Steel drained the rest of his cup and set it in the sink with Emerson’s. “Where’s the *Hawk*?”

“Waiting for us. We should be on our way now.”

Julia got up and deposited her dishes in the sink, steering clear of Steel. “I take it your crew doesn’t know about this place.”

“No, and it’s staying that way. Only a few know about it, and it’s too many as far as I’m concerned. Not a word. Got it?”

She nodded. “My lips are sealed.”

“Then let’s get out of here.”

Reluctantly, I emptied the rest of my cup in the sink and followed the others out of the kitchen. Julia paused before we reached the front door. “Do you happen to have a coat I could borrow? It’s freezing out there.”

Emerson said nothing. He produced two coats from a closet and handed one to her and the other to me. I put it on without comment. I was happy to have a little protection from the cold.

Both of Emerson's men from the day before were waiting outside in the vehicle. None of us spoke as we went speeding back to the city. I watched the ground pass below us. Large patches of white snow were scattered here and there. I studied the sky as well, noting that it would probably snow again later and silently thanking Emerson for the coat.

We landed at a spaceport, and Emerson led the way to a modest Charger—Beta class if I were to hazard a guess—with mounted plasma cannons. A few men stood guarding the outside, and they all straightened when they saw Emerson. He waved them off and snapped a command at them to keep their posts. We followed Emerson up the ramp and onto the ship.

Julia's face turned to stone, and I wondered if that's what she had done when she was on the ship the first time. She looked decidedly less cop-like. Her hand stayed near the gun on her hip, and her eyes constantly moved. I couldn't imagine what it had been like for her as a cop to be aboard a mercenary vessel like that. I was hazy on the details surrounding her first time on board, but I doubted it had been a pleasant experience for her.

We reached the bridge, and Emerson walked straight up to a massive man who towered over all of us, and who had skin darker than mine and dreads that were shorter. I took an extra second to study him. I wasn't sure what his ethnicity was because he seemed to have some mixed blood. He was just so...large. Tall. Intimidating.

He didn't look happy, either. He looked at Emerson, and then looked at Steel. He nodded to them, but then his eyes moved to Julia, and he scowled. He barely even glanced at me.

"Captain." His voice held a warning, but Emerson shook his head at him.

"Reuben, how did it go?"

He continued to scowl at Julia. "Not well. The suppliers are clean. We checked everything. It wasn't them."

Emerson sighed and sat down in the captain's chair. He pressed buttons on the interface and scanned a private screen.

“That eliminates some suspects at least.”

Reuben crossed his arms. “Why is she here?”

My eyes scanned the rest of the room, but there were only a few people present, including a woman who sat at the station in front and to the left of Emerson. Not the best time for Emerson to have this conversation.

Emerson didn't even glance at him. “I hired her to help us find the merchandise. She was in town.”

Reuben continued to glare. “That's not necessary.”

Julia gave him a look of her own. “Calm down, big guy. I'm not here to threaten your manhood or your position.”

Steel smirked and covered it with his hand. Then he reached out and smacked Reuben on the arm. “She's cheeky, isn't she?”

“Cheeky doesn't begin to cover it.” Reuben slapped his hand away. “It's bad enough dealing with you, but her? No.”

Emerson glanced up. “The decision has already been made, Reuben. Deal with it.”

Reuben shut his mouth, but he still seemed agitated. Steel shook his head at him. “Relax. I've got my eye on her.”

That produced a snort from Reuben. “Cass kicked you to the curb already?”

“No.” Steel's face hardened into a deadly look. “We're fine.”

Julia rolled her eyes. “Man, you people are so touchy when it comes to women.” She walked over to the other woman and smiled at her, clapping her on the back. “How do you deal with it, Gabby?”

Gabby, a pretty girl with long brown hair and body armor covering just about all of her, grinned. “I tune them out. It's not bad unless he's around.” Her eyes went to Steel, who winked at her.

Emerson stood up, breaking back into the conversation. “Enough. Reuben, get Steel a manifest of the crew and gather

up the men. He and Carter will be conducting interviews regarding our missing shipment. Ethan and I are going to check out a few fences across town.”

Reuben blinked, looking shocked. “Interviews? Captain, is that necessary?”

“Someone knew exactly where we would be and when. You’ve ruled out the suppliers, so that leaves this crew and Archuleta’s men. We’ll make it to them soon enough. For now, I want to rule out as many possibilities as we can. So yes, we’re doing interviews.”

Reuben looked from the captain to Steel and then to Julia. “Are you sure having them both do that is wise?”

“Are you questioning me?” Emerson’s voice turned cold. I suppressed a sigh. I didn’t want to listen to his posturing. Emerson had to assert himself as the captain, I understood that, but I didn’t like listening to it.

Reuben’s jaw tightened. “No, sir.”

“Then do as I ordered.”

Without another word, Reuben stalked away. Julia watched him go, looking faintly pained. “Now he’s going to be in a bad mood and a real butt to deal with.”

“Too much for you to handle, Carter?” Emerson eyed her, still looking annoyed.

“No.” She walked back over to our group. “It just sucks.”

“Then quit complaining. I have enough to deal with without having to listen to everyone around me gripe.”

She sniffed but said nothing. Emerson turned to Steel. “Be thorough. Go get a room setup.”

Steel nodded and looked at Julia, motioning towards the door. “After you.”

She snorted. “As if. Lead the way.”

“Have it your way.” Steel headed for the door. Julia glanced hesitantly at me. I nodded at her, and she nodded back. I didn’t necessarily like separating from her, but Emerson was the one

calling the shots. Neither of us had a say. She followed Steel out the door.

Emerson gave me an assessing look. “How good are you in a fight?”

“I can hold my own.”

That answer didn't seem to satisfy him, but he nodded. “Fine. I guess you'll do. Let's get going.” His dismissal of my capabilities annoyed me, but I didn't say anything. Let him figure out my uses on his own. I didn't need to prove myself to him.

“Where are we going first?”

“Downtown. There's a little place on 43rd street that might be able to help us. Let me do all the talking.” His eyes roved around the room. “Gabby, how are the repairs coming?”

“Almost complete, Captain.”

“Good. Keep everything moving. We'll be back soon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Emerson nodded to her and then turned for the door, hands patting his sides and pockets, doing a quick inventory of his weapons. The only weapons I had were a laser gun and a rather large hunting knife strapped to my hip, hidden by my coat. I had given Julia everything else because she obviously had far more training with them. I trusted her accuracy even more than my own. Besides, I didn't need more than one gun and a knife. Though there was no telling what danger we would end up encountering.

I doubted the men pursuing Julia would have caught up to us fast enough to cause problems, but I also doubted it would take long before they figured out where we had gone, even though we had taken appropriate precautions. If those people had enough resources, then we would be found eventually. I was hopeful that we would wrap up with Archuleta and be off-world before they figured out we were with mercenaries. Doubtful, but still possible.

Emerson led the way down to a small bay that housed a few hover vehicles. He hopped into a sleek, black hovercar that cost as much as a house. It was a simple two-door, but it looked elegant. I opened the passenger door and sat down on supple black leather and glanced around the interior, sufficiently impressed. It might have looked like a regular car, but an extra meter on the dash belied the power under the hood. He had made a few adjustments, including a gravity propulsion system that would offer an almost obscene amount of speed for that kind of vehicle.

The car turned over and purred contentedly. Emerson checked the meters on the dash while the ship's outer bay doors opened behind us. "Nice car," I commented.

Emerson grunted. "It's my personal car, so let's not destroy it on this trip, understood?"

Personal car? The man sure has taste. "I'm not the one driving."

"Duly noted. Not a scratch anyway."

I lifted my hands. "I have no intentions of hurting such a beautiful car."

The door opened all the way and Emerson put the car in gear and it lifted effortlessly up and out of the bay. "Doesn't being Goliath's third come with perks like a nice car?"

"Yes, but I'm not with Goliath anymore. I had a nice car, but it wasn't as nice as this one. Fairfax isn't exactly a wealthy place."

Emerson eased out into open air and the car joined seamlessly into air traffic. "So, you quit the drug business?"

His line of questioning made me uncomfortable, but I felt obligated to answer. It was one thing to tell Julia, but I didn't know this mercenary. "Basically."

"But you still have a good relationship with Goliath, I take it?"

"Yes." I kept my answers brief, not wanting to share too much information.

Emerson seemed to catch on and he snorted. “I’m not being nose-y; I just want to make sure that when you say you’re in with Goliath you’re telling the truth and not putting us all at further risk.”

I gave him a derisive look. “I’m not lying.”

“Carter obviously didn’t know about your drug connections, so it’s not a far leap for me to think you’re lying. Very few people make it out of this life with their life still intact.”

He means too many people die. He wanted to be sure I wasn’t marked for death by Goliath. A lot of people who deserted their gangs were hunted down and killed to protect the gang’s secrets. I wasn’t one of those people.

“I was lucky,” was all I said.

Emerson rubbed the scar that ran down his jaw. “How was it? Getting out, I mean.”

Not sure where he was going with his question, I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Transitioning to a normal life. I assume that’s what you did. How was it?”

“Well, it wasn’t easy. I’d been with Goliath since I was thirteen. I went to college and got a legitimate job to help pay for it. I had never been in a formal classroom before, and it was an adjustment. So was the job. I kept waiting for something to happen, but it never did. I suppose that was the hard part. I kept expecting to fail at what I was doing or to somehow be drawn back into Goliath. But I wasn’t.”

“Until now.”

A smile cracked my face. “Until now. Which was a total coincidence. It’s been years since I got out. It feels a little strange being back in this kind of situation, but I couldn’t let them kill Julia.”

“Even though she was a stranger?” Emerson seemed genuinely curious.

I shrugged. I didn’t know how to answer him. “I couldn’t stand by and watch them kill her. It wasn’t right.”

“Yeah.” Emerson nodded. “I understand. I don’t think I could have stood by either. Do you regret leaving Goliath?”

“No.” I truly didn’t. Sometimes I missed my brothers, but I never regretted giving up the lifestyle. I didn’t even realize how wrong it all was until I was far away from it. I did things while I was part of the gang I would always regret, and there was no way to change that. *I will never repeat those mistakes.*

Drawing myself out of my gloomy thoughts, I peered at Emerson. “Are you thinking of leaving the life of a mercenary behind?”

“Of course not.” He answered a little too quickly. “Just curious.”

I didn’t believe him, but I didn’t press him. I understood if he ever left it would need to be on his own terms and in his own way. I was a little surprised that he was thinking about leaving the mercenary life behind. He was successful from what I’d seen. Mercenary life had been pretty good to him. He had money and a crew and status. Lyle Archuleta had sought him out for his services, so he had to be good at his job.

Before I could contemplate it any further, Emerson pulled out of traffic, and we descended towards the ground. I glanced around, surprised we had reached 43rd street already. Shops lined both sides of the street, peddling everything from shoes to grooming services to mechanical parts. It was a mishmash of businesses, and it made the street popular. People were walking on the sidewalks in pairs or alone despite the cold, moving from store to store.

Emerson put the car in park and gazed through the windshield. I tried to follow his eyes but couldn’t pick out which store he was watching. However, there was a pawn shop in the general area of his gaze, which seemed to be the most likely destination. “The pawn shop?”

He nodded. “Let me do all the talking. Just watch my back, okay?”

“Okay.” I didn’t want to argue with him. I knew my way around the city from my days in Goliath, but I wasn’t going to

volunteer information about that. I didn't know the people we were going to see, so the point was moot. Things had changed a lot since I'd been gone.

We both got out and Emerson locked the car, giving it an extra look to be sure it was secure. Obviously, he liked the car. Not that I blamed him. If I owned his car, I would be worse than him. I wouldn't even bring it downtown.

The pawn shop itself looked a little rundown, and a garish sign announcing that they paid cash hung above the entry door. The front windows were tinted, making it hard to see inside. I scanned the area surrounding the building but didn't see anyone lurking around or guarding it.

Inside, shelving units took up most of the floor space, and large, glass counters divided the front of the store from the back. A man sat behind the counter, tablet in hand, pen tucked behind his ear. He looked up when the bell chimed. His face sported a flat, bored look that seemed to be there perpetually. He was chomping on a stick of gum, and his fingers tapped against the side of his tablet. The stool he was sitting on creaked strenuously when he leaned back to assess the two of us.

From what I could see, there was no one else anywhere around. Behind the counter was a set of doors, presumably leading to the backroom. There could be people in the back, but it was impossible to tell. No way to gauge the threat level.

None of that seemed to bother Emerson. He strode right in, confident and authoritative. He went straight to the counter where the clerk sat and leaned against it. "Davis."

The clerk's expression didn't change, but I could see his muscles tensing slightly. His hands stayed in sight, however, and I carefully palmed my gun behind my back and out of his sightline. Just in case.

"Captain." Davis eyed Emerson with almost open hostility. "What brings you here?"

Emerson's eyes roved the room before dropping to scan the merchandise behind the glass. "I'm trying to find someone."

“You’ll have to be more specific.” His voice was dry as he shifted in his seat, hands still on the tablet.

“Anyone come in here trying to offload a shipment of guns? Specialty guns.”

Davis frowned, but then pursed his lips. “No.”

“You wouldn’t be lying to me, would you, Davis?” Emerson’s voice was light, but I felt the threat behind it. I shifted nervously, trying to keep an eye on the front door as well as the back door.

Davis sighed. “Let’s be frank, Captain. I know what you’re looking for and let me tell you, no one has approached me. Even if they did, I wouldn’t fence anything belonging to Archuleta. I value my life and my job. No one has contacted me about moving your merchandise.”

Emerson heaved an annoyed breath but nodded and backed away from the counter. “You’ll contact me if someone does?”

He nodded. “Not because I have any fondness for you, but I won’t get on Archuleta’s bad side. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

Emerson nodded back at him, but he didn’t go so far as to thank the clerk. He turned to me and inclined his head towards the door. I eyed Davis one more time before turning. I didn’t put the gun away until we were on the street again.

“Are you sure he was telling the truth?” I asked as we climbed back into the car.

Emerson nodded. “Davis isn’t stupid. He may not have any love for me, but he respects Archuleta, and he knows fencing anything belonging to Archuleta would be signing his own death warrant. Davis is wily, but not suicidal.” He fired up the car, and we lifted back into the air.

“Where to now?”

“There are a few more places we can check.”

There were five more places, to be exact. We spent all morning driving around the city, hitting up local fences. No one seemed to know anything. Either no one had been

contacted, or else no one was talking about it. It was hard for me to gauge which it was, since I didn't know any of them, but Emerson seemed to believe them.

He scowled and leaned against his car outside the last place, a restaurant that was notorious for laundering money. "What a waste of a morning."

I stamped my feet against the cold as little snowflakes drifted down. A quick look at the sky told me the snow would get worse before too long. "Are there any other places you know of?"

Emerson shook his head. "Not any place we can go with just the two of us. We set foot near those places we'll get blown out of our shoes."

Snow landed on my cheek, and I brushed it off. "There's one place I know of that we can check."

He eyed me across the top of the car. "You know a place? Here?"

I nodded. "Goliath does business here all the time. Esmuna is one of our biggest markets. I spent some time here in the old days."

"You know a guy?"

I shrugged. "I used to. There's no guarantee he's still there, but we can check it out."

"Fine. Let's go."

We climbed back into the car, and I gave him directions. The store was only a few streets over, in one of the shadier parts of town. Not that we hadn't visited a few already, but this was worse. This was not a good neighborhood to get caught in by yourself.

The jewelry store still sat where I remembered it, retro neon sign flashing in the window. This time when Emerson locked his car, he glared at every face on the street, whether they were looking at him or not. He had a particularly fierce look when he wanted to, and it seemed to serve as a decent deterrent.

"I'll take the lead on this one."

Emerson didn't argue. I pushed open the door and stepped into the brightly lit interior. The store was tiny and filled with glass cases and counters. A woman and a young girl stood off to the left, looking at some silver necklaces. I eyed them, but they didn't even glance up. Emerson looked longer, eyes lingering on the girl. An odd look, something akin to sorrow, crossed his face, but he said nothing.

Tyrone stood in front of the counter, fixing a display. He was about my height with bony arms, and I remembered he always smelled like garlic. I was almost surprised to see him. A part of me had been sure he wouldn't still be working there. Truthfully, I figured someone would've put a bullet in him long before then. But it was fortunate for us that he was still alive. He and I weren't friends, but we had at least some semblance of a working history.

Carefully, I walked towards the counter. Tyrone caught sight of me, and his eyes widened. He spared Emerson a glance before scurrying behind the counter and putting something solid between us.

"Ethan." Tyrone sounded surprised, but not necessarily welcoming.

I nodded at him. "Tyrone." I kept my voice low so it wouldn't carry to the woman and her daughter.

He sniffed, his eyes looking me over carefully. He also eyed Emerson the same way. His eyes darted around like he was looking for a way to escape. I caught a whiff of garlic and my nose wrinkled.

He licked his lips nervously. "What brings you here?"

"Making introductions." I glanced back at Emerson. "A friend of mine is looking for some merchandise."

Tyrone placed his hands flat on top of the counter, which I didn't take as a positive sign. "I thought you were out of the game. Well, I honestly thought you were dead."

I lifted an eyebrow at him. "No, I'm obviously not dead. We're looking for some information on some special merchandise."

His eyes pinged back and forth between Emerson and me. That was also not a good sign. “I don’t know anything.”

Not the answer I had expected. I frowned. “I haven’t even told you what we’re looking for yet.”

My instincts flared, warning me of danger just as Tyrone’s hands suddenly dropped behind the counter.

“Down!” I barked as Tyrone lifted a shotgun. There was no time for me to do anything but jump to the side. Tyrone tracked me, firing and just barely missing. Emerson swore and went for the woman and the girl. The little girl screamed when the gun went off, and Emerson grabbed her, grabbed her mom, and pulled them both behind a display case, covering them with his body.

There was no time for me to worry about them. I yanked out my own gun and scrambled to a crouch. Tyrone’s gun went off again, but I was tucked down and he didn’t come close to hitting me. I ran, still crouched, to the opposite end of the counter. I leaned around it and caught sight of Tyrone’s leg. I couldn’t take the chance that the little girl or her mom would get hurt so I shot him immediately, knowing I would only have the element of surprise for a moment.

Tyrone yelped and then cursed as his leg gave out and he dropped. I sprang towards him. He saw me and tried to lift the double-barreled shotgun, but it was too heavy and bulky for him to lift one-handed. I snatched it out of his hands before he could pull the trigger. I could hear Emerson yelling something. I stepped back and trained both guns on Tyrone. “Got him!” I yelled.

There was movement, and I looked up to see Emerson checking before standing upright. Then he ushered the two innocent civilians towards the door. The woman grabbed up her daughter and ran without hesitation.

Once they were safely outside, I returned my focus to Tyrone, who was groaning and pressing his hand against his leg where I’d shot him. I kicked him. “Get up. Stop whining. I shot you with a laser. It isn’t that bad.”

Tyrone glared at me, but he grasped the counter and started pulling himself upright. Emerson stomped towards us with murder in his eyes. He swore harshly, leaned across the counter, grabbed Tyrone by the shoulders, and jerked him up and half over the counter. Tyrone yelped again and flinched in pain.

“You stupid waste of space! What were you thinking, shooting a gun with a child in the room? What kind of monster are you? Sweet mother! If you had hit that girl, I would have chopped you into itty bitty pieces and set you and your shop on fire, you pathetic coward!”

Part of me wanted to tell Emerson to ease up, but the other half of me completely agreed with him. Instead of stopping him, I stepped closer, keeping my laser trained on Tyrone. “Why’d you try to shoot me, man?”

Tyrone’s eyes bounced between the two of us, his face white with fear. “Nobody gets out. No one. The only people who get out of the game are informants. I’m not an idiot. You show up after *years*, with a *friend* in tow, wanting to make introductions? He’s a cop.”

Emerson’s face turned red. “I’m not a cop!” He punched Tyrone in the face, hard, causing blood to leak out of his nose. “The name is Emerson, mercenary captain of the *Hawk*. I’m about as far from a cop as you can get.”

If it was even possible, Tyrone’s face turned even whiter. “You—you are?” he stuttered.

I cocked my head at him and then cocked my gun as well. “Yes. He’s not a cop, and I am *not* an informant.”

Emerson swore again and shook Tyrone before pushing him away. He had no balance and fell against a shelving unit, breaking one of the shelves and knocking boxes to the ground. Tyrone flinched and groaned again, but I felt no pity. I crouched down, waving the gun in his face until his shifty eyes locked onto the weapon.

“Listen closely; we are looking for information. If you don’t give us what we want, we’re going to kill you. I would think

long and hard before answering. Got it?"

Tyrone nodded, one hand clutching his leg while the other one held him upright. "Okay. Okay."

Emerson took over, walking around the counter and crouching on the other side of him. "A shipment of guns was stolen from me night before last. Bunch of modified laser rifles. They belong to Lyle Archuleta. Someone stole them, and I want to know if they contacted you to try and fence them."

Tyrone opened his mouth, but nothing came out except for a serious whiff of garlic. My nose bunched up of its own accord and I leaned back slightly. "Come on, Tyrone. Answer."

He gulped and nodded. "I was contacted last night about some guns like that."

"By whom?"

"They didn't give me a name. It was all done electronically. He wanted me to match up a buyer for him."

"And what did you say?"

He blinked rapidly. "I didn't know anyone offhand without making inquiries, so I told him I'd let him know if I found someone."

My patience was wearing thin, and it was obvious Emerson's had already snapped when he grabbed Tyrone again. "How can you contact him?"

Tyrone's voice went up in pitch. "He left a code for me to post on an anonymous discussion board on the net. All the information is written on a pad of paper over there, under the register." He pointed towards the cash register. I stood up and stepped over to it, lifting the cash drawer out, but there was nothing underneath it. I lifted my eyebrow at Tyrone, and he gulped again. "It's under the chip reader."

Sighing, I set the cash drawer back down and lifted the scanner. Underneath it was a slim pad of paper with some scribbles on it. I looked it over and frowned. "This is it?"

He nodded vigorously. “That’s all, I swear. I don’t have any more information.”

Emerson’s hand went around his throat, putting pressure against his Adam’s apple. “You wouldn’t be lying to us, would you? Because that would be a very stupid idea.”

“No,” his voice sounded strangled when he tried to speak past Emerson’s grip. “I’m not lying. I swear. That’s all the information I have.”

I believed him. Tyrone was a complete coward at heart, and he knew it would be deadly if he held anything back from us. “If he contacts you again, you get a hold of Goliath and tell him to pass it on to me, you understand me?”

Tyrone tried to nod as best he could. I glared at him some more while I tucked the paper into my pocket. “He’s telling the truth.”

Emerson released him and stood up. Anger continued to seethe from him. “If I find out you’re lying, I will come back here and kill you.”

Tears were leaking down his face when he nodded back. “I’m not lying. I swear.”

“Let’s go.” I hated watching him cry. Only cowards cried like that. Some things were important enough to cry about, but this wasn’t one of those things.

Emerson followed me back outside, and the blast of cold air helped to cool a little of my anger, though I don’t think it helped Emerson much. He still looked ready to kill when he got back in his car. I took a deep breath before I climbed in as well.

The engine fired up immediately and I barely had the door closed before we were in the air. I glanced warily at Emerson. He was gripping the wheel so tightly his knuckles were white. “Are you alright?”

He practically bared his teeth at me. “I should have killed him. I can’t believe he fired a gun with that little girl in there. That’s unforgivable! What if he had accidentally hit her? She’s

just a kid.” He let out another curse word and slapped the wheel.

Obviously, the captain was protective of kids. That was positive news at least. I didn’t know much about the captain, though I knew that, for whatever reason, Julia thought he was a decent man, apart from being a mercenary. I hadn’t seen much swaying me either way on his character, but the vehemence with which he protected a child made me believe maybe he was a decent person after all.

“The point is that the girl is safe, and we have our information.”

Speaking of the information, I pulled out the paper and studied it in more detail. “I’m not sure how helpful this is going to be.”

Emerson grunted. He seemed to do that a lot. “Why?”

“The discussion panel is an open forum. Anyone can get on it, and anyone can post. I don’t think we can trace our thief through this.”

Emerson was silent while his mind sorted through our options. “If nothing else, we can use it to lure him out. We need to think about it.”

He was right. I gave him another cautious look, but he seemed to have settled a little. I looked back out the windshield. “Are we heading back to the ship?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” We would regroup and see if Julia had come up with anything from her interrogations. I hoped she had.

The car sped up, and I glanced at Emerson again. Maybe he wasn’t as calmed down as I had thought. I gripped the handle on the door and tried not to panic as we zoomed manually through air traffic and narrowly missed a traffic signal pole.

“It won’t do us any good if you kill us before we get back.”

Emerson’s jaw ticked, but he eased off the gas a little. “I’m not in a good mood now. And if anyone on my crew is part of this, my mood is going to get a lot worse.”

I flinched. *Maybe it would be best if Julia didn't find anything.* Hopefully the crew would be squeaky clean, but, with our current streak of luck, I wasn't going to hold out hope.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Julia

I never thought I would hate interrogations so much. Normally, I looked forward to interrogating suspects because usually I had some idea of their guilt. But in this case, all these people were guilty, and we were trying to narrow down their crimes to something specific, which was a lot harder. Especially since I couldn't ask the questions I wanted to. I had to rely on Steel to do that.

Working next to an assassin was uncomfortable to say the least, although he didn't seem to mind working with an IPF agent. He was perfectly relaxed as we set up a makeshift interrogation room. My presence didn't seem to bother him like his bothered me. I watched him in silence, not thrilled with the circumstances.

Once everything was set, I knew I couldn't put off talking to him any longer. Even though I didn't want him around, I didn't have a choice. There had been plenty of other cops I'd been forced to work with in the past, and I had figured it out. *This won't be any different.*

I faced him and took a deep breath. "I need you to be specific with your questions and vary the topics. I need a baseline with which to work."

He gave me a dry look. "I know how deception detection works. I have experience with it from when I was in the military."

Both my eyebrows shot up, but it wasn't the information that surprised me. I was surprised he had told me. He didn't seem like the kind of person to offer up information about himself. "You do?"

Steel nodded but didn't elaborate. "But we do need signals. If you think he's hiding something, cross your legs. If you think he's innocent and we should turn him loose, cross your ankles."

I rolled my eyes, but he had a point. We would need a way to communicate nonverbally. “If I scratch my jaw, I want you to press on with whatever line of questioning you’re on. Okay?”

“Sounds good to me.” He glanced around the room one more time before stepping into the hallway. He tapped on a com link I hadn’t seen him acquire. “Reuben.”

After a few seconds, Reuben answered. “What?”

“We’re ready.”

“Where are you?”

“Across the hall from medical bay.”

Within a few minutes, Reuben appeared. He still looked to be in a foul mood when he shoved a tablet into my hands. “There’s the manifest. I already called Jack down so you can start with him.”

Steel lifted an eyebrow at him. “Why start with Jack? We aren’t going alphabetically?”

Reuben glowered at him. “I need Jack to get back to work as soon as possible. Make it quick. He’s working on repairs. He’s not part of this. If he is, I’ll put on women’s clothing and do a strip tease.”

I blinked, trying to get that image out of my head. My eyes scanned the list. It was long. “Let’s get started, then.”

Reuben turned his sour look towards me and shook his finger in my face. “You keep your mouth shut. For the record, I think having you here is a bad idea. I don’t know why you’re here or why Emerson is *letting* you be here, but if you screw any of this up, I’ll put you in the ground myself.”

Snails. He’s intimidating. While I didn’t allow people to intimidate me, Reuben had a way of getting under my skin, though I would never admit that out loud.

To my surprise, Steel pushed Reuben’s hand away from me. “Ease up.”

Reuben jerked his hand away. “Don’t defend her. If she can’t handle herself then she’s already dead. The captain isn’t here to babysit her, so someone has to watch out for his interests. This whole thing is a waste of time.”

“So you’ve said.” Steel’s voice dropped a level in volume, and something dark crept into his tone. “But before you go defending this crew like they’re a pack of saints, don’t forget what some of this same crew did to Cass.”

Immediately, some of the fight went out of him. His eyes clouded, and he looked away. “Those two are dead.”

“Because I killed them.” Steel said it so matter-of-factly it was chilling. “Doesn’t mean there aren’t more bad apples. And we’re not even talking attempted rape here, we’re talking theft. Are you going to deny the possibility of it being someone on the crew just because you don’t like Carter’s presence? Deal with your issues and get over yourself, Reuben.”

Without waiting for a response, Steel walked back into the makeshift interrogation room. I looked from his disappearing form to Reuben, trying to process their conversation. Certain things about Steel suddenly made a lot more sense.

Another man appeared at the end of the hall. Reuben glanced at him. “There’s Jack.” Without another word, he disappeared.

I tried to push away my reservations so I could get the job done. I ushered Jack into the room and took a seat beside Steel, though I didn’t sit too close to him. I crossed my arms and waited for Steel to begin.

Reuben was at least right about Jack being innocent. He had nothing to do with the theft, that much was obvious. Our questions were more perfunctory, and Jack seemed to realize that. He answered honestly, if not a little impatiently, but he didn’t fight us on anything.

Once we were finished with him, we moved on to the next name. And the next. And the next.

Steel was a good interrogator, which didn’t exactly comfort me. The pure terror on several of the faces of the crew as we

moved from one name to the next also set me on edge. As soon as they saw him, their faces would pale, and they'd start sweating. It made it harder to read them when the predominant emotion was fear. But Steel asked the right questions, poking and prodding in all the right places, allowing me to establish baseline behaviors and distracting the men from their fear.

He was intense. That was part of what made it so uncomfortable. He looked like he could kill at any moment. Maybe I only felt like that because I knew he was an assassin. I kept myself turned in my chair so I could see him and whichever member of the crew we were interrogating at the same time. When I had angled my chair ever so slightly, I had seen a hint of a smirk on his face, but it disappeared just as quickly. I wasn't sure if he was annoyed or amused. Either way, he would just have to deal with it.

After what felt like the hundredth crew member, I rubbed the back of my neck and stood up to walk around the room for a few minutes. "I told Emerson this was not a good use of my talents."

Steel snorted. "He only wanted you here so you wouldn't be out with him while he hits the street. If you think it's possible for your identity to be discovered here, think about what it would be like for you out there. Most criminals can smell a cop a mile away. At least here the crew is already predisposed to think of you as a tracker."

I frowned at his assessment but couldn't argue with him. He was probably right. And I could see Emerson doing whatever he could to keep me from outing myself while I was with him. He was right that if anyone figured out that I was a cop while I was with Emerson then his reputation would be ruined. And it was more than just a reputation in this kind of work, it was his very life. If Archuleta found out I was a cop, we'd all be dead. Except Steel. I doubted anyone could get the upper hand with him.

There was a knock at the door before it opened. Gabby stepped into the room, an amused look on her face. "I guess it's my turn."

I took a deep breath before sighing. Steel nodded and gestured to a chair. “Have a seat.”

Once Gabby was seated, I returned to my chair as well. I doubted Gabby had anything to do with the missing guns. I had gotten to know her a little during my time on the ship before, and she was loyal to Emerson. I couldn't see her doing anything to undermine him.

At least the atmosphere was a lot more relaxed with Gabby. She didn't seem visibly frightened by Steel, though she obviously respected him. It was also obvious that they knew each other. The lack of fear made reading her easier, though I found nothing deceptive about her answers regardless.

“Thanks Gabby.” Steel stood up and motioned towards the door. “You're free to go.”

She smiled at him and stood up. “Glad I passed. I want to find whoever stole from us as much as you guys do.”

Steel shook her hand, which he hadn't done with any of the other crew members. “Send your sister down next.”

Gabby nodded and left, thumbing her com as she did. Steel stretched while he was standing up and then dropped gracefully back into his chair. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, feeling wary of him still, even though I knew he wouldn't randomly knife me while we were doing interrogations. *Probably.*

As though he knew exactly what I was thinking, he interlaced his fingers behind his head and gave me a long look. “I'm not going to kill you, you know.”

I sniffed. “I know.”

He chuckled softly. “I don't think you do. You're wound tighter than a spring.”

I set my jaw and shrugged. “You're an assassin. Do you blame me?”

“No. But I want you to know I'm not here to kill you or hurt you. If Emerson says we're on the same side, then we are. I

have no reason to kill you. Your tension is making this harder for both of us.”

I hadn't realized my tension was affecting him, but I didn't have a way to make it better. “Listen, I get you aren't here to kill me. In my head, I know that, and I believe it's true. But my head also knows you're an assassin, and you kill people for money.”

“Did. I'm retired, remember?”

His words were almost flippant, and I dismissed them. “Retired or not, it takes a special kind of person to kill for a living. Everything inside me tells me you're dangerous and you could turn on me in the blink of an eye. Friend to foe. And if we are on opposite sides in a fight, I know I'm dead. It makes a person tense. Not to mention all the other things I have to be stressed out about right now. It's not all you. If anyone figures out who I am, I'm dead.”

Steel watched me with serious eyes. “I can't say if we were on opposite sides that I wouldn't kill you. I'll do whatever I have to do. But if it makes you feel any better, I don't want to kill you. Friend or foe.”

His words did make some of the tension ease, but not much. I nodded. “Thank you.”

Before either of us could say more, the door opened and Gabby's sister, Kasha, appeared. We went back into interrogation mode. This time I watched Steel, knowing that neither woman was behind the theft. I studied Steel instead, trying to glean as much information about him as I could.

It wasn't easy. His face was hard, like a mask, and he didn't leak any of his thoughts or emotions on his face. He was focused on the task at hand, and he kept himself guarded otherwise. I could see he had incredible focus and was detail-oriented. His eyes were one of his biggest tools. I had seen him quell some of the crew with his glare. If he softened his gaze and widened his eyes a little, he could put them at ease just as easily.

Beyond that, I didn't glean much. Mostly, I confirmed what I already knew. His movements were graceful. Everything he did was precisely controlled. His hands were quick, and I think they moved more on instinct than actual conscious commands. He always looked ready to move, to pounce, to defend himself. I could see the military training in him. He *must* have been special ops. Killing people had most likely been his job in the military and that had carried over when he was discharged. I didn't like it, didn't think it was right, but I could understand it at least. If he was trained by the military to do one specific thing, it would be incredibly hard to suddenly be out of the military with your one mission in life taken away.

Kasha left, and I gave up my study of him. All I could do was keep myself on his good side and be wary of him. My instincts still proclaimed him as the most dangerous person I knew and to run from him, but that wasn't a possibility, so I had to force myself beyond my instincts.

The next crew member came in and sat down. He folded his hands in his lap, but he moved them around as though he was nervous. I could see a touch of fear in his eyes, but not as much as some of the others. His height and barrel-chested physique lent him an imposing air. He had a lot of facial hair, and his beard hung down a good three inches below his chin and was unkempt. Shifty eyes moved around the room, catching my attention. Something seemed off with this one.

Steel watched him shift around in his seat. "Bozeman? That's what you go by?"

The man glanced at Steel before looking away. He leaned back and folded his arms. "Yeah. What's this about?"

"Where are you from, Bozeman?"

He seemed surprised by the question. "What?"

Steel's eyes narrowed in impatience. "Where are you from?"

"Esmuna. Here."

I watched his face closely, trying to establish a baseline for his emotions. I needed to see how he would react while telling

the truth before I could determine how he behaved differently when he was lying. Steel tapped a finger against the table. “Are you from Concordia?”

Bozeman grunted in affirmation.

“Your file says you joined Emerson’s crew about a year ago. Why this crew?”

He looked confused now. “The captain was hiring.” He shrugged, as though the answer was an obvious one.

“Do you like working for the captain?”

“Sure. As much as anyone.” His eyes danced away, and he shifted in his chair and lifted a hand to scratch his nose, after which he swiped the hand over his hair. My eyebrows slid upwards in surprise at the cluster of behaviors.

Before Steel could ask another question, I scratched my jaw. His eyes flickered to me, and he seamlessly readjusted his line of questioning. “How well do you get along with the rest of the crew?”

Bozeman frowned, obviously still confused by the questions. “What? Fine, I guess.”

“Do you stick mostly to yourself?”

Again, he shrugged. “I suppose so. What is all this about?”

Steel’s eyes narrowed. “Do you think Captain Emerson is fair to the crew?”

I leaned forward, anxious to hear his answer. He blinked again, and his eyes shifted back to the wall. “Well,” he paused, this time giving a half-shrug, “I mean, sure. You know. As fair as a mercenary can be.”

He may not have stalled much, but he used a lot of filler words, and the half-shrug was just as telling. Those were all signs of stress or deception. However, the wording he chose was a dead giveaway. My instincts said he was qualifying his answers when he lied. I leaned back, and Steel and I exchanged silent looks.

Steel's face hardened when he turned back to Bozeman. "Were you part of the team that unloaded the shipment from the *Hawk* to the warehouse?"

Again, his eyes slid away. "No."

I frowned. His pitch had gotten higher with that word, but he was telling the truth. I'd read the list of crew members who took the shuttle with the guns from the ship to the warehouse, and his name hadn't been on it, but he was still hiding something. I just wasn't sure yet *what* he was hiding.

"But you knew about the mission. What was being transported and all the details." I hadn't meant to speak, but it came out before I could stop it. Steel didn't even blink at my interjection, though Bozeman did.

"Why would I know any of the details? I knew about the mission, obviously, but the crew weren't told the details. I didn't know any more than any of the rest of them." His eyes didn't stray this time, but he was qualifying again. *Lie number three.*

"Tell us what you do know." Steel almost sounded diplomatic, which was a tactical change for him. For most of the interrogative process he had been hard and accusatory. The sudden switch surprised me a little, but I would follow his lead.

Bozeman's shoulders tensed, but the rest of his body stopped moving, a sign that he was focusing intently, probably trying not to let something slip. "I knew we were picking up a shipment on Desoto. I knew the captain was talking about working with someone big, but I didn't know it was Archuleta. No one told me when we were supposed to pick it up or drop it off or where the team was heading. I found out same as everyone else after the fact, when we got the news that the team had been attacked."

There was that wording again, though it was more subtle this time. He was constantly comparing himself with the rest of the crew to try and make himself disappear into the crowd and not stand out as a suspect. Only it wasn't working.

Steel asked him another question about if he knew anyone on the team closely. I ignored it and tried to formulate a strategy in my head to trip him up. It was going to be tricky since I wanted to talk as little as possible. I was supposed to be a tracker, not an interrogator.

Instead of focusing on the questions, I took the tablet from Steel's hands and opened Bozeman's personnel file. Emerson kept detailed files on all of the crew. I pursed my lips and partially listened to the interrogation as I read. Steel was still playing the gentle interrogator, asking Bozeman lots of open-ended questions, hoping to glean more information or trip him up. It was a good strategy.

"Do you do much outside of work? Go to bars or clubs or anything?"

"Not really, only sometimes. Everyone does."

Another lie. Or maybe not so much a lie as a hedge. He was still hiding something. His file didn't say too much more about the man than what I'd already guessed. I pressed my lips into a line and sat back in my chair, setting the tablet on the table. Steel glanced at me, but I didn't acknowledge him. Not yet. There was still more we were missing.

Steel looked back at Bozeman. "We're trying to figure out what happened with the stolen shipment. Is there anything you know about it that could be helpful?"

His voice was the perfect mix of gentleness and pleading, as though Bozeman was the only one who could help us in the whole universe. I almost snorted, but I refrained. His ploy was solid, and I wouldn't mess it up. Bozeman might let something slip.

Bozeman looked a little bit like a spotlight had been shined on him while he was taking a leak. He blinked rapidly and shifted in his seat again. "I don't know anything that can help you." His words were blunt, and his eyes kept shifting to the door. He obviously wanted to escape the room and Steel's line of questioning.

Steel tilted his head to the side. “Have you heard anything from any of the other crew members? Any suspicious behavior?”

Several seconds passed and Bozeman said nothing. I could see the exact moment he decided to lie. He swallowed hard and shrugged. “I mean, I heard Ezra talking about how nice it would be to have some extra cash. He said it would be nice if one of these payday were actually just for him. But I don’t know if I’d say he’s guilty or anything.” One shoulder lifted slightly in another half-shrug.

There was no reason for him to lie unless he was trying to direct the attention away from himself. I crossed my legs and tapped a finger against my knee. I saw Steel glance at me, but I didn’t exchange looks with him. I decided to interject again. “You’re saying you had nothing to do with the missing shipment? But Ezra does?”

His eyes met mine and then slid away. “I don’t know if I would go so far as to blame Ezra. I mean, every guy talks about needing money. But I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

I speared him with the hardest look I could conjure. “I think you’re lying.”

His gulp was almost audible, and I could see his throat working up and down. His eyes went from me to Steel. “What? You have no proof. That’s ridiculous.”

I snorted. “It’s not ridiculous. I think you had something to do with the theft.” Taking this kind of strategy was a gamble, but I hoped Steel would back me up. If he was going soft, then I was going to go hard.

“No! I did not do anything wrong!” His fingers were moving around restlessly, a sign that he was stressed. I would have been too.

Steel spoke, putting his hand out in a placating gesture towards me. “Slow down, there, Carter. There’s no reason to doubt his story.”

“On the contrary. He’s trying to blame someone else. Someone on board already pointed us in his direction. Why should we believe him?” I said the lie boldly, hoping for a reaction. I wasn’t disappointed, though the reaction wasn’t the one I was expecting. All I got from Bozeman was a look of confusion.

“Who told you I had something to do with it?” He sounded genuinely puzzled. If he was responsible for the theft, he didn’t have a partner on the crew. That was interesting. There’s no way he could have pulled something like that off without help. He had to have partners somewhere.

Steel played along with my lies. “Just because someone put the blame on him doesn’t mean they’re telling the truth. I mean, Bozeman said he had no idea where the shipment was even being unloaded. If he had anything to do with it then he would have needed to know where the guns were going.”

I caught Bozeman’s neck squeezing inwardly only because I had my eyes on him instead of Steel. I blinked and suddenly realized what I’d been missing.

Steel had been trying to clue me in. I nodded faintly at him before looking back at Bozeman. “Maybe you’re right, Steel. Maybe Bozeman is innocent.”

Relief flashed in his eyes. He nodded. “See? I told you I didn’t have anything to do with that theft.”

Steel nodded. “It’s not him, Carter. He obviously isn’t part of this. I mean, he couldn’t have pulled this off by himself. It’s impossible.”

Bozeman blinked. I nodded and picked up the narrative from there. “Even if he was involved, he wouldn’t be the brains of the outfit. Let’s say he somehow managed to know where they were going to drop off the guns. He doesn’t have a crew to do the actual thieving.”

“Exactly.” Bozeman sounded a little nervous again, as though he knew we were up to something.

“Someone else would have to be behind all of this.” I wagged a finger at Steel. “Someone on Archuleta’s side who

knew about the shipment and had the manpower to intercept it.”

“That’s right.” Bozeman nodded vigorously. “I don’t know why the captain even suspects someone on his crew. Obviously, it’s someone who works for Archuleta.”

I smiled at him, almost sweetly. “The only problem is Archuleta’s people didn’t know where the shipment would be dropped off. Emerson chose the warehouse without informing Archuleta beforehand. Emerson was going to contact them after getting the guns unloaded. If someone wanted to intercept the shipment, the best time to do it would be at the warehouse before Archuleta’s men were called in for pickup. They might have known the when, but how would they have known where to go?”

Fear was steadily creeping into Bozeman’s eyes and his feet shifted. He moved into a position better suited to standing up in a hurry. He realized he was caught. I knew he could turn violent at the drop of a hat, and I repositioned myself in case he decided to fight. Lashing out with an assassin in the room wouldn’t be prudent, but I doubted this guy was smart enough to turn himself over peacefully.

Steel nodded at me. “That makes sense. Someone on Archuleta’s crew would need to get that one little piece of information from someone on Captain Emerson’s crew. And it wouldn’t have to be someone specifically on the team that took the guns to the warehouse. With a little digging, it would be easy enough to find out where the team was going. It would be very simple to send a message off to someone on the outside.”

“Exactly.” I licked my teeth and made sure Bozeman was looking at me before I continued. “I bet if we checked all outgoing messages, we’d find what we were looking for.”

Bozeman’s eyes jumped between the two of us, as though trying to decide if he should make a move. I hoped he wouldn’t, but I knew he would. He was bigger than both of us, and if he thought he could muscle out of the room then he would try. I don’t know where he would go from there, but I

doubted he could think that far ahead with adrenaline racing through his system.

Chances were high that he would go for me. I was closest to the door, and I was the smallest. If he was lucky, he could use me for leverage as a hostage. I knew, logically, that he would go for me. I was already lifting myself out of my seat, ready to fight back. Some people were just that easy to read.

Sure enough, he came up out of the chair like he was on fire. It was still a little jarring to hear his chair crash to the floor while he lunged towards me, but I was trained for this kind of thing. I was already up and moving out of his reach, towards the door. He realized what I was doing and adjusted course, snagging my arm in his left hand. I turned and ducked under his other arm and slammed my heel down on his foot.

Although he grunted, his grip didn't loosen. Instead, his hand came around my neck. I threw my arm up and leveraged myself out of his hold. He reached for my face, and without much thought I chomped down on his thumb. He roared, jerked away from me, crashed into the table, and fell over.

I stood over him, wiping his blood off my jaw. Steel sat in his seat, arms folded, but he still somehow looked ready to spring. I scowled at him. "Thanks for the help."

"You definitely had him handled." Steel smirked. He stood up and eyed Bozeman, who was sliding towards the wall and pulling himself to his feet. "You can take care of yourself. I can see that."

Bozeman roared something and charged at me again. I sighed and ducked his obvious punch and came up with a quick uppercut to his sternum, using all the force I could muster. It wasn't enough to knock him down, but it did surprise him. I went to punch his face, but Steel was suddenly there. Quick as lightning, he wrapped his arm around Bozeman's neck and squeezed. Bozeman tried to jerk out of his hands but failed miserably. After a few seconds, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he crumpled to the floor.

I took a deep breath to force some of the adrenaline away. Steel stood over the body, giving me an almost impressed

look. “You handle yourself well. Is biting in the official IPF handbook?”

“That was all me.” I tried to wipe the blood off my chin again. This time I was pretty sure I got it all. “I may be a cop, but I act to survive. If that means fighting dirty, then I’ll do it. Some things go beyond procedure and the law.” I hated to say it, but I knew I was referring to more than just the fight. I hadn’t turned Emerson in because we had an understanding. He had helped me, and I had helped him. I had no plans on turning Ethan over when this was finished, either. Or any of the crew.

There was more to life than the law. Life was complicated, and the unique situation I found myself in was even more complicated. I knew I was breaking laws by doing what I was doing, but I was trying to survive. Maybe not all of it was for survival, but that’s what I was telling myself. I hadn’t always obeyed the law, even prior to being kidnapped. Obviously, I was a drug addict at one point in my life, but it wasn’t just that. Even as a cop, I still sometimes did things I knew I shouldn’t.

Like killing Santiago.

I didn’t often think about killing him. I hadn’t necessarily *needed* to kill him. It would have been better for our case if I hadn’t. But I couldn’t stomach the idea of him not being punished for all the people he had killed and tortured. Santiago was a monster. So, I had killed him. And I had made sure it was slow.

Part of me had enjoyed watching him die, which scared me a little. I felt like I should have been bothered more by it. But when I had looked at him, all I could see were the faces of the people he’d hurt. He was sadistic and the world was a better place without him. Given the opportunity, I would do the same thing all over again.

Needing to move on, I cleared my throat. “Now what?”

Steel smirked again. “Now we drag him down to a cell until he wakes up. Then we interrogate him a little harder. And we get a name.”

I stared dubiously down at the body. “I don’t think we can lift him by ourselves.”

He laughed. The sound was surprisingly pleasant. “You aren’t hiding some super strength in your belt?” He grinned at me. He looked relaxed and almost friendly, which wasn’t something I had seen from him before. Without his aloof detachment, he was even more attractive. Of course, his face reverted almost immediately, but I’d caught a glimpse of who he really was beneath his shell. He was a lot more human than he allowed people to see.

Steel looked down at Bozeman and shook his head, not allowing me to dwell on his momentary unmasking. “I think we should get Reuben’s help. He’ll be happy interviews are over. You don’t think Bozeman was working with someone else on the crew, do you?”

“No.” I shook my head. “He was genuinely confused when I said someone else had pointed the finger at him. There’s no way he was working with anyone else on the crew.”

“Good enough for me.” He slapped his com, calling Reuben in to help. “I’m just glad this wasn’t a total waste of time.”

I grunted in agreement. “I wasn’t sure this was going to yield anything, but I think we got lucky.”

Steel shook his head. “No, this was talent, not luck. I can see why you studied deception detection. You have a knack for it. I would never have picked up on some of his lies.”

His praise surprised me, but also pleased me. I knew I was a good cop and did my job well, but it was still an affirmation to have someone as skilled as Steel tell me I was good at it. Assassin or not, I would take the compliment.

“Thank you.” I hesitated before saying the words, but they were genuine. Steel nodded at me, as if he understood.

Reuben appeared, looking rather unsettled that our interrogations had turned up a culprit. When he saw it was Bozeman, however, he didn’t seem surprised. “I always knew he was a slimy one.”

I rolled my eyes at his hypocrisy but said nothing. Reuben's opinion didn't matter one little bit to me. I found him to be egotistical and antagonistic towards me. He obviously didn't like me, and because of that, I didn't like him. I knew he wouldn't out me as an agent, but that was only because of his loyalty to Emerson. I knew it wouldn't extend beyond that. Given the opportunity, Reuben would happily plant a knife in my back.

Reuben lifted Bozeman by the shoulders, and Steel and I each took a leg, and together we carted him down to a holding cell. We passed a few people who gave us strange looks and wide berths, but I didn't pay them any mind. If Steel was around, I doubted anyone on the crew would ask us what we were doing or why. And Reuben was first mate. He only answered to the captain.

Even though I was walking with two escorts, I didn't feel safe. I knew plenty of the crew were capable of dangerous things. They posed a threat to me on many levels. After what Steel had said about Cass, I was feeling jittery. I was strong and could take care of myself, but I was also small. Small people were easily targeted. If someone on the crew decided they wanted a piece of me, there was little to stop them, even if I was Emerson's guest.

Reuben's presence didn't reassure me at all. I doubted he was the kind of man who would stand by and let someone attack me, but I still wouldn't rely on him to protect me, not when he obviously hated me. And while Steel had shown a willingness to protect me, I couldn't rely on him. The only people I trusted to watch out for me here were Ethan and Emerson, neither of whom were on board. Walking openly through the ship without either of them was nerve-wracking. When I had been on board previously, I had always been with Emerson. He had never let me go anywhere without him. At the time, I had assumed he did it to make sure I didn't make trouble, but perhaps it was more for my safety than I thought.

Once we arrived at the holding cell, we dropped Bozeman onto the bed, none too gently, and locked him in. Reuben gave him a disgusted look. "What did he tell you?"

Steel shook his head. “Nothing much. He flipped out too fast and tried to make a break for it. Once he wakes up, we can have a real chat with him.”

I shivered and tried to block out the meaning behind his words. *Torture*. I could never condone that. The thought of it made me sick, reminding me of what I had suffered myself. This wasn't the time to get stuck in those memories, so I forced them to the back of my mind. I could deal with them some other time when we were finally, truly, safe.

Reuben nodded. “Yes, we will.”

“How long until he wakes up?” I didn't want to speak, but I also didn't want them to know that things were getting to me. *Be tough, Jules. You can do this.*

Steel shrugged. “We can wake him up on our own if necessary. But I suggest we wait for Emerson. He'll want to know what's going on.”

“He called to say the two of them were on their way back. He'll be here before long. I doubt he'll be happy, though.” Reuben walked towards the door. “I need to get back to the bridge.”

Emerson didn't want there to be a traitor on his ship. I understood that, but we were making progress. We had uncovered at least one guilty person, and through him we would hopefully be able to find out who else was involved and where the stolen guns were. It still ate at me that I was helping a mob boss track down stolen guns he'd purchased illegally, but I refused to feel guilty about it. If I wanted to survive, I couldn't afford to dwell on it. Sometimes you can't do the right thing no matter how much you want to.

Steel folded his arms and leaned against the wall. “I doubt Bozeman knows where the guns are. I bet whoever he gave the information to simply paid him a straight fee. It's cleaner that way.”

“Yeah, but at least he'll give us a lead. A direction. He ought to have a name, or something useful.”

“It is a start.” Steel tapped a finger against his elbow. “How sure are we that it’s someone from Archuleta’s gang?”

I shrugged. “It’s the most logical choice. I can’t see someone on the outside getting close enough to anyone on either side to know about this deal. It’s possible someone got wind of it and paid both sides for the information needed to set Emerson up, but the more likely scenario is someone working for Archuleta double-crossed him. Especially if he’s having internal troubles.”

Steel grunted. He opened his mouth to say more, but his com beeped, and he tapped it. “Yeah?”

Emerson’s voice came over the radio. “We just got back. How are the interviews going?”

“We’ve got someone in holding. You should come down.”

“On our way.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Julia

It took only a few minutes before footsteps echoed down the hall, purposeful and angry. I stifled a sigh, knowing Emerson was going to be a bear to deal with now that he was upset. He wasn't a cruel man, but he did have a short temper.

He came into view first with his mouth set in a hard line and anger practically leaking from his pores. He looked at both of us in turn before going to the cell and taking a look inside. He crossed his arms and muttered a curse word. "Bozeman."

Ethan came in next looking much calmer but also grim. I relaxed marginally at the sight of him. He gave me a private smile before his face returned to its grim expression. I reached out and gave his arm a gentle squeeze, and his features softened. He stood beside me, and we faced both Steel and Emerson.

"We think someone from Archuleta's crew paid him to give them the location of the warehouse."

"Is that what he said?" Emerson turned his sharp eyes to me.

"No. He attacked us before we could get any details from him. But he was definitely involved."

"Was anyone else from my crew involved?"

"Not that I believe. He seemed genuinely confused when we said someone else told us he was involved. I think he was working alone, at least as far as anyone on your crew goes."

Emerson ran a hand through his hair and turned away from us. Steel frowned at his back, catching onto his abnormal demeanor. "What's got you so angry?"

"None of your business," Emerson snapped.

Ethan cleared his throat. "One of the fences we went to see pulled out a shotgun and nearly killed a couple of bystanders. They're okay though."

I swallowed, hearing what Ethan wasn't saying. The situation had rattled them both. "I'm glad no one was hurt."

Steel pursed his lips for a moment before relaxing his face and turning to Ethan. "What did you guys turn up?"

Ethan produced a piece of paper and handed it to him. "This fence I know named Tyrone—the one with the happy trigger finger—was contacted online by someone looking to offload some merchandise of the same kind as our missing guns. Tyrone agreed to look for someone interested in purchasing the guns. The plan was for Tyrone to contact him when he found someone. Bad news, everything is anonymously done over a discussion board on the net. No way to trace our thief."

I frowned. "We could still send whoever it is a message and set up a meeting, right?"

Emerson spoke again, though his back was still towards us. "Yes. Hopefully it won't come to that. Now that we have the traitor among my men, we should be able to use him to find whoever paid him off. We can find the guns that way. That's the better play."

I had to agree with him. Setting up a meeting with an unknown party was risky, and there was no guarantee that whoever was responsible would show up. I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. "Agreed. He should be able to give us a name or some kind of lead."

Emerson turned around at that. He looked at me for a long time while he puzzled out something in his head. "Carter, you and Ethan go to my quarters and take a break."

Ethan blinked at him, surprised. "What?"

I knew what he wasn't saying, and my eyes dropped to the floor. "Come on, Ethan."

He frowned at both of us. "Aren't we going to make a plan?"

Steel grunted. "Can't make a plan until we have the information." He looked long and hard at Bozeman's cell. "So right now, we're going to *get* that information."

I saw when his brain connected the dots. “Oh.” He nodded but didn’t say more. I pulled on his arm until he turned and followed me out of the room. I led him down to the lift, and we stepped inside.

“They’re going to interrogate him.” Ethan said it matter-of-factly, but I felt like there was a question under it. It was a mild way of putting it, but it was still true.

“Yes.”

“Are you okay with that?”

I closed my eyes and shrugged. “No. But what am I going to do about it? If I wasn’t here, he would still do it.” I cracked one eye open to peer at him. “Did you ever do that when you were with Goliath?”

His face didn’t change much, though it did tighten somewhat. “No. Goliath didn’t like torture. Occasionally he would rough someone up to get a message across, but not straight torture.”

“They may not need to use torture. Bozeman has no reason to keep quiet that I can think of. He knows what’ll happen if he doesn’t talk.”

The lift opened, and I led the way to Emerson’s personal quarters. After putting in the pin code, the door popped open. I stepped inside and Ethan followed, giving me a questioning look. “How did you know his code?”

“He gave it to me last time I was on board.” I dropped into the closest chair, leaned my head back, and closed my eyes. “He made me stay here with him, because he said it was the only way he could ensure my safety. I thought it was because he wanted to keep me under watch. He didn’t want me on his ship at all, and he didn’t trust me. But now I think it was probably for both reasons.”

Ethan walked around the room, not quite pacing, but obviously unable to stand still. “He does seem to be a good guy.”

I couldn’t help but snort. “Don’t say that in front of him. He’ll hit you for it.”

“Yeah, but he is. He may be a mercenary, but he has a sense of justice. He was really upset when Tyrone fired his gun while there were innocent people around. And he didn’t kill you when he had the chance.”

I agreed with him, for the most part. “He could have made a decent cop if he had chosen that direction. But he went the mercenary route.”

Ethan sat down across from me, and I opened my eyes to look at him. He had a thoughtful look on his face. “Yet you haven’t turned him in. Why?”

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure I had an answer. I shrugged. “I only worked with him because an influential and powerful man couldn’t find someone he loved, and he said Emerson and I working together was the best chance he had of getting her back. And I believed him. While she escaped on her own, we did catch—or, well, we killed—her kidnappers.

“If our positions had been reversed, I would have done anything to make sure my sister was safe, even if it meant relying on a criminal. I couldn’t *not* help, even if that meant working with a mercenary. After it was all over with, I had the opportunity to turn him in, but I couldn’t. He did the right thing and risked his life to help us find a kidnapped woman. He treated me well and was genuinely useful in tracking her down. He wanted to do the right thing, and I couldn’t have him arrested for that.”

We sat there silently for a few moments, both of us lost in our separate thoughts. My thoughts were on Alexi and our childhood and all the hard choices I had made to protect her. All the beatings I took to keep the attention off her were worth every bruise and broken bone. I had fought and stolen and cheated and done all sorts of illegal things to protect the two of us growing up, and I would do it again if I had to.

Thinking about the past was painful, so I tried to steer my thoughts back to the present, but my mind kept tripping over itself and reverting to the memories of my younger years, and the fact that my mother had probably murdered a man for abusing me. She had done something horrible, but she did it to

protect me, so how different were we really? That didn't justify everything else wrong she had done, but it did make me think that maybe, just maybe, she did love us in her own way. Maybe she didn't have much love left in her, but some was still there.

I felt like I was going to cry, and I couldn't stand to do that, so I shifted in my seat and forced myself to focus on Ethan. "Tell me something."

He blinked, surprised. "What?"

"Just tell me something. Anything. Tell me a story."

Perhaps my eyes were a little wet, or maybe he could hear the pain in my voice. He blinked rapidly while his brain processed the request, and then he nodded. "Okay." He stood up and pulled his shirt over his head.

It was my turn to blink, and I sat up straighter. "What are you doing?"

My voice was slightly unsteady, and it irked me. I kicked myself internally for being so easily affected by him. Just because he was taking off his shirt didn't mean anything. My mind wanted to run off in five different directions, but I forced it to halt and to pay attention.

He draped the shirt over the back of his chair, and I tried not to stare at his chest. It was hard not to, though. Between his smooth skin, defined muscles, and array of tattoos, my eyes didn't know what to focus on. He was a bit thin, but still toned. He wasn't a weightlifter by any means, but he was more in shape than I would have expected from a climatologist. He had held his own while fighting, so I shouldn't have been surprised.

"Showing you one of my tattoos."

I'd forgotten I had even asked him a question. I simply blinked at him, and he smiled, as though he knew how distracted I was. He pointed to his right side to a small tattoo. I frowned and squinted, barely making out what looked somewhat like a quarter moon with a circle attached to it.

"What is that?"

“It’s a symbol.” When he noticed me squinting, he walked over, took my hand, and pulled me to my feet. “It’s a symbol for platinum.”

“The metal?”

“Yes. In Novem culture, platinum represents strength, endurance, and determination.”

I snorted softly. “Everything is a symbol in your culture.”

He laughed. “You’re right. We’re very symbolic people.”

I studied the tattoo curiously. “Why platinum?”

“Before Sosa took over as Goliath, we were on a delivery. It was supposed to be routine, done it a thousand times, but this time another gang decided to pick a fight. They tried to wipe us out and steal our product. There were only about a dozen of us, and two went down immediately. I took a bullet, right here.” He took my hand and pressed my fingers to the center of the circle part of the tattoo. Even though I couldn’t see it, I could feel the ridge of scar tissue where the wound had healed.

“Sosa caught me as I went down, and our group retreated into a building. They had us pinned down, but we were a wily bunch, and we kept countering their attacks. We had a lot of firepower, which I don’t think they had anticipated. I didn’t participate in much of the fighting. I laid on the floor, mostly, while Sosa kept me safe and alive. We fought them for seven hours.”

My jaw dropped. “You were stuck without medical help for *seven* hours?”

He nodded. “No one thought I’d make it. *I* didn’t think I’d make it. Sosa wouldn’t let me give up, though. He treated my wounds the best he could, but the rest was up to me to maintain my will to survive. I held on. It was agony. I passed out for a little of it, but not much. When we finally beat them and a medic got to me, I had lost so much blood Sosa said I was a white man. I should have died, but I pulled through. Everyone said I had platinum bones. I shouldn’t have survived, but I did.”

“You endured.” It made sense. I ran my finger around the tattoo gently. *How is his skin this smooth?* “You survived.”

“That’s why I got this tattoo around the scar, to remind me I’m made of tougher stuff than I thought.” He smiled softly. “My bones—and my will—are platinum.”

I couldn’t imagine being shot and having to lay there for seven hours, thinking I could die at any second. I’d been through a lot, so I could empathize to an extent, but I couldn’t imagine the grit it would take to survive something like that.

“Well, I for one am very glad you didn’t give up.” I tilted my head back to meet his eyes. They were intense and focused on me. I almost wanted to take a step back, but I didn’t. “I’m not sure I would have survived that.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Julia. I believe you can do anything you decide to.”

My eyes dropped to his collarbone, and I swallowed. I was too close to him. He was like a magnet, pulling me towards him. I knew it, but I couldn’t scrounge up the will to step away from him. Instead, I traced his other tattoo. It was the one with the intertwined symbols for earth, wind, and fire. It was done in thick black lines, but it was also somehow soft and fluid. It was beautiful, and my favorite tattoo so far.

His hand cupped my elbow, and his thumb rubbed gentle circles on the inside of it. Sparks shot from his fingertips directly into my skin with each touch. I tried to ignore it, to pretend it was nothing, but I couldn’t. Every time we touched, something deep inside me felt suddenly at peace and content and...happy.

I couldn’t explain why I was drawn to him. I couldn’t pinpoint the thing that sucked me in, but there was no point in denying that I was attracted to him. I liked being close to him. I liked touching him, and I liked it when he touched me. I liked the feelings he evoked in me.

Him. I liked *him*.

I breathed in slowly, trying to get a handle on my thoughts and emotions. Not sure that I had a firm grip on either, I closed

my eyes before looking back at Ethan's face. The intense look was still there. It wasn't an angry or predatory look, just laser focused. I wasn't sure I was ready for that kind of intensity.

For a moment, I didn't know what to say. I had planned on saying something, but words fled under his gaze. My eyes followed one of his dreadlocks as it trailed down to his collarbone. "What are we doing?" was all I could think of to say.

"Truthfully, I'm not sure." He knew exactly what I meant, and I was grateful he didn't parse words.

"This is...I don't know if I'm ready for this."

His other hand settled on my waist. It was strong and somehow reassuring even while it set my insides fluttering. "I think we need to define what this is."

The easiest thing I could do was close my eyes and hide. I could still feel his eyes on me, and I didn't want to face him. But that would be cowardly, and I hated being a coward, so I leaned my head back and looked him in the eyes. "I like you, Ethan. I am...strongly attracted to you. I don't know why."

A smile took away some of the intensity of his gaze. "Way to boost my ego."

I flushed. "That's not what I meant. I mean, I haven't had real feelings for a guy since I was in the academy, and our circumstances aren't conducive to lasting feelings. And, honestly, you aren't my usual type."

"Maybe that's why you are attracted to me. Because everything is different right now."

My emotions weren't that clear to me, but I didn't dismiss his words. "What about you? What are you thinking?"

He was silent, as though he was searching through his feelings. "I feel attracted to you. I've always been attuned to the movement of the universe, and I know we were meant to meet. At first, I simply thought it was so I could help you get away from those men, and then I wondered if you'd been brought across my path to teach me something. I feel drawn to

you in a way I've never felt before. Being with you feels right."

It wasn't the first time he had talked about the universe bringing us together, and I knew he believed it. I wasn't entirely sure what I believed. I couldn't deny there was something out there that I believed was a higher power, if I could term it that way, but it wasn't something personal to me. It was obviously personal to Ethan.

His thumb was still rubbing circles on my arm, and it was distracting me. I swallowed. "So...what now?"

"What is it you want?"

To be loved.

I don't know why those words sprang to mind, but I couldn't say them out loud. That would be too vulnerable. I had too many wounds to speak those words aloud. "I'm not sure." I looked away from him again. "There's so much going on right now."

"Maybe this will make it simpler." He tilted my chin up with his finger and he kissed me, gently but firmly. I didn't fight him; I didn't want to. He slipped his arm around my waist and pulled me into him, and I obligingly slipped my arms around his neck, grabbing onto his dreads.

He paused, lifting his head slightly, but didn't release me. We stared at each other. I could feel the uncertainty showing in my eyes. Ethan didn't seem bothered by it. "Oh, *ami*." His voice was low, barely above a whisper. "Do you not feel how right this is?"

Something in my head was yelling at me to run. I couldn't explain my aversion to commitment, and I couldn't deny its existence. But I could move beyond it. Because my heart was indeed telling me that standing in his arms was right. Like I belonged there. The only other time I'd felt that way was so long ago, when I was so young that it was barely a flicker of a memory. Back when my parents loved me before Dad died and everything fell apart.

Too many thoughts and feelings were jumbled up inside me, so instead of answering him I simply kissed him again. He held me tightly, stroking my hair, and I felt my heart twitch. It was a kind of twitch I hadn't felt before. I wasn't naive enough to say I fell in love with him at that moment, but I felt something I'd never felt before. Something that was in the same vein as love.

I pulled back a little, feeling overwhelmed, but I didn't step out of his arms. I couldn't look at him. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. By the end of the breath, I realized I didn't want to stop. I kissed him again, relishing the feeling of his lips gliding against mine.

He kissed my neck, and I ran my hands over his face. He whispered something in my ear. It was in his native tongue, and I didn't understand it, but it sure sounded sexy.

Eventually, he pulled back, and I stared up at his eyes, confused. He had a smile on his face, and he rubbed his thumb along my jaw. He said something else in his native tongue before momentarily closing his eyes. "Did that make anything clearer for you? Because it did for me."

I blinked, barely even remembering that we had been discussing our feelings before making out. I cleared my throat and licked my lips. He watched the motion with the same intense focus he'd had earlier. Words left me again.

"Look, *ami*, whatever happens while we're here, whatever comes from helping Emerson, when this is over and you're safely back on Viridis or wherever you need to be, I fully intend to ask you on a proper date, where I intend to do a lot more of that. All I'm asking for is a chance. Don't discount me because of my past."

Somehow, words came back to me. "I don't know, Ethan. I can't make any promises right now. I don't know exactly what I'm feeling or what's going to happen." Sadness filled his eyes, and I squeezed his arm. "But I can say I will make sure I give whatever this is between us fair consideration. We can revisit it once we're out of danger."

The sadness disappeared and he smiled. My concession might not have been what he was looking for, but he seemed content with it. “Done.”

Unsure of the wisdom of my choice, I nodded. Ethan was different. Exploring this new feeling was worth the possible pain of it not working out. It terrified me a little. I hadn’t put myself at risk of a broken heart probably ever, but I was tired of being lonely. I may not let people see the loneliness, but I felt it deeply and I was tired of it. I was tired of doing everything on my own, without support, without a life partner to help me shoulder my burdens. I longed to have someone love me as much as I loved them.

Before either of us could say more, the door beeped and opened. We stepped apart jerkily, and I nearly tripped over my chair. Emerson and Steel stepped into the room. Emerson’s eyes raked over both of us, taking in Ethan’s shirtless appearance and our obvious closeness. His eyes came to rest on me with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, are we interrupting?”

Despite my best resolve, I blushed. “Lick a laser, Emerson.”

He snorted and couldn’t hide his smile. “I’m sorry, are you eighty? No one uses that phrase anymore.”

I had no retort, so I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

Steel didn’t have any obvious reaction to the situation, but I’d swear the corners of his mouth were turned up. Ethan didn’t seem bothered by any of it, though he did grab his shirt and pull it back over his head. “I take it you had some success?”

His words brought everyone’s minds back to the situation at hand. Emerson sobered up and his smile dropped. “Yes. You were right. Someone on Archuleta’s crew, a guy by the name of Kent, approached him at a bar and struck a deal with him. He paid Bozeman a thousand credits for the location of the warehouse. He doesn’t know where the guns are currently, and he hasn’t had face to face contact with Kent since the bar. He

said that Kent mentioned reporting to someone in charge, but he didn't have a name."

I frowned. "Kent was an underling?"

"It appears so, yes."

That threw a bit of a wrench into our plans. "Bozeman has no idea who else is involved?"

Steel shook his head. "No. He was a pawn."

"Great." I sighed. "What now?"

Emerson sat down on the couch across from me. He looked tired. Or annoyed. Or both. "Now we contact Archuleta and tell him what we have so far. Once we give him a name, he'll take care of Kent. But if we aren't sure who Kent is reporting to, then that's a little risky. I would rather give him a report, get a location for Kent, and pick him up ourselves. Then we can squeeze him until he gives up the head of this little scheme."

"Somehow, I doubt Archuleta will sit by once he has a name."

Emerson nodded. "Yes, but I can't go around him. If I start picking up his people, it's going to cause friction that may result in violence. I don't want to chance that."

He had a point. I chewed on my lip, which made me think about Ethan. I glanced at him and saw him watching me with a little smile. I couldn't help but smile back before I returned my attention to Emerson. "Then we don't have a choice."

He rubbed his jaw. "Okay. I'll call him."

Steel sat down on the arm of the couch. "I wouldn't tell him much though. Just ask for permission to pick up Kent."

Emerson nodded and stood up. "Yeah, I got it." He disappeared into the other room to make the call, and I picked a piece of lint off my shirt.

"And here I thought we might have an actual break." Ethan sighed.

I snorted. “The faster we find Archuleta’s guns the faster Emerson will get us off-world. I’m still worried my kidnappers are going to catch up before we wrap this up.”

Ethan frowned deeply. “How long do you think we have before they catch up with us?”

I shrugged. “If they have the resources I think they do, not long. They might get a little thrown off track because of how we got to Concordia, but they’ll still figure out where we were dropped off. There are cameras practically everywhere. Eventually, they’ll track us here.”

Steel folded his arms. “These guys are pros?”

“That’s the feeling I got. I don’t know if they are mercenaries, but I feel more like they’re personal security with some serious training. I don’t know. But they had some deep connections if they found out we had evidence barely an hour after we obtained it.”

“If they are as connected as you think, they’ll find you soon. But if you’re still with Emerson, he’ll protect you. And his crew is the best.”

“Yeah, I don’t doubt that, but I do doubt he’ll put everything on the line for me. I’m on the other side of the law from him.”

Steel grunted. “That’s not important to him.”

I couldn’t dispute that. Steel knew Emerson way better than I did, and I had no evidence one way or the other. I sighed and crossed my legs, feeling impatient. “I just want to get out of here before being found.”

We only had to wait a few more minutes before Emerson reemerged. He didn’t look happy, but then again, his mood today had been consistently sour.

“Well?” Ethan asked before the rest of us could.

“Archuleta said to meet at one of his estates. Kent is there. He’s going to bring him in. I tried to talk him out of it, but he refused to listen. Let’s hope that doesn’t backfire. We may spook whoever is behind this.”

“Do you think it might flush the real culprit out?” I asked.

Emerson shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, we need to go.”

Steel gave him a flat look. “Just the four of us?”

“Yes. He doesn’t want me to bring a bunch of people. I already called Jack and told him to get the shuttle prepped and ready. We’re leaving now.”

I dropped my head back against the seat. “No rest for the wicked.”

Emerson gave me an almost wolfish smile. “Coming over to the dark side, are we?”

“Not even close.” I stood up and gave him a look of pure granite. “Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ethan

The ride to Archuleta's estate was a fast one. Julia and I sat next to each other, almost touching, but not quite. I wanted to touch her, to hold her hand, but we both knew that wasn't a good idea. Emerson might only tease us about it if he noticed, but others might choose to exploit it. I didn't think Steel would cause any problems for us since it didn't seem like he cared, but there was no way to gauge what the crew might think. Granted, Jack was the only other crew member on the shuttle, and he was busy piloting, but given the circumstances, being extra cautious felt like the best move.

Julia didn't say much on the ride. She seemed a little more reserved than normal. I got the sense that undertaking a romantic relationship would be a massive step for her, especially if she hadn't had a real relationship in years. She'd had a messed-up childhood, and I knew that affected her in every area of her life, including the romance department.

Part of me was surprised by how much I wanted a relationship with her and how much I was willing to risk for her. I had dated when I was with Goliath, but those relationships had been shallow at best. They had been solely focused on having fun and hadn't been serious at all. At least when I made it to college the relationships matured. None of those girls knew about my past. Somehow, none of the women I dated had felt like the one, but with Julia it was different. I'd never felt this invested in a relationship, and Julia and I weren't even dating yet. This was new and fragile and important.

The good news was we could figure everything out once this was all over with. We could take things slowly. I wanted to show Julia how much I cared about her without scaring her off. I needed time to figure out how to do that.

"We're here." Jack spoke from the cockpit when we started to descend.

Emerson, who was sitting across from me, gave each of us stern looks. “Remember, don’t say anything. And don’t start any fights. We’re here to pick up Kent, not divulge what we know to Archuleta. Not yet. Is that clear?”

I nodded, as did the others. Julia scratched the back of her head. “I take it you have no desire to turn this over to Archuleta to finish, huh?”

“No. I’m going to find that merchandise myself. I don’t trust him to finish this and not blame me. If he wants his merchandise back, then I’m going to get it.”

When the shuttle touched down, Jack got up and opened the cargo door. Outside the shuttle stood five men, all armed, though no guns were currently pointed at us. Their eyes were wary, as though they didn’t trust us. I didn’t appreciate the hostility.

Emerson led the way down the ramp. Julia and I followed next. As soon as my foot touched the ground, a frigid breeze blew up, making me tense. I didn’t mind winter, since I knew all seasons had a purpose and a beauty all their own, but the wind felt like a bad omen.

Julia whistled quietly under her breath, and I followed her eyes to see what she was so impressed with. Once I saw the massive, towering building, I almost whistled myself. Archuleta’s home was more of a mansion than a house. It had five levels and thick, white columns in the front, framing an enormous wooden front door. The house angled at the sides, producing east and west wings, both of which were made of brick and covered in decorative vines. The landscaping was immaculate. Sculpted shrubs lined the walkways, and ornate iron fences surrounded little flower gardens, though of course no flowers were currently blooming.

I glimpsed a few other buildings as well, but beyond a hangar, where he probably stored multiple private aircraft and spacecraft, I couldn’t make out what the other buildings were. The front yard, where we landed, was huge and bare. In the summer it was undoubtedly a perfect shade of green. Farther away, I could see a wall surrounding the entire property.

“I knew he was rich, but this is ridiculous,” I murmured to Julia.

She grunted in agreement. The men were already ushering us towards the house. I stayed at her side and kept my eyes open and alert. We might have been allies of Archuleta, but this place wasn't safe. The vibes coming out of the house were dark and foreboding despite its opulent appearance.

Emerson didn't look impressed or intimidated as he walked towards the mansion. I don't know if it was a front he was putting on, or if he just didn't care. He seemed to be good at pretending to be indifferent when he wanted to, but I might have been the only one to notice the foreboding nature of the house. It wouldn't have been the first time I'd picked up on something that others hadn't.

The door opened promptly when we approached to reveal more guards. They stepped aside so we could enter. Marble floors lined the entryway, and a massive chandelier hung suspended from the high ceiling. A wide, curving staircase led up the right side of the room to the next floor with gold-plated railings. Bronze statues stood in the corners of the room, adding to the opulence.

There wasn't much time to take in the beauty because we were quickly ushered towards the rear of the house. Obscenely expensive paintings hung on the walls, but I didn't have time to stop and study them. There were even a couple tapestries throughout the house. *I didn't think people even liked tapestries anymore.*

We came to a large study. Bookshelves lined the walls, and plush chairs and a big desk stood close to the side wall. Lamps with fancy carved bases sat on little end tables, all lit. In my opinion, the decor was over the top. There was no way he needed that many lamps lit.

Archuleta's men fanned out around the room, setting up by the large windows overlooking a pool. Archuleta himself sat behind the desk, a seriously displeased look on his face. My stomach sank when I saw his expression, but I tried not to read too much into it. I had a feeling anger was his default emotion.

Emerson didn't seem cowed by his angry visage. "Archuleta." His greeting was respectful, but not necessarily friendly.

Archuleta grunted. "Emerson."

"We're here for Kent."

"Obviously." Archuleta rubbed his jaw. "He's dead."

I don't know why I was surprised, but I was. Julia had thought something like this would happen. My main thought was that we were back to square one. *Can't follow the chain of command up to the boss if one of the links is broken.*

Emerson scowled rather fiercely. "What do you mean, he's dead? I called you less than an hour ago."

Archuleta gave him an annoyed look in return. "He's dead. Sitting out back with a bullet in his head. I sent my men to retrieve him, and he fought back, shooting one of them. Rodney didn't have a choice but to kill him."

At the mention of his name, a man standing to Archuleta's left towards the corner of the room straightened, tilting his chin up slightly. I hadn't seen him before, and I was pretty sure he hadn't been at the meeting Julia and I had crashed, but I thought his name sounded vaguely familiar, as though someone had brought him up in connection with Archuleta before.

"Walk me through exactly what happened." Emerson sounded like he was trying to conjure up patience.

"I told Rodney to bring Kent here so I could hand him over to you. Rodney took a few of the men and went to retrieve him. Kent saw them and must have known what they were there for. He started shooting at them and killed one of my guys. Rodney put him down." Archuleta spoke as though he was talking to a simpleton. The tone was condescending, and I twitched, controlling the impulse to say something snarky.

When I was younger, I used to have a quick temper and a smart mouth. It had gotten me in trouble a time or two. I had learned to move away from that and to think through my words, but being in this kind of environment made those old

tendencies want to spring right back up. Emerson wasn't Goliath, but he and I were on the same side, and I didn't like him being disrespected. If I'd still been with Goliath and someone had talked like that to Sosa, I would have shot them.

Emerson didn't have my reaction. Instead, he folded his arms. "How do you expect me to find your guns now? Kent was our only lead. Now we have no way of figuring out where the guns are."

My eyes jumped around the room, trying to take in the reactions of the men. Emerson wasn't telling the truth, and I knew exactly why he lied. It was highly likely that whoever Kent had been working for was in the room. It was also probable that it was someone who had gone to get Kent, hence why he'd ended up dead instead of captured.

Archuleta stood up, braced his palms on the desk, and leaned towards Emerson, who didn't back away. "I don't care how you do it. Dig into his past, his financial life, where he likes to hang out, I don't care. Figure it out. This is still on you. Kent must have stashed the guns somewhere. I want my merchandise back, and I'm holding you personally responsible if they are never found."

Emerson's look turned ugly. "You make it really hard for me to want to work for you."

Archuleta shrugged. "The money's good. If you want to stick around, impress me. I'm not impossible; I simply want results."

"I'll find your guns, mark my word. But I won't take the blame for this. This scheme was concocted by one of your men. You are responsible for what went down."

Although he didn't look happy, Archuleta didn't contradict him. Instead, he waved his hands at Emerson as though he was finished with him. "Get out. I'm in a foul mood. Go find my guns. You won't find them here." He turned to one of his underlings. "Take them back to their shuttle."

Rigid, Emerson turned and followed him from the room. The rest of us trailed along silently, taking our cues from

Emerson. Obviously, Kent's death put a wrinkle in our plans, but there were still some avenues we could explore, if we didn't tip our hand. Julia, Steel, and I exchanged silent looks. Neither of them seemed surprised by the outcome of our little jaunt to the estate, but none of us were happy about it.

Once we were back on the shuttle, Jack started to fire up the engines, and Emerson let out a vehement string of curses. I blinked at him but didn't comment. Julia set her jaw and took her seat. Steel, however, gave Emerson a bland look. "Hades, Emerson, calm down. You're that angry?"

"Shut up, Steel," Emerson grouched.

Steel rolled his eyes. "It's called a setback. We have other options."

We strapped ourselves in as the engines whined and lifted the shuttle into the air. Emerson tapped a hand against his leg. "I'm not angry about that. Archuleta's attitude aggravates me."

"I agree." I pushed a couple of my dreadlocks over my shoulder and adjusted the safety restraints. "Guy's an alpha-class jerk."

Julia laughed under her breath. "What I can't figure out is how he's so successful."

"He's good at business." Emerson stretched out his legs, and some of the anger seemed to leave him. "He's good at making deals and knowing the exact moment to act. Somehow. It's like an instinct for him."

"We should make a new plan." Julia studied her fingernails, picking at one of them. "My instincts are telling me that Rodney is the guy behind all this."

"Why Rodney?" I was genuinely curious.

"It's a feeling, mostly, but my gut is usually right. He headed up the team who went to get Kent. He probably got the guys that helped him steal the guns to go and kill Kent. Maybe Kent fought back and shot one of them. Or maybe they were forced to bring along someone who wasn't in on the plan, and they had to kill him to cover up their involvement. Either way, Rodney still looks good for it."

Her logic seemed sound, though it was all still guesswork. I sighed. “Why do I feel like I’ve heard of Rodney before?”

Emerson answered. “He’s Archuleta’s second-in-command. They’ve been major players for almost ten years. Rodney takes care of everything Archuleta doesn’t personally do. Does his dirty work. He’s helped him get this far.”

That sounds right. I nodded. “Yeah, I seem to remember Goliath dealing with him once upon a time. I wasn’t personally involved with that, but I heard about Rodney. Tough guy.”

“He’s tired of being second and wants control. He does all the dirty work, and Archuleta gets the credit and reaps the benefits. It has to wear on a person after a while.” Julia picked at one more nail before dropping her hand. Her eyes lifted to mine. “It’s a plausible theory.”

“Do we set up a meeting over the discussion board?” I asked.

All eyes went to Emerson. He nodded. “The problem is we need a viable buyer. Someone with credibility and cash. We can’t just make up a buyer because they’ll need to meet in person. Rodney’s men will know who we are, so we need someone outside of the crew to be the buyer.”

Silence descended on the group while we tried to come up with a solution. Julia didn’t even know anyone on Esmuna, so she wouldn’t be much help. I couldn’t think of any of my old ties on Esmuna who would have the clout for this kind of thing, or who I would trust to ask. I already didn’t know many people around here as it was, and I was afraid the ones I did would react like Tyrone and assume I was an informant.

Steel finally shrugged. “I’m not thinking of anyone.”

Emerson sighed. “Reuben has some ties in the area. Let’s hope he has a favor he can call in.”

“We’ll set up a trap.”

“Ideally.” Emerson sat forward and rubbed his hands together. “If we can pick the meeting location then we can control the environment. Set up the crew to surround the place.

Wait until they show up, confirm they have the guns, and then go in.” He glanced at Julia and almost smiled. “Very similar to a police sting.”

She smiled. “I bet we can coordinate something like that.”

He grunted. “I thought so.” He leaned back again, his eyes going to Steel. “Do you think Cass can help us out with posting on the discussion board?”

Steel, instead of being annoyed by him bringing her up this time, simply shrugged. “She’s taught me a few things. I may not need her help.”

Emerson gave him a strange look. “Are you sure everything’s okay between you two? You’ve been acting weirder than normal about her.”

Steel sighed. He started to say something and then stopped. His fingers twitched down at his sides before he shrugged. “I’m thinking of proposing to her.”

Emerson’s eyebrows winged up. “You’re what?”

Steel set his jaw and looked away. Emerson realized his reaction might not have been the best, and he put his hand out in a placating motion. “I’m not saying it’s a bad idea. I just didn’t think you’d ever get married.”

“Well, it never was an issue before her.” His voice was a little softer, as though this was important to him.

Emerson was quiet before he responded much gentler than before. “If you want to marry her, then ask. She loves you, man. A lot. If you want to marry her then you should. Don’t let anything make you second guess it. She’s a great girl, and she puts up with you. There isn’t anything more to think about, is there?”

Steel looked between me and Julia before shrugging. “I’ve never done anything like this. I’ve never been serious about a girl. I’m not even sure she’ll say yes.”

“Oh, she will. If she loves you, which I’m pretty sure she does, she’ll say yes. You just need to ask her. Man up. You can shoot a president, but not ask a girl to marry you? That’s sad.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.” Julia muttered and turned her head away from the two of them.

Steel’s closed look returned to his face, but he nodded. “I want to.”

“Then you should,” Emerson said firmly, closing the discussion. We settled back into silence. I wondered what it was like for an assassin to be in love and to want to build a life with someone but not know if they’d be safe. That had to be one of his biggest concerns. It would have been one of mine.

I stifled a yawn as the shuttle started to descend back towards the ground. I checked the time and was stunned to see it was already early evening. I hadn’t realized the day had gone by so fast. No wonder I was tired. I was used to going without proper sleep, but usually not with this much adrenaline. My limbs were starting to feel heavy. I needed some fuel and a long night’s rest.

It took a few minutes for Jack to maneuver the smaller craft aboard the *Hawk*. We disembarked, and Emerson smacked his com. “Reuben.”

After a few seconds I heard his voice respond. “Captain.”

“I need to speak with you.”

“We have guests, sir.”

Julia halted abruptly. Reuben hadn’t sounded happy, necessarily, but there also hadn’t seemed to be any overt warning in his voice. Emerson’s steps slowed, and then he stopped entirely. “Guests?”

“Novem. They’re waiting in the mess hall.”

Novem? Why would any of my people be here? Did Sosa send someone to check on me?

Emerson looked at me with the same question in his eyes, and I lifted my hands. “I have no idea why they’re here.”

He tapped his com again. “We’re on our way.”

Julia gave me a side glance as we started walking again. “Think this is going to be trouble?” she asked quietly.

“Your guess is as good as mine.” I kept my voice quiet as well, though I didn’t think we needed to be so cautious. My tribe wasn’t my enemy. “It may not have anything to do with us.”

She pursed her lips. “I doubt it’s a coincidence.”

“Yeah, I don’t believe in coincidences.”

Minutes later, we arrived at the mess hall. It was an open space with tables set up in rows and food dispensers along one wall. It was utilitarian in concept for cleanliness and sanitary reasons. Several of the tables were occupied with crew members, who immediately ceased conversation when Emerson entered.

At the far end of the room, six Novem men sat around a table. Emerson moved towards them immediately, ignoring his crew. From the other side of the room, I couldn’t see anyone well enough to recognize them, but I could tell clearly that they were Novem.

“Gentlemen.” Emerson’s voice was firm, but not unwelcoming. I tried to look around him and Steel, but I couldn’t see much. I stepped to the side to get a good look at the newcomers but was blocked by another table.

“Captain Emerson. Greetings.”

I know that voice. I pushed against Steel’s arm to get him to move, but immediately removed my hand when he glowered at me. I tried to ignore the look and squeeze between him and the table. My eyes immediately dropped to the man sitting in the middle of the table, showing his place of honor. He was already rising to greet Emerson.

“S—Goliath?” I almost used his real name but stopped myself in time. Julia might know Sosa was Goliath, but it was a secret I wouldn’t reveal to anyone else. Keeping his identity hidden was important.

Sosa turned from Emerson to look at me. A grin split his face, and he stepped away from the table and immediately wrapped his arms around me. “Ethan! *Da mein, rinwayo.*”

I couldn't hide my smile as I wrapped my arms around him. "*Da mein*. It's good to see you, brother."

The last time we had seen each other in person was months ago. Because of my work schedule and his sensitive occupation, we rarely got to see each other in person. Part of it was also for my benefit, though I chafed at the thought that I was kept from my brother simply for safety concerns. Some things were more important than that.

Sosa leaned back, clasping both of my arms. He looked me up and down before nodding. "You're looking well. I half expected to see you malnourished or at least for the weather on Cadium to have worn on you, but I see you've come through unscathed."

I laughed. "It was a little touchy there, but I survived." I turned to look at Emerson and Steel. Julia was standing partially behind them, lips pressed together in a thin line. I focused on Emerson. "Captain Emerson, this is Goliath. Brother, this is Captain Emerson. He's the one I told you about."

The captain held his hand out and Sosa shook it warmly. "Your reputation is well-known among my business associates. It is good to finally meet you in person."

Emerson nodded demurely. "And I know your reputation as well, Goliath. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you for your hospitality. Your first mate was very considerate of us."

I tried not to interrupt them. There were too many people present, and both Sosa and Emerson had appearances to maintain. That was part of what it meant to be leaders, and I knew for two people who were as powerful as them that there were formalities to observe. While Emerson might not have been the leader of a gang with as much influence as Sosa, he was still powerful in his own right.

Emerson gestured around him. "You are welcome here, and you are welcome to dine with us."

"Thank you. I believe we shall accept the invitation."

I glanced around at the other faces at the table and couldn't hold back another smile when I saw Asher. He grinned back at me, and I circled the table to hug him.

“Asher! It's been too long, my brother.”

Asher clapped me on the back. He was a few inches shorter than me, with a stocky frame and darker skin. Black braids hung down his back, dotted with ceremonial beads. “Ethan. It is good to see you.”

The others watched for a moment, which should have made me feel uncomfortable, but I was too happy to feel out of place. Emerson rubbed his jaw. “What brings you here?”

Sosa smiled and motioned to me. I obediently released Asher and walked back over to him. “Ethan contacted me to ask if I had any information pertaining to his situation. Unfortunately, I was of little help, but I was on one of Esmuna's moons and thought I would drop in to visit my old friend.”

I knew there was more to the story, but I didn't say anything. Not in front of everyone. I clasped Sosa's forearm. “I'm always happy to see you, *rinwayo*.”

Sosa nodded to me. His eyes went to Steel, and then to Julia. “Introduce me to your other companions.”

I frowned at him, but I recognized an order when I heard one. I might not be part of the gang anymore, but that was only because Sosa had allowed me to leave. In a situation like this, I still had to acknowledge him as leader and behave like I was still part of the gang. I motioned to Steel and Julia in turn. “This is Steel and Julia.”

Steel had a closed, predatory look on his face. That seemed to be his default face when meeting new people. In his line of work, it paid to be cautious. Julia also didn't look too thrilled. She did, however, extend her hand, whereas Steel did not.

Sosa took her hand with a smile and an assessing look. “Pleasure to meet you, Julia.” While still clasping her hand he leaned towards me. “You did not mention how beautiful she was when we talked.”

Julia blushed ever so slightly, and I felt a little embarrassed myself. Before I could think of something to say, Julia spoke. “When we first met, I was covered in dirt, dust, and blood, so I doubt I looked very beautiful then. First impressions last, you know.”

Sosa chuckled and released her hand. “True, but I think Ethan is a bit more evolved than that.”

Emerson interrupted, to my relief. “Let’s sit and eat. I’m famished.”

Somehow, Steel and I ended up sitting next to each other across from Emerson and Julia. I didn’t like the seating arrangement, but there was nothing I could do about it. Asher sat on Julia’s other side, but I would have felt more comfortable if I was the one next to her. Sosa had decided to forgo his seat of honor and sit on the end next to me instead. He nudged my elbow as we dug into the food Emerson’s men had fetched for us. “How has work been going? Find any amazing storm stuff lately?”

I snickered at his teasing tone. “It’s been going well. You know how storms fascinate me. I have some cool pictures back on my ship I should send to you. Admittedly, Cadium is not my favorite planet, though I did end up finding something I had not expected.”

My eyes connected with Julia’s, and she smiled softly before taking another bite of what appeared to be meatloaf. Sosa caught the look and lifted an eyebrow. “Is that where you met the lovely lady sitting across from us?”

Of course, he already knew the answer to that, but he was giving me an out in case the others at the table weren’t supposed to know that. I didn’t mind the question as much as I minded his insinuations. I turned and gave him what I hoped was a quelling look.

“Yes. But that’s a long story. I would be much more interested in hearing about this business you were doing on the moon. Which moon was that?”

“Acacia. We were meeting with a new potential client.” He chewed thoughtfully. “Buyer. Wasn’t sure he was legit, so I declined the deal.”

Julia snorted so softly I almost missed it. She coughed to cover it and kept her eyes on her plate as she took another bite. Sosa eyed her, but I couldn’t read his expression. I had a feeling the two of them weren’t going to get along. They were enemies by nature. Police officers and drug lords weren’t usually compatible friends.

Sosa dropped the subject and looked back at me. “How goes things here?”

It was an open-ended question, and I glanced at Emerson before answering. He nodded to me to signal that I could tell Sosa about the situation.

“We hit a snag. Tracked down one of the thieves on Archuleta’s payroll, but he’s since been killed.”

Sosa took a drink and lifted his eyebrows. “One of the thieves?”

I nodded. “He was reporting to someone, but we didn’t figure out who it was. Kent was our best lead, and now he’s dead.”

“Do you have any other leads?”

“Yeah, if we can make it work.”

“Actually,” Emerson interjected, “I’m thinking you might be able to help us with that.”

I gave him a questioning look, and he shrugged. “Goliath has the clout, and obviously enough money.”

“You want Goliath to set up the meet?” Julia nearly dropped her fork.

The idea had merit. I thought it over. *He would be a good fit. He is well-known and would have an obvious reason for wanting to purchase guns.*

“Yeah, I could see that working.” I agreed with Emerson.

Julia almost glared at me. But she closed her eyes and visibly relaxed. She looked at me again with annoyance rather than anger, but also with resignation. “Fine.”

“Help with what?” Sosa asked plaintively.

I explained the situation to him and what our plan was. He listened carefully, finishing off the food on his plate. When I was finished talking, he sat there for a long moment, looking thoughtful. Then, he nodded. “I’ll do it.”

Emerson smiled. “Excellent.” He looked at Steel. “Can you send out a message and set up a meeting for tomorrow?”

Steel’s face remained like granite, but he nodded. Without a word, he got up and left the room. I watched him go, wondering again if he really was a person to be trusted or not. Sometimes it seemed like he was a good guy, and then other times he seemed completely inhuman. I just wasn’t sure which side was real and which side was pretend.

“I can only stay through tomorrow, I’m afraid.” Sosa pushed his plate back and folded his hands on the table. “I have business to attend to on Fairfax.”

Julia’s mouth tightened. I knew this was hard for her. I wanted to give her hand a squeeze and tell her I understood her feelings, but she was too far away to do that.

Emerson relaxed a little. “We should have this all wrapped up by then.”

I hoped so. The sooner we got off Esmuna the better.

Julia stood up abruptly. “Let me know when the meeting is set for tomorrow. I want to rest.”

Emerson gave her a look I could tell meant something, but I wasn’t sure what the *something* was. “You aren’t going anywhere by yourself.”

Her jaw tightened, but she said nothing. For several tense moments, she and Emerson stared at each other. Then, she looked at me and then at Sosa. I opened my mouth to volunteer to go with her, but she turned sideways, almost turning her back to me, and focused on Emerson. She put her

hand on his shoulder and rubbed it. “Would you escort me back to your room, then?”

I blinked. I wasn’t sure how her voice remained civil when she was obviously angry. Emerson leaned back to look up at her. I saw his eyes move around the room before he slipped his arm around her waist. He pulled her down to sit on his leg. “One minute.”

Their voices sounded strange to my ears. I hadn’t heard either of them use those tones before. They weren’t nice, but they weren’t quite sarcastic either. But she was sitting in his lap, and I couldn’t make sense of why. I suddenly felt like I was sliding down the side of a mountain. Just when I thought I had traction, the stones beneath my feet would fall away.

Julia sat obligingly on his leg, though her eyes did seek out mine. I gave her a confused look and she rolled her eyes before smiling faintly. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but it was obviously supposed to reassure me.

Reuben appeared suddenly, making me jump. He dropped into the seat Steel had just vacated next to me. He had a huge pile of food, and he immediately began forking it into his mouth. He looked between Emerson and Julia but didn’t comment on their odd behavior. “All repairs have been finished, Captain,” he reported.

Emerson seemed pleased. “Good. I want us completely operational and stocked up by tomorrow at noon. Hopefully we’ll be leaving the planet by nightfall tomorrow if everything goes well.”

Julia folded her arms and tapped an impatient finger on her elbow. “Are you done yet?”

I was having a hard time following her rapid mood changes. Sosa hid a smile beside me while I blinked at her. Emerson rolled his eyes. “Patience, woman.”

“Woman?” Julia dropped her hands onto her hips. “Who are you calling *woman*? I have a name, you know.”

They were starting to draw the attention of others in the room. Emerson glowered at her. “I’ll call you whatever I

please.”

She glared right back at him, shifting positions to look him in the eyes. “I’m not a piece of property, you know. I have a mind and ambitions and I don’t need you.”

Someone across the room scoffed loudly. Everyone was watching. I didn’t know what else to do except watch the drama unfold before me.

Emerson laughed at her. “Oh honey, you just don’t realize you need me. Why else do you think you came back?”

She made a disgusted noise and started to pull out of his grip. His arm wrapped tighter around her waist, and she growled. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and smacked him on the chest. “Stop being a caveman and let go.”

Instead of obeying, Emerson grabbed her wrists and trapped her hands behind her back. “You think you don’t need me? That you don’t *want* me?”

A brief look of genuine annoyance crossed her face before she leaned back, lifted her foot, and shoved Emerson with it. She had enough power behind her that he lost his grip, but before she could wiggle away, he grabbed her by the waist again.

Enough was enough. I didn’t know what was going on, but I wasn’t about to let Emerson manhandle her. I didn’t know what had gotten into him, but I wasn’t afraid to stand up to him. I started to rise, but Reuben clamped a hand on my shoulder and pushed me back down. I glared at him, and he leaned over to whisper in my ear. “Ease up, cowboy. This is an act they do. They did it when she was here before. Just watch. It’ll keep the men away from her. For her safety.”

Not sure I believed him, I turned back to the two of them. Julia slapped rather weakly at the hands holding her. Emerson laughed at her. A few of the other men laughed as well. Julia’s eyes sharpened, and instead of fighting his hands, she hauled back and punched him in the face.

She caught his cheek, and he immediately released her. She scrambled away from him and stood there, hands on her hips.

He prodded his cheek, real irritation in his eyes, before standing up and facing her with a predatory look. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Make me.”

A few of the men howled. A challenge had been issued, there was no mistaking that. I got the feeling that few people challenged the captain. But Julia squared off with him, not looking the least bit intimidated. I knew she could handle herself, even against Emerson, so I kept my seat. For now.

Emerson caught her arms, ducked down, lifted her up, and slung her across his shoulder. She yelped, obviously caught off guard, and started hitting his back. Having seen her fight before, I knew she wasn’t putting any real effort into getting away from him, though she made it seem like she was by how much she wiggled. “Put me down!”

He ignored her and turned back to our table, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “Goliath, I hope you have a pleasant evening. You are welcome to stay aboard our ship. Reuben will see to anything you need. And thank you again for helping us.”

Sosa seemed highly amused, and he sat there with a lazy smile on his face. “Of course, Captain. Thank you again for the hospitality.”

Emerson turned and headed for the door. “I’m going to teach you a lesson, woman.”

Julia growled. “I’ll claw your eyes out.”

I could only watch them go, feeling confused. Sosa leaned over and chuckled. “I thought she was your girl?”

I shook my head in confusion and stood up. “I’ll be back.”

Reuben gave me a warning look. “Speak with them in private.”

I nodded and headed for the door, trying not to hurry, and trying not to look like I was following them. For the most part, I knew my way back to the captain’s quarters, so I stayed far

behind them, barely keeping them in sight. Emerson continued to carry Julia, screaming, all the way there.

I caught up with them in the hallway outside his room. Emerson punched in the code without a word. The door opened, and he stepped inside. He didn't even glance at me when I followed. Once we were all inside and the door was closed, Julia cut off her protests and Emerson gently set her back on her feet.

"Was it really necessary to punch me so hard?" He rubbed his cheek and frowned at her.

Julia almost smiled. "You deserved it. Are you really going to tell me I managed to hurt you?"

He grunted. "It's not like I can't take a punch." He turned to me. "I think we put on a pretty good show. What do you think, Ethan?"

"I think I'd like to know what just happened."

Julia smiled and gave my arm a squeeze. "I'm sorry I didn't mention this before." She gave Emerson a flat look. "I didn't realize we were going to continue this charade."

Emerson rolled his eyes and walked away from us. "I'm serious about the safety of the people I bring on board. Are you trying to tell me you didn't see Bram eyeing you? The second you left the room he was going to jump you."

When she didn't look surprised, I frowned. She sighed. "Okay, yes, but still. We didn't need to put on a whole show. You could have just escorted me back here and been done with it."

"Publicly marking you as mine makes you untouchable. You know that. All the men know that. It's a pride thing. You don't screw with the captain's girl. If I have to fake a fight with you and throw you over my shoulder to be sure none of my men try to shove you in a closet, then that's what I'll do." His face turned grim. "I've seen the aftermath of that, and it doesn't end well. No one deserves to go through that."

Julia gave him a curious look. "Did that happen to Cass? Steel's girlfriend?"

Emerson pressed his lips together. His face and tone were serious as he told us the story. "I knew some of the guys had trouble keeping it in their pants, but I had always managed to control it before that. I never had an incident of that magnitude on my ship. Cass left the room for barely a minute, and she was gone. Steel practically went crazy. He found her, fast, but there was so much blood. Cassia's a fighter. She almost killed one of the guys on her own."

He paused, turned, and ran a hand through his hair, messing up his curls. "Steel killed one and drug the other one into the hall and slit his throat as an example to the rest of the crew. You should have seen his face. You think he's scary now, imagine when he's scared and full of rage and covered in blood. Everyone on the crew is scared to death of him, especially after I 'accidentally' let it slip that he was an assassin. No one messes with him. But since the incident, I don't take chances.

"Just because I'm a mercenary captain doesn't mean I don't have standards. I don't abide by that kind of behavior, and I would never let anyone be harmed in that way. Not ever. If that means causing a scene and letting you punch me then I'll do it." He met Julia's eyes. "Cop or not, while you are on my ship you are under my protection. That is how this world is run." He seemed to take the whole thing personally, almost as if there was more to the story than what he was sharing.

Julia nodded, slowly, almost as if maybe she was having the same thoughts as me. "I understand. Thank you."

He nodded back. "Steel will show up before too long with a time for tomorrow. You and I are stuck in here, at least for a while, so if you wanted to rest then I suggest you do so." He glanced at me. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes." Their behavior made sense. He was being vulnerable by sharing that story with us, and as a mercenary, being vulnerable was a hard thing to do. I suddenly realized that even though he and Julia claimed to be enemies, they were the same person, just on different sides of the law. Both were passionate and strong and devoted to the safety of others. I knew then that Emerson was a true friend, and I had a feeling

that when he made friends with someone it was kind of a forever friends deal.

Emerson nodded and headed towards his bedroom. “I have some things to do. I’d appreciate not being bothered until Steel comes back.”

We both nodded, even though he wasn’t looking at us. I turned to Julia and gave her a hug. She returned it, and I kissed the top of her head. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I’m fine. Believe it or not, Emerson is a good actor, and he’s gentle when he wants to be.”

I wasn’t asking because of Emerson. I knew she was fine with him. I was asking because of Sosa. Seeing him had to be hard for her. She could keep most of her thoughts to herself, but I knew underneath her shell she wasn’t happy about his appearance.

“And what about Goliath?”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. I could tell she didn’t want to answer me. “Look, I’m not happy, but I get it. I *so* get it. He’s family. No matter what he does he’ll always be your family. And I can respect that. It is a little hard to be around him. My cop instincts want to kick in, but I’m doing okay. Right now, I’m not a cop. That’s how I’m getting through this. Right now, I’m Carter the tracker, and the goal is to survive. That’s what I’m trying to do.”

“You’re so strong, Julia. I’m right here with you. You’ll get through this. Whatever way you need to do it is fine with me. I didn’t know Sosa was going to come here.”

She shrugged. “Well, here he is. And it’s fortuitous. We need his help. I can deal with it, even if I dislike it.”

I hated to leave, but I needed to talk to Sosa. “Are you going to be okay here for a while? I should spend time with the others.”

“Yeah, I’m going to lie down and maybe get some rest for a bit. I’m wiped.”

I smiled faintly. “I can relate. I’ll be back later.”

“Okay.”

I gave her a quick kiss before leaving. She didn't seem to mind the intimate gesture, which I took as a good sign. I headed back for the mess hall and caught Sosa just as they were leaving. He sent me a questioning look, but I didn't acknowledge it. I wouldn't until we were alone.

Reuben was leading them to some guest quarters. I followed them, and Reuben showed them the three rooms that the six guests would be sharing. Sosa thanked him and dismissed his men into the two other rooms, leaving Asher and me with him in the third room.

Asher dropped into a chair when the door closed, and he laughed. “Man, E, you're certainly keeping interesting company.”

I couldn't help but laugh with him. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

Sosa sat down on the floor with his back against the wall. “So? What was that display at dinner?”

I scratched at my dreads. “It's a long story. They were putting on a show for the crew. Emerson has had some trouble in the past with his crew accosting women on board. The two of them aren't a thing. Most of the time they can barely stand each other.”

Sosa grinned. “I knew it. They put on a good show, don't get me wrong, but they lack real chemistry. Unlike the two of you, who kept exchanging intimate glances throughout dinner,” he added pointedly.

I shrugged and sat down on the bed. “I guess we did, didn't we? I wanted to be sure she was okay. Your presence wasn't exactly thrilling for her.”

“Also gathered that. What's her deal? She's all chummy with a mercenary, but a gang member is beyond her tolerance?”

“It's more complicated than that.”

“Then enlighten us.”

Holding back a sigh, I nodded. “She has a long history with drugs. They destroyed her family. I can’t blame her for her feelings.”

Sosa shrugged. “Maybe not. But we’re brothers. She’s going to have to accept that.”

“Well, right now she’s willing to accept it because her survival depends on it. She’s relying on a lot of criminals to keep her safe, and that wears on her. She’s an independent woman. Cut her a little slack.”

Asher crossed his legs. “I’m all for it. I think it’s about time you found an *amitulo*. Whatever her occupation.”

Sosa sighed. “I agree. But I also have a lot of people depending on me. This affects them too.”

I felt a hint of annoyance churn in my stomach, and I tried to squash it. “That’s why you came, isn’t it? To determine if Julia is a threat to the gang?”

“That’s part of it, I won’t lie. But I’m also here because I care about you and wanted to see if I could help. If you guys didn’t want to finish this thing out with Captain Emerson we’ll take you to Viridis right now, no questions or hesitations.”

“Julia would never go for it.”

“Because I’m Goliath,” Sosa sneered.

I felt the urge to punch him, but I quelled it. I hated it when he got self-righteous. “No, not because you’re Goliath. Because she already gave Emerson her word. Because no matter how much she denies it, she and Emerson are friends. She wouldn’t leave him in a lurch, even with someone chasing her and trying to kill her. She won’t take the easy way out.”

Sosa was quiet for a long moment, my words seeming to have hit home with him. “She’s got integrity.”

“Yes. I have a lot of respect for her.”

“So, it’s more than her beauty.”

I gave him a derisive look. “I’m not that shallow anymore. I may not have known her for long, but I care about her. A lot. I

suggest you get used to the fact that she isn't going anywhere."

"Okay." Sosa was quiet, but he sounded sincere. I relaxed a little. He shook his head at me. "I support you, Ethan. No matter what. If she's who you want, then I hope things work out."

Having him say that took some of the weight off my chest. Even if I hadn't admitted it to myself, I had been worried my feelings for Julia would cause a huge rift between my brothers and me, and I wasn't sure I could stand that.

Before I could say anything, the panel on the wall beeped, and Emerson's voice came through the speaker. "Goliath?"

Sosa answered. "Yes. And Ethan and Asher."

"Ah, good. Steel got a time and place set up for tomorrow. Two in the afternoon."

"Excellent." Sosa smiled. "That's good news. Thank you."

"Have a good night."

The communication cut, and I tried to relax. "I can't wait until this is over."

"Remind you of the old days?"

"Yeah. It reminds me of all the things I wanted to leave behind."

Sosa gave me an understanding look. "Some things we could all do without. But I have a feeling tomorrow will end well for us."

I hope you're right.

"We could use a break." I decided that thinking about tomorrow wasn't going to help us. "So, tell me, what else has been happening back on Fairfax?"

Sosa grinned slyly. "Oh, there's a ton to catch you up on."

I settled back with a smile, happy to be around people I loved, and ready to hear all the gossip from back home. Sosa

would talk my ear off all night, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Julia

I hung my borrowed laser on my belt and then double-checked that my knives were in my boot and the small of my back. There was nothing worse than going into a battle unprepared. I had given Ethan's weapons back to him, and Emerson had been nice enough to loan some new ones to me.

"The area is fairly secluded." Emerson had a satellite image of the meeting point up on the screen. He sat in his captain's chair, studying it intensely. "That bodes well for us."

I peered at the shell of a building. It looked like it was once a warehouse of some kind, but now it was just walls barely standing upright and covered in spray paint. The windows were broken and there was a huge chunk missing from the roof as well.

"Is it even safe to set foot inside?" I pointed to one of the walls, which looked like it was bowing. "That doesn't look good."

Emerson shrugged. "Steel and some of the crew have been staking it out since last night. Steel did a walk through. Says it looks bad, but the structure is still intact. There's a whole section of offices along the west side, and that's what's keeping the building up. Just don't lean on the opposite wall and you'll be fine."

Ethan snorted. "How encouraging."

"The building isn't what I'm worried about." He pointed to the area around the building. "There isn't much in the way of cover. There are some trees over here," he gestured to the east part of the screen, "and some abandoned machinery opposite, but that's not a lot of cover for us. We'll have to leave the ship far enough away not to be noticed, and we need to get in position before our thief shows up. If he comes by air, we are more likely to be spotted."

"Maybe he'll come by ground." I shrugged, knowing the chances of that were slim.

Gabby was sitting at her station, and she glanced over her shoulder. “It’s not like we’re expecting an army, right? These are just a few guys who pulled one over on their boss. I doubt they’ll have a spacecraft. Probably a hover vehicle of some kind. Big enough to transport the guns, but not spaceship big.”

I studied the area, trying to commit it to memory. “The plan is to wait in these two areas until they show up, get confirmation they have the guns, and then rush the place?”

Emerson nodded. “Essentially. Once they are inside the building, we’ll approach and wait outside the entry points. Goliath will signal when he confirms the guns are physically present. We go in and take them down.”

I leaned against the wall and crossed my ankles. “We aren’t taking a big crew, are we?”

“No. There’s not enough cover. A dozen men. With Goliath and his men, that’s six more. We can signal for backup if we need to.”

The control freak in me wished we could take more men. We were more likely to win with an overwhelming force. But even without more men, we had the numbers. I doubted whoever stole from Archuleta had an army with him. I was betting on more like half a dozen to ten people, max. We also had the element of surprise.

Emerson glanced at Ethan. “Where is Goliath, anyway?”

“Meditating. It’s tradition before something like this. They’ll be ready on time.”

“We need to leave soon.” Emerson looked over at Reuben, who was typing away at a computer. “Reuben, report.”

Reuben glanced up from the screen. Today, his dreadlocks were pulled back from his face, and he was dressed in light body armor. He looked ready for a fight, and I could appreciate how seriously he took his job, even if I didn’t like him as a person. “The *Hawk* is prepped and fueled, and engineering is finishing up the safety checks. The men are arming themselves and then heading for the hangar. Steel checked in, and the site seems deserted still.”

Emerson nodded. “Good. Reuben, you’ll remain here with a backup team. If anything goes south, I want your men ready. Hopefully this will go down smoothly, but we should be prepared for anything.”

“Captain,” one of the crew members turned from his station. “We’re being hailed.”

The captain frowned. “By whom?”

“I don’t know. It’s an encrypted channel.”

Emerson and I exchanged glances. I didn’t have any idea who it could be. To be safe, I took Ethan’s arm and pulled him towards the front corner of the bridge and out of the camera’s sightline for a video call. Emerson watched us go and then nodded to the communications officer. “Pull it up on my private line here.”

A few seconds later, a screen lit up. “Who is this?” Emerson asked immediately, his voice gruff and impatient.

“I’m not your enemy, Captain.”

My heart froze in my chest, and I squeezed Ethan’s arm. I recognized that voice. I was glad I’d thought of moving away so he couldn’t see us. I waved at Emerson to catch his attention. He barely glanced at me, but I gave him a wide-eyed look, hoping he would understand that this was the guy who was after us.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Emerson folded his hands across his stomach. “Who are you?”

“Think of me as a potential client. I’m here to discuss a mutual problem we have.”

Emerson squinted, and his lips pressed into a firm line. “Clear the bridge.”

Crew members looked up and then started shuffling towards the door. Ethan and I stayed in the corner. Reuben got up last, exchanged a look with Emerson, and then left as well. Once everyone else was gone, Emerson sighed. “Speak quickly. I don’t have much patience.”

He chuckled. I couldn't see his face, but I could imagine he was smirking. "I've been tracking two people: a woman and a Novem. My investigation has led me to you. I believe you know of whom I speak?" Emerson's face showed nothing of his thoughts. "I don't know how she got on with your crew, and honestly, I don't care. What I care about is killing them both."

I took a quiet, steady breath. It would be a lie to say I wasn't afraid of him because I was. I had spent...I didn't even know how much time with him on his ship while he questioned me. Tortured me. I pushed those painful thoughts away and tried to focus on the present. *You aren't on his ship anymore. You're on Emerson's ship, and you're safe.*

Emerson tapped his right forefinger against his other hand. "Why is that my problem?"

"Because she's a cop."

Admittedly, Emerson did a good job of faking a surprised look. He straightened up in his chair and leaned forward. "Why should I believe you?"

"Look it up for yourself. Agent Julia Carter, IPF."

"And the guy who's with her?"

I could almost hear him shrug. "A meteorologist of some kind. He stuck his nose where it didn't belong. Now, I want them both dead."

Emerson pressed his lips together. "What problem do you have with her?"

"That's not important. What's important is I'm offering you a hundred thousand credits if you hand them over to me. Or, if it's easier, you can kill them yourself. That's a nice payday for your crew for five minutes of work."

My stomach dropped. *That's a lot of credits.* I wasn't sure where he was getting his money from, but it did cement the theory that whoever had orchestrated Ben's kidnapping had capital to spare.

Emerson met my gaze and his eyes slid away. Part of me was worried he would take the money. That was an awfully good payday for virtually no work. Even though we were sort of friends, he had to be tempted.

He rubbed his jaw. “We’re in the middle of a time sensitive job.”

“I understand. How about I give you an hour? You find a few moments in there to kill them, and then we can meet. I’ll take the bodies off your hands and pay you. Everyone’s happy.”

Emerson nodded. “That sounds like a good plan.”

“Brilliant. I’ll leave you to it then.”

The screen disappeared, but none of us moved. Emerson was staring at the wall, deep in thought. Ethan gave me a questioning look. I didn’t know what Emerson was thinking, or if he was going to take the deal, so I shrugged. If Emerson decided to kill us, then we were dead. There would be no escape.

Finally, Emerson looked back at us. “That doesn’t give us a whole lot of time. We need to adjust our plan.” He smacked his com. “Reuben, get back in here.”

“Adjust how?” My voice was steady, but I felt my hands shake a little.

The door opened and Reuben came back inside. Emerson didn’t even look at him. “As soon as we’re ready for takeoff we need to go. While we’re out waiting for our seller to show up, you need to monitor communications in case this guy calls back. If he does, don’t answer it. Just let me know. As soon as we get the guns, we haul back to the ship, drop them off at Archuleta’s, and then we make a beeline for Viridis. He’s going to be tracking the ship, so keep an eye out for anyone following us. Don’t take chances; blow them out of the sky if need be.”

My body relaxed when I realized Emerson wasn’t going to kill us. He was still going to get us out of there. It was foolish of me to doubt him because I knew he had my back. I knew he

was a good guy underneath his gruff exterior. I was a little ashamed that I had doubted him.

Reuben nodded to Emerson and went back to his station. He immediately began sending out commands. It took barely a minute before we were lifting into the air. “On our way.”

Emerson looked at me. “I didn’t recognize this guy, but I don’t think he’s a mercenary. He seemed like ex-military. I wish Steel had been here to see him. He’d have picked out more specifics. If we get you back to Viridis and they follow, are you going to be safe?”

I hadn’t thought about them following us all the way back to Viridis. But then again, that’s where they had kidnapped me from, so it didn’t seem likely they would have a problem returning there.

“If we make it to the IPF office, then yes. At least for now. That’s the best-case scenario.” I didn’t want to think about what would happen if we didn’t eventually catch these guys. I doubted they would stop hunting us.

Emerson frowned. “I’m not so sure about that.” He looked between me and Ethan. “We need to be careful. We’re walking a very thin line.”

I agreed with him. Ethan sighed. “This is going to be an interesting day.”

That’s an understatement.

After a short while, the ship landed again, and Emerson led us down to the loading bay. Goliath had his orders to wait until it was closer to the meeting time before leaving, but the three of us and about a dozen of the crew climbed into the shuttle and flew out to the meeting place. It was a tense ride, though I couldn’t explain why. Maybe it was the anticipation of a fight, or maybe it was knowing my kidnappers were onto us again. Maybe it was both.

Whatever the reason, I was happy when we finally landed. We climbed out, and I tried not to shiver. There wasn’t any snow on the ground here, but the temperature was frigid. I pulled my coat tighter, and Ethan took my hand and gave it a

squeeze before dropping it. I smiled at him, glad we were still in this together.

Part of me wasn't sure why Ethan continued to hang around. He could have left anytime. I wouldn't have held it against him. I was the one in danger. It was possible that my pursuers would go after Ethan if he left, but also maybe not. Their focus would have to be on me. Ethan could have gone with Sosa and left me to figure this out on my own. But he hadn't. He had stayed.

Because he likes you.

It felt weird to acknowledge that, but he had gone out of his way to make it obvious that he cared about me. And I cared about him. Far more than I had any business to.

Let's just hope both of us make it out of this without a scratch.

We made the short trek over a couple of hills until we came to the abandoned warehouse. We moved carefully and swiftly, dividing into two teams. Emerson led us over to the collection of old machinery. His men started to fan out to find places to hide.

Out of nowhere, Steel suddenly appeared, and I jumped. I took a deep breath, trying to dispel the adrenaline. He gave me an amused look before addressing Emerson. "Everything's still quiet."

Emerson nodded. "Good. Did you send the rest of the men back?"

Steel nodded. "They were happy to get away from me."

"I can't imagine why," I muttered.

Steel almost smiled. Emerson nodded and looked around. "You can head back too."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Emerson grunted. "You've been up all night."

"And I'm still fine. I've gone a lot longer without sleep. I want in on this."

“Fine.” Emerson sighed. “Have it your way. Let’s get under some cover.”

The four of us separated, trying to find places to hide. Steel disappeared immediately. *I doubt he’ll have trouble finding cover.* I opted to slide between an old tractor wheel and a crane. It was a small space, too small for any of the guys to fit in, but it was perfect for me. *Sometimes being small has its advantages.*

Just as I got into place, the com crackled in my ear. “Check. Everyone, com check.”

Each of the men confirmed that their coms were working. I confirmed and leaned back, keeping my eye on the corner of the decrepit building. It was a quiet day, and barely a breeze stirred the leaves of the nearby trees. I pulled my gloves over my hands, seeking warmth, and then buried them in my armpits.

“Goliath,” Emerson’s voice whispered in my ear, “can you hear me?”

There was a little crackling and then Goliath’s voice came over the radio. “Yes. We’re standing by and ready to go.”

“Good. Wait for my signal before heading out.”

“Understood.”

I hated waiting, but I was used to it. Even though we didn’t have many operations of this kind in the diplomatic security branch, I still had some experience with it. I had done plenty of ops in training and in my early years with the force.

The cold was starting to seep into my back from the side of the crane, and I tried to ignore it. I kept my senses alert while I scanned what little area I could see. It smelled dry and crisp and like sunbaked metal. I didn’t hear or see any of the other men, but I took that as a good sign. These mercenaries were professionals. I had forgotten Emerson’s crew was well-trained. They were good at what they did. Even if they were brutes, they were highly trained in stealth and combat.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly. I tried not to think about what would happen if we made it back to Viridis with my

kidnappers still pursuing us. Likely, they would try to attack us before we got there, because it would be much easier to kill us now, before we reached Viridis. But even then, if they had influence and money, we wouldn't be safe anywhere. I couldn't imagine uprooting Alexi and going into hiding until all this was resolved. It wasn't like I even knew anything that could bring these guys down. Our only breakthrough had been the drive, and we didn't have it anymore.

Regardless, I knew this was far from over. We weren't any closer to finding out who was responsible for Ben's kidnapping and assassination attempt, and now we were running for our lives. I hated being hunted down like an animal. *Maybe after we get these guns back for Archuleta, I can talk Emerson into setting up a trap. We know they're nearby. This might be an opportunity.*

I filed that thought in the back of my head for later when Emerson's voice finally came back over the radio. "Goliath, head on down."

"On our way."

We still had to wait some more, but finally a little ship that must have belonged to Goliath passed overhead and circled around before setting down outside the building. Goliath and his men emerged and headed inside. I didn't have any way to tell what time it was, but it must have been close to the designated meeting time.

"Stand by. Target still not in sight."

I didn't know who had said that, but I kept my eyes open, and my mouth shut. This wasn't the time to fuff around.

After what must have been ten minutes, someone else came over the radio. "Target spotted; north by northeast, approaching slowly. Midsized hover vehicle, armed with mini plasma cannons."

Snails. Well, that sucks.

Mini plasma cannons meant whoever it was had a lot of firepower and was serious. For a moment, I worried about Goliath because he was Ethan's friend, but I let go of the

feeling immediately. Worrying wouldn't help anything, and there were other things I needed to focus on.

I caught sight of the craft at the other end of the building before it set down in the large hole in the roof. I wasn't too surprised they set the vehicle down directly in the building, but it was still not ideal. It would have been a lot easier if they had parked outside. I would feel better if they were separated from their plasma cannons.

"Hold positions." Emerson's voice was tight, but I could feel a current of excitement underneath it.

The craft's engines shut off, plunging the area into near perfect silence. I shifted, ready to move, but Emerson hadn't given the word yet. I knew he wanted to make sure everything was good before we left the safety of our cover. He was being smart.

"Targets emerging from vehicle." That was the other voice again, probably someone in the trees on the opposite side.

Seconds ticked away.

"Confirmed: seven hostiles."

"Hold," Emerson replied.

Goliath was talking to them inside. I knew he would signal if anything seemed off or felt wrong, but waiting was nerve-racking, and my adrenaline was already starting to spike. I breathed through it, trying not to let it affect me. Adrenaline could be seriously debilitating if I allowed it to take over.

Finally, Emerson's voice came back over the com. "Move out. Keep it quiet and don't be seen."

Carefully, I crept out of my hiding spot, pulling out my gun as I did so. I kept it trained on the ground as I made my way towards the building. I could see the others trickling out of their hiding spots as well, and Ethan hurried towards me. He kept pace at my side as we crouched and hustled towards the building. Ethan may not have been trained in stealth, but his background in the woods had given him plenty of experience in moving silently.

We reached the side of the building below one of the busted-out windows not far from one of the doors. I could hear voices inside and strained to catch what was being said.

“...best quality out there.” That wasn’t Goliath, but I didn’t recognize the voice.

“I believe you. I would still like to examine the guns before purchase.” Goliath sounded pleasant, but firm.

“Of course.”

Emerson spoke again on the com. “Wait for confirmation of the merchandise. No one moves until I say so.”

Ethan met my eyes. He didn’t look nervous, just determined, with his gun ready at his side. I reached for his free hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. The connection made my insides settle a little bit. I should have questioned why his touch calmed me so much, but my mind wasn’t ready to think about the answer to that yet.

He squeezed my hand back and smiled.

There was a lot of noise inside that sounded like scuffling feet and metal scraping. I assumed the guns were being brought out of the ship. That’s what I hoped was happening, at least.

Again, we were stuck waiting. There was a low murmur of voices, but I couldn’t pick out any words from it. Then there was a snap of wood, and something clattered on the floor. I tensed but held my position when Emerson didn’t give the signal.

After a moment, the com clicked on, and this time I heard Goliath’s voice in my ear. “Beautiful guns. It looks like everything’s here.”

The com clicked off and I could hear the other guy speak through the window. “Now, to payment.”

Emerson spoke again. “Move in. Try to take them alive if possible.”

We descended on the doors. I followed Jack as he silently opened the door and slipped inside. He was armed to the teeth

and had a dark look on his face. I took a deep breath and scanned the area immediately upon entry.

It was a large, open room, with oil drums of various sizes off to the right, close to the interior wall. Pipes, scrap metal, and large worktables lined the outer wall. Chains hung from the rafters, and a catwalk in major disrepair hung from the opposite wall. Bits of machinery and what looked like engines and chunks of twisted metal dotted the room, some as large as a door and some as small as a quick cooker. If I had to guess, I would say the warehouse was used to store and repair heavy machinery, but it was impossible to say for sure. The good news was that there was plenty of cover if we needed it.

Their ship sat in the middle of the room below the large hole in the ceiling with the cargo door open. Five large, wooden crates sat not far from the opening, lids pried off and scattered on the floor. Goliath and his men stood next to the crates, but towards the interior wall and out of our line of fire. Seven men stood between the crates and the ship, armed, but not currently pointing their guns at anything but the ground.

Rodney stood at the center of the group, and I felt a rush of vindication. My suspicions of him had been mostly gut instinct, but I had learned a long time ago to listen when my gut spoke. And it made sense. Usually, the simplest answer was the right one. It didn't surprise me at all that he wanted to steal from his boss. Maybe it was to undermine his authority so he could take over, or maybe he saw an opportunity to make some extra cash and took it. I was a little surprised that so many men backed him instead of Archuleta, but I couldn't pretend to know what was going on in their minds.

There was no more time to contemplate motives and logistics because they saw us. They lifted their guns quickly and the air was filled with the sounds of gunfire and screams. Unfortunately, they had a good deal of cover because of their ship, and no one wanted to shoot the guns we were supposed to retrieve. Goliath and his men dodged and immediately went for cover. Those coming in from the same door as Ethan and me had the best line of sight to Rodney and his men, and I

took aim and fired as quickly as possible, catching one high in the shoulder.

Gunfire hit the floor at my feet, and I scurried to the right, ducking behind one of the tungsten oil drums. I could hear the ping of the bullets as they hit the metal. I was glad the drums were dense enough to stop the bullets. I waited for an opportunity to pop off a few quick shots. Most of Rodney's men were trying to get back in the ship, and I could hear the plasma cannons whirring, priming to fire. That could cause a lot of damage.

In all the commotion, I'd lost sight of Ethan. After a quick search, I spotted him again farther along the wall, close to one of the interior doors. He was crouched behind a piece of equipment, and it looked like he was waiting for an opportunity to shoot.

The plasma cannon fired, hurting my ears. I ducked my head and covered my ears. Debris shot through the air, far away from me, luckily. I swallowed and fought against the panic and fear that welled up.

My com was full of chatter, and Emerson called out commands for his men to ground the ship and destroy the plasma cannons. One or two of the mercenaries must have been hit because I could also hear them calling positions and evacuating the injured. Everything was happening at once, but I focused on keeping the men pinned down until the ship was disabled. Then they wouldn't have any chance of escape.

“New hostiles, new hostiles!”

The call came across the com and my head jerked up, wondering what the heck that was supposed to mean. If Rodney had back up, we would be in serious trouble. Other men, dressed differently than Rodney's men, came jumping in through the windows and darting in through the doors. I recognized one face and knew immediately that they were the ones after me.

Snails!

“Emerson!” I snapped into the com. “He didn’t wait an hour!”

Swearing filled my ear as Emerson called Reuben for backup. Bullets ricocheted around me, and I tucked my head to my chest, trying to make myself as small as possible. I could hear scuffling between the shots from those already engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

Over the rim of the drum, I could see pockets of people fighting. Some of the crew were still behind cover, shooting at Rodney and his men, but it was hard to tell who was winning. The plasma cannons were aimed at the men closest to the exterior wall and had already blasted two holes in the wall. I could see one of Emerson’s crew climbing up the side of the ship, bent on destroying those cannons.

A noise caught my attention towards the right, and I saw Ethan fighting with a man. As I turned, Ethan took a hard punch to his jaw and reeled back into an interior door, which must have been rotted because it busted like it was made of butter. I watched his legs disappear down the hall and his opponent took off after him.

Focusing on Ethan had distracted me, and I didn’t notice someone approaching. I caught movement from the corner of my eye and turned just in time to see the leader of the kidnapers himself moving into position to shoot me. His beady eyes were full of anger, and his lips were pulled back in a snarl, making his scar stand out even more vividly. I reacted quickly, lifted my laser, and fired at him. He ducked and rolled to the side, but still managed to fire back at me. His bullet missed, but barely. I flattened myself on the floor and took aim again. This time, I hit his gun, causing it to fly from his hand. I had aimed for his body, but I would take the disarming as well.

He cursed and rolled again, grabbed a piece of metal, and flung it at me. It struck me on the shoulder, and I jerked to the side, crying out in pain. It was enough of a distraction for him to make it to his feet and rush at me. I tried to lift my gun, but my shoulder spasmed and I couldn’t lift it high enough. He kicked the gun from my hand, and I clenched my teeth. I

twisted my body, swiped my leg out, and knocked his feet out from under him.

We reached for each other at the same time and grappled on the floor. He was strong and burly, and he was trying everything he could to use his size to his advantage. I tried to use my agility and speed to do some damage, but I barely managed to kick him a few times in the gut. He grunted and winced but didn't release his grip.

Finally, I let my injured arm go limp, catching him off balance, and he dropped towards me. I rotated and wedged my feet against his stomach and shoved with all my might. It was enough to push him off me, and he went skidding across the floor.

I got to my feet, still trying to crouch below the oil drums, and he got to his feet as well, pulling out a knife. I debated about taking out my own knife, but I waited, thinking through my options. I doubted I could win in a straight up fight with him. Not where it was too dangerous to even stand upright. My eyes flickered to the open doorway that now stood to my left, and I made the decision to try for it.

He noticed as soon as I looked at the door and moved just as I took off in a dead run. I weaved between the oil drums, keeping my head low. I could still hear gunfire and knew some of the bullets and lasers were hitting awfully close to me. I kept one eye on my enemy as he tried to cut me off, but he would need to run out in the open to reach me before I made it to the doorway, and he was too smart for that.

I reached the doorway and didn't stop running. He charged in not far behind me as I made a hard left. The floors here were concrete, and other than some debris here and there they were empty. Multiple doorways led into what appeared to be offices, though there was little light, and what furniture I could see was broken. I tried to think of a plan, or a place to hide, but my mind was coming up blank.

Before I could decide what to do, a hand clamped on my shoulder and I turned immediately, broke the hold, and barely dodged a knife coming towards my face. He swung at me

again, and I ducked below the swing and pulled out my own knife. I rammed it up towards his midsection, but his hand clamped around my wrist, and between that and gravity I couldn't muster enough strength to finish the move. His other hand came down towards me with his knife, so I abandoned my attack, kicked the inside of his leg, and jerked backward. I fell over a body and into a doorway. I scrambled backward, and it barely registered that I had tripped over the body of the guy who had gone after Ethan.

The room was completely bare, though it was large enough to be a meeting room or maybe a lunchroom. I darted back some more, trying to put some distance between us as he came in after me. When he saw the dead man, he paused, reached down, and pulled a gun from the body.

"Snails!" I changed course, pushed myself back to my feet, and lunged at him. He took aim, and I shoved the gun. It fired, the noise hurting my ears. I felt an impact in my right arm, and it went limp.

My momentum knocked us both to the ground. His hand smacked the corner of the doorway and the gun slid across the smooth concrete floor and fell into a grated drain.

Before I could react, he flipped me onto my back and started punching me. I wasn't sure where his knife had gone in all the commotion, but I was grateful it was gone, or else I'd already be dead. Blood spurted from my nose, and I was pretty sure he broke it. I tried to use my right arm, but it didn't want to work right. I still had my knife in that hand, somehow, and I transferred it to my left and stabbed at him. I didn't think I'd make contact, but I caught him across the forearm, and he jerked, which gave me the space to scrape it across his stomach. The wound wasn't deep, but it was enough for him to jerk back. I took the opportunity to slash at him again, trying to drive him away from me.

Someone slammed into him from the side, knocking him back into the room. Ethan grappled with him on the floor a few feet away. I rolled to my side and pushed myself to a sitting position. I looked at my right arm and hissed when I

saw blood pouring from it. It started to ache, but the pain wasn't terrible. I could worry about that later.

Get up, Julia. Fight.

We hadn't won yet, and Ethan was outmatched. I forced myself to get to my feet. I was a little shaky, but I could still fight. I stepped towards them, clutching my knife in my good hand, and yelled something unintelligible. Both men glanced at me. Ethan saw I had the knife and rotated, putting the man between us. I slashed downward with the knife and caught him in the outer arm. The knife lodged deep, and I let go of it. He jerked, cursed, swung his other hand back at me, and slammed my bad arm, knocking me off my feet. I hit my back hard, and the air rushed out of my lungs, making me wheeze.

Ethan punched the man in the face and tried to knee him in the gut. He countered the move and shoved Ethan, who tripped and fell back into the wall. His head hit the stone with a sickening thud, and he slid to the floor. He didn't move. Blood started pooling around his head and my heart dropped to my stomach.

"No! Ethan!" I tried to get back to my feet, but before I could move, my attacker was in front of me. He slammed his foot down on my left ankle, and I heard bone crunch. I screamed.

He was breathing hard, but he was also smiling now. He reached up and yanked the knife from his arm. He growled and swore before looking back down at me. That was the moment I realized I was going to die. My right arm was useless, and my ankle was shattered. Blood was pouring from my nose, and I could feel my face puffing up from where he'd hit me. My body hurt, and I was without a weapon.

"You've been a real problem, you know that?" He leaned over me, and it looked like he was trying to catch his breath.

Time was the only thing that might save me if I could somehow think of a plan. "You deserve it."

He chuckled, though there wasn't much humor in it. "Self-righteous cop."

“How did you know Emerson wouldn’t take your deal?”

“The offer was so good I thought he would. And it’s not like he has any love for a cop. But then we followed you and realized we had an opportunity. We decided to capitalize on it.” He wiped some blood from his forehead. “Killing you has turned out to be far harder than I could have ever anticipated.”

I sniffed. “I don’t know anything. Obviously. Why still kill me? I don’t know who your boss is. I don’t even know who *you* are. I’m not a threat.”

“On the contrary.” He eased upright and started toying with the knife. “You’ve seen my face. Eventually, you’ll figure out who I am. That’s not acceptable. Whether you know who my boss is or not, you’re too much of a liability to let live. And you’re too good at your job. I have to kill you. And right now, I’m looking forward to watching the life leave your eyes.”

He was trying to psych me out, and it was working. “Tell me who your boss is.”

“No,” he sneered.

I cocked my head to the side. It hurt, but I didn’t let myself flinch. “Come on. You’re already going to kill me. Just tell me what’s on the drive.”

“You mean this drive?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the little flash drive. My whole body went still. I never thought I’d get another chance to retrieve it, but the fool had brought it with him. My goal changed from simply surviving to retrieving that drive.

Once he saw how focused I was on it, he laughed and set it on the floor. “Oh, you’re not going to get your hands on this.” Quick as a flash, he slammed the heel of his boot down on the drive and it shattered into three pieces.

My heart sank. “*Snails.*”

He bent down over me again, this time lifting the knife a little. “I’m going to kill you now. And then I’m going to make doubly sure your friend over there is dead. And then I’ll work my way through killing your whole team, starting with your partner.”

Fear gripped my insides, and I felt my vision blur momentarily. “Leave them alone. They don’t know anything.”

“But they’ll keep digging. So, I’ll just have to keep killing. You won’t be around to witness it; don’t worry.”

There was movement behind him, and a body fell from the ceiling. There was absolutely no noise, and I thought for a moment I had hallucinated it, but then I caught sight of amber eyes. I didn’t even have enough time to process what was happening before an arm snaked under my attacker’s chin and wrenched it up, exposing the skin on his neck. He made some noise of surprise, but he was too slow to combat Steel when he drew a blade across his jugular, cutting deep.

Blood sprayed me and I closed my eyes. I wiped them off with my good hand before opening them again. Steel held tightly to the man, waiting until he was definitely dead before letting the body fall to the floor. He frowned at me. “You look like a mess.”

I lifted my uninjured arm and pointed at Ethan. “Help him. Please.”

Steel glanced back at Ethan and then dropped to his knees beside him. He touched his neck, checking for a pulse, and then gently tilted his head so he could see the back of it.

Worry gnawed at my stomach. “Is he okay? Please tell me he’s alive.”

“He has a pulse, but it’s faint.” He produced a syringe from a pocket and stuck him with it.

“Nanobots?”

“Yes.” Steel grabbed a handkerchief from another pocket and pressed it to the back of Ethan’s head. I tried to move, to go over to them, but when I tried, everything hurt. I couldn’t even muster up the energy to crawl over to them. Steel gave me a disapproving look. “Don’t move.”

“Is it working? Is he okay?”

Steel checked the back of his head and his pulse again. Then he nodded to me. “It’s working.”

Relief rushed through me, and I collapsed against the wall. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, feeling tears well up. I wanted to swipe at them, but there were too many other fluids on my face, and I didn't want to smear them into my eyes, nose, or mouth. Blood could cause infections. That had been hammered into me during IPF training.

Steel stood up and walked over to me. "You look like a mess," he repeated.

"This hasn't exactly been a cakewalk you know."

He prodded at my face, and I flinched. "Broken nose."

"Figured as much."

He peered at my arm and then lifted it slightly. I hissed. He sighed. "No exit wound. The bullet's still inside. What else hurts?"

"My ankle's shattered."

Steel peered at what he could see above the shoe. "That's a nasty break. I can't give you any of the nanobots until we get the bullet out of your arm. Otherwise, you'll heal over it. The bones in your ankle will also probably need to be set before we can give you nanobots."

I bared my teeth against the pain. "Figures."

Ethan stirred, and my heart thumped in my chest. "Ethan?"

Steel went to help him sit up. Ethan groaned and put his hand on his head. "What happened?"

"You whapped your head. Steel gave you some nanobots."

Ethan sat with his back against the wall, trying to get his bearings. "My head is pounding."

"Give the nanobots some more time." Steel peered at the wound on the back of his head. "The bleeding has stopped, so it'll heal soon."

We waited a little while for Ethan to regain his strength. It didn't take long before he opened his eyes and gave me a concerned look. "You look awful. Are you okay?"

I wanted to laugh, but that would have hurt too much. “Oh, I’m peachy. Bullet in my arm, shattered ankle, broken nose.”

Steel didn’t seem impressed by my sarcastic answer and interrupted Ethan before he could respond. “Can you stand?”

Ethan slowly got to his feet. “Yeah, I’m feeling a lot better.”

“Can you help me get her back out to the front?”

“Yeah.”

I looked up at the ceiling then, realizing I had no idea how Steel had dropped out of thin air. I noticed an open vent cover that was barely big enough for a person to squeeze through.

“Steel. Thank you.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me and then followed my eyes up to the ceiling. He nodded. “I heard you screaming. I thought you could use some help.”

“You were right.”

Steel spoke into his com. Mine must have fallen out because I couldn’t hear anything. “Emerson, is everything clear out there?”

There was a pause, and then he spoke again. “I’ve got Carter and Ethan. She’s pretty banged up. We’ll bring her out front.”

I felt a little more relieved when I realized the fighting must be over. “We win?”

Steel grunted. “Yeah. They have Rodney and one of his other men in custody. Everybody else is dead. Reuben showed up with the rest of the crew. They’re loading up the guns now.”

“Then let’s go. I want to go home.”

Ethan grunted as well and leaned over to help me up. He swayed and nearly fell into me. Steel grabbed his shoulder and pulled him upright. He pushed Ethan gently against the wall. “Easy. I don’t think you’re quite ready to be bending over.”

“Sorry. I just felt dizzy.”

“Understandable.” Steel looked me over and then reached down on my left side to lift me into his arms bridal style. It still hurt and I cringed, biting my tongue, but Steel was being as gentle as possible. The pain couldn’t be helped.

Steel turned to the door, and I remembered the drive. “Wait!” I tried to motion with my head to where the pieces were still lying on the floor. “I need those.”

Ethan carefully and gradually squatted down and retrieved the pieces, putting them in his pocket. I wasn’t sure the drive would be worth anything now, but maybe it hadn’t been damaged that badly. *Maybe we can still get something off of it.*

“Let’s go.” Steel motioned with his head towards the door, and Ethan slowly started walking in that direction. Steel paused before following him, eyeing his back dubiously. “If you go down now, I’m not catching you.”

Ethan waved a hand over his shoulder at him. I closed my eyes and tried not to feel anything. Steel tried not to jostle me, but it was unavoidable. Pain exploded in batches across my body as different places protested the movement. My ankle was the worst since it had no support underneath it.

I started to feel nauseous, and I leaned my head against Steel’s shoulder, trying to combat the feeling. I didn’t care anymore that he was an assassin, former or otherwise. I didn’t believe he was going to kill me, especially after having saved my life. And, honestly, given how terribly I felt, I wouldn’t have cared if he actually did decide to kill me. So long as I could close my eyes. I didn’t have it in me to pay attention to my surroundings anymore. I didn’t often leave my fate up to others, but I was willing to let Steel and Ethan take care of me for a little while.

We made it back to the main part of the warehouse, where bodies were being piled up and set on fire and the last crate of guns was being carried out the door. With the fight finished, most of the men seemed to be hurrying through a cleanup job, destroying the dead bodies, and doing a sweep to find any weapons left behind.

Emerson saw us and walked over immediately. He frowned deeply at me. “Geez, Carter, you look like you went through a blender.”

“Thanks,” I muttered against Steel’s sleeve. “Can we just get this bloody bullet out so I can get some nanobots?”

Then I immediately passed out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Julia

When I came to, I was back on the Hawk in the medical bay, staring up at the ceiling. My vision was blurry, and I was pretty sure I was only barely conscious. Everything hurt. I could hear voices, but I didn't know what they were saying. My right arm throbbed, and I think I muttered something.

Ethan's face popped into view, and he took the hand on my good side and gave it a gentle squeeze. "We got the bullet out. You're going to be fine."

His words reassured me enough for me to close my eyes. I must have passed out again. The next time I woke up, the pain was pretty much gone. I blinked at the harsh light above my head and then sat up.

"Whoa, easy there." Ethan appeared by my side and put his hands out to steady me. "How are you feeling?"

I poked around at my injured arm and my face, but there was barely a twinge of pain left. I looked down at my ankle and gently worked it in a circle. It still hurt, but it wasn't bad. "I'm okay. My ankle hurts a little, but everything else is fine." I smiled at him, trying to ease the worry on his face. "I'm okay. Really. How are you doing?"

"Fine. Pretty much back to normal."

I glanced around at the small room filled with medical equipment. I was glad Ethan was the only one there. "How long was I out?"

He shrugged. "Not long. It took a long time for them to finish cleaning up the warehouse. They had to dispose of the bodies, and they stripped down Rodney's ship, taking anything that was useful. It's been two hours or so. We're on our way to Archuleta's estate now."

"Good. I want to be there when Emerson hands over Rodney and the guns."

"Are you sure you're up for it?"

I took another moment to check my pain level before nodding. “Yes.” I carefully stood up, testing my ankle to see if it could take the weight. It was stiff and sore, but it supported me.

Ethan stood up as well, putting his hand on my elbow. He didn’t try to stop me, but he was ready to help. I pulled on his arm until he leaned towards me, and I gave him a quick peck on the lips. “I’m really glad you didn’t die.”

He smiled, the worry lines on his face relaxing at my tender words. “Same goes for you. You really had us worried there for a minute.”

I walked slowly out the door, and he followed right behind me, ready to help if I needed it. It took me longer than it should have, but I eventually arrived at the bridge without incident. Emerson, Gabby, and Reuben were in their seats, and Steel stood propped against the wall. Other crew members manned their stations as well, but I didn’t know their names.

“How long until we get to Archuleta’s?”

All eyes turned to me. Emerson lifted an eyebrow. “Should you be up yet?”

“I’m fine, thanks for asking.” I stepped forward gingerly and leaned against the back of his seat. “It’ll take more than some broken bones and a bullet to keep me down.”

Emerson gave me a look before returning his attention to the screen in front of him. “Don’t get blood on my chair.”

I leaned back and looked down at myself. My clothes were caked in dried blood. I wrinkled my nose and looked at Ethan. “Is my face clean at least?”

“Yes, they cleaned off the blood after they set your nose. Don’t worry; it’s just the clothes. And the hair.”

Maybe it was a good thing I passed out. I turned back to face the screen. “Are we almost there?”

“Five minutes or so.”

Ugh, I don’t have time to shower. “I want to go with you.”

Emerson gave me another long look, full of annoyance, but he didn't argue. "Fine. I'm not going to stop you."

I smiled sweetly at him. "Smart man."

Steel gave me a look I couldn't read. "You sure are in a peppy mood for someone who almost died."

"Well," I shrugged, "I'm grateful to be alive. And I'm even happier that my kidnappers are dead."

"Agreed," Ethan murmured.

I shot Ethan an empathetic look, knowing we were both relieved that at least part of our ordeal was finally over. Then I cleared my throat. "Steel, can I talk to you for a second?"

He gave me a probing look before nodding. He followed me out into the hallway where we could talk in private. I leaned against the wall to take the pressure off my ankle, and Steel stood across from me, hands in his pockets.

"I wanted to say thank you. Again. For saving the both of us." I owed him a lot for saving not only me, but also Ethan. I knew, without a doubt, that if he hadn't heard my scream and come to help, both Ethan and I would be dead.

Steel frowned, almost looking uncomfortable. "It wasn't a big deal."

"But it was. I know I've been wary and suspicious of you, and that hasn't been fair. You've been a huge help to us. You saved our lives, helped us kill our enemies, and kept us safe. I was wrong about you." There was still a part of me that feared him and was hesitant around him. Even in saving my life, he had proven he was extremely deadly. My instincts picked up on it and warned me to be cautious, but I could also tell he wasn't a bad guy. I had judged him a little too harshly. I was thinking that maybe I could trust him after all. I hesitated, but then added, "And I hope you ask Cass to marry you. You obviously love her a lot. Don't let that kind of love go."

Truthfully, I didn't know Cass at all, but my intuition was telling me that any woman who knew about his past and continued in a relationship must love him deeply. If I had been

in her position, in love with a man this caring and protective, I would marry him if given the opportunity.

He gave me a long, piercing look before nodding. “Thank you. And you’re welcome. Don’t expect me to come running to your rescue or anything from here on out, but I’m glad you both survived. I have a respect for people in your profession.”

I smiled. “And I have a healthy fear for people in yours.”

Steel smiled back, a gleam of amusement in his eyes. “I’m retired, remember?”

“Carter!” Emerson yelled from the bridge. “We’re here.”

We had landed in Archuleta’s front yard again, which probably irked him since this was a spaceship and not a smaller vessel, but Archuleta didn’t say anything while the men unloaded his guns. He seemed more than a little surprised when Emerson, Ethan, Steel, and I came down the ramp with Rodney and his other conspirator in tow.

Emerson pushed Rodney to stand in front of Archuleta. “Here’s your thief.”

Archuleta nodded to one of his men, who pushed Rodney and the other man to their knees in front of Archuleta. He glared down at his former second-in-command. “How could you do this to me?”

Instead of answering, Rodney spat on his shoes. Archuleta struck him hard and fast in the face, knocking him to the ground. I lifted my hand to stop him but quickly dropped it. My instincts had kicked in, telling me to intervene and protect, but I ignored the urge. Criminals had their own law, and it had nothing to do with me. Right now, I wasn’t a cop; I was just a woman trying to survive an impossible situation.

Emerson spoke, drawing Archuleta’s attention. “We’ve retrieved your guns. The rest of his men are dead. I think we’ve fulfilled our contract.”

Archuleta motioned to his men, who took the two traitors and ushered them towards the house. Archuleta looked us over with inscrutable eyes. I hadn’t bothered to change out of my bloodstained clothes, and I figured that might garner a little

respect from him. He met my eyes and pursed his lips before looking back at Emerson.

“I must say you have impressed me. I didn’t think you’d be able to get my merchandise back or find the ones responsible, but you’ve kept your word.” He held out his hand for Emerson to shake.

Emerson’s face didn’t relax any, but he did shake his hand. Archuleta smiled. “There may be a place for you in my business after all. If you’re still interested.”

No one moved while Emerson contemplated the offer. Then, slowly, he shrugged. “We’ll talk. I have a little bit of personal business to attend to now, but I’ll be in touch.”

Archuleta’s smile grew. “Excellent.”

“We’ll talk again soon.” Emerson nodded to Archuleta before motioning to his men to get back on the ship.

“Thank you, Captain Emerson.”

Emerson didn’t acknowledge Archuleta’s parting words. Instead, he walked back up the ramp. I spared a brief glare for Archuleta before following. I waited until the door was closed and we were lifting into the air before speaking quietly to Emerson.

“Are you going to continue working for him?”

Emerson shrugged. “We’ll see. It is a lucrative job. I haven’t decided.”

I snorted. “It’s a bad idea. You’re digging yourself into trouble.”

“Yeah, probably.”

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. “Are we going to Viridis now?”

He nodded. “That’s our next stop. Reuben should be pointing us in that direction as we speak. Though we will need more exact coordinates.”

“Easily done. I need to make a quick call and let my partner know we’re coming. Then I need to take a long shower. I think

we have time before we get there, right?”

Emerson nodded. I smiled. “Then we’re heading to your quarters. Do you have a tablet I can borrow?”

“You’ll find one on the stand beside my bed.”

“Thank you.”

Ethan and I headed for his quarters. It was getting easier and easier to walk. *I should be back to full strength soon at this rate.* This wasn’t the first time I’d broken bones, but it was definitely the fastest I had recovered.

After retrieving Emerson’s tablet, I sank down into one of the plush chairs. Even though I was healing rapidly, I was still sore. That wasn’t going to go away so easily. I sighed and looked at Ethan, who was standing in the middle of the room watching me. “I want you to hang onto the pieces of that drive. I’ll ask you for them later, but once we get to IPF headquarters they’re going to insist I see the physician there, and I don’t want anyone finding them.”

He nodded. “I’ll keep them safe.”

“Thank you.” I fired up the tablet and called Jordan. I wasn’t going to tell him much, especially since I couldn’t be sure our call was private. It might have been a little paranoid of me, but I wanted to be sure no one could overhear something they shouldn’t. Especially since I wasn’t sure if the drive would end up yielding anything.

It didn’t take long before Jordan answered. “Julia!” He looked relieved. “Thank goodness. I was about to go to Esmuna myself and track you down. You look awful. Are you okay?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I’ve been better, but I’m okay. Nothing some nanobots couldn’t fix. I wanted to tell you we’re on our way to Viridis. We should be there soon.”

Jordan visibly relaxed and his shoulders slumped. “Alexi will be happy to hear that. She’s been worried sick about you.”

“I know. I don’t blame her.” I leaned back and sighed. “The ones who kidnapped me are dead.”

Jordan frowned. “What happened?”

“They tracked us down and attacked. I got pretty banged up, but they’re dead. There was no other recourse.”

“Is it bad that I’m glad?”

“No.” I laughed. “I’m glad too. Of course, that means we are out of leads.”

“What about the drive? Were you able to recover it?”

“No,” I lied. “Whoever this guy was, he destroyed it in front of me to taunt me. We’re back to square one.”

Jordan hung his head, looking tired. “We’ll figure something out. I don’t think we’re ready to give up just yet.”

“Like IPF would let us.” I smiled, also feeling tired. “I should go shower. I just wanted you to know we’re on our way back, and to bring Alexi down to the office. That’s where we’ll go.”

“We?”

“I made a friend.” I glanced over at Ethan, who smiled at me. “He saved my life. I’ll explain it all when we get there.”

Jordan gave me a questioning look but didn’t press the matter. “I’ll be looking forward to your story then. Be safe, Jules.”

“I will. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

I cut the connection and sighed. “I’m going to have a ton of paperwork to fill out for this one.”

Ethan laughed. “Mind if I make a call? I am well past due to check in with my supervisor, and I should let them know about the ship.”

Flinching, I handed the tablet to him. “Make sure you tell them it was commandeered for IPF business and that they will pay for everything once I submit the paperwork. They’ll have to file a claim, and Centric Enterprises will probably have to

pay for it out of pocket, but then IPF will reimburse the money. Sorry again about your ship. And Andy.”

He shrugged, and then smiled at me. “If all this hadn’t happened, I never would have met you. I can live with it.”

“You won’t get into a lot of trouble, will you?”

“No. Maybe a lecture. But once the IPF backs up my story and pays for it they’ll be fine. They have no reason to be mad at me anyway. I did the right thing.”

I nodded. “Thank you. For everything.”

He crouched in front of me, and his fingertips brushed gently across my face. “I think I should be thanking you, as well.”

His touch sent my stomach fluttering, and my skin tingled. I wasn’t sure I would ever get used to the way I responded to his touch. I leaned towards him, intent on kissing him. He leaned towards me as well, and I paused right before our lips met. “You know, I’m kind of icky right now. I’d understand if you didn’t want to kiss me.”

“Julia,” Ethan sounded disapproving. “I’m pretty sure at this point I’m never going to *not* want to kiss you.”

My stomach did somersaults, and I pressed my hand against his chest, though I didn’t push him away. “Be careful saying things like that. I might think you mean it.”

“I do.” He kissed me, cradling my head gently with his free hand. “Our souls have touched,” he murmured against my lips. “I can feel it. Now that they have, I’m not planning on going anywhere. I know that might scare you off,” he smiled gently, pushing a stray hair out of my face, “but it’s the truth.”

It *did* scare me, there was no way around that, but it also excited me. The part of me that feared commitment told me to shove him away as quickly as I could, but all the other parts of me screamed to never let him go. I fisted my hand into his shirt, holding on as tightly as I could. “Okay.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “Okay?”

I blushed. “I want to see what happens.”

Ethan didn't say anything more. He pulled me closer and kissed me again. Not only did he smell like maple, but he also tasted of it, somehow. Vaguely sweet and like nature. *I could get addicted to this.*

The tablet hit the ground, dropping from Ethan's hands with a thud. His fingers tangled in my hair, and he pulled my head back, nipping at my throat. My breath caught in my lungs, and I forgot how to breathe. I slid my hand under his shirt and across his stomach. I could feel his muscles tighten under my fingers and I rubbed them with my thumb. He smiled against my neck and tilted my head down again to capture my mouth with his.

My body felt like it was on fire. Everywhere he touched me, I could feel sparks tingling against my skin. *I've never felt like this with anyone before.*

Ethan paused, pressed his forehead to mine, and took a few deep breaths. I was also out of breath, and I smiled, feeling a little shaky.

"You okay, *ami*?"

"A little overwhelmed. But in a good way." I pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose. "I'd feel better if I was cleaner."

He laughed, nuzzling my cheek with his. "I'm not complaining."

I smiled ruefully at him. "Let's not pretend like I don't smell like blood and sweat. I need a shower, and you need to make a call."

Ethan pressed a kiss against my ear, breathing into it. My knees shook. "Want to pick this up when you're clean?"

Yes.

I swallowed, hard. "Emerson might not like us using his quarters for that."

Ethan groaned something in his native tongue and his hand found mine, drawing circles on the back of it with his fingertips. My mind turned to mush. He kissed my ear again. "I won't tell if you won't."

Snails. “Okay.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ethan

Julia and I stood at the spaceport just outside the Hawk, and I basked in the warmth around me. I was happy I had shed my coat and returned it to Emerson. Viridis, unlike Esmuna, was tropical and hot. It felt like a rebirth, having moved from winter into vibrant summer. I smiled in the sunlight and sent up a prayer of thanks to the universe.

“Don’t forget, Carter,” Emerson said as he strolled down the ramp to see us off. “You still owe me one.”

Julia smiled at him and rolled her eyes. “I won’t forget. You did me a solid. So, thank you.”

Steel also came down the ramp, but none of the rest of the crew followed. That was fine with me. We hadn’t gotten to know most of them outside of Emerson and Reuben, and it wasn’t a secret that Reuben hated Julia.

I offered my hand to Emerson, and he took it. “Thank you, Captain Emerson. You have proven to be a man of character.”

Emerson scowled and dropped my hand. “Watch it. You’ll ruin my reputation.”

Julia laughed at his grumpiness and then wrapped her arms around him, giving him a quick hug and a peck on the cheek before releasing him. He blinked at her, obviously surprised. He didn’t seem to know how to react. He grumbled something under his breath, and she winked at him.

“A hug won’t kill you, Emerson. Not even one from me.”

She seemed to have fun teasing him, and I couldn’t help but smile as well. Even Steel cracked a smile. I offered my hand to Steel, and he shook it. Julia turned to him next, respect in her eyes. “Steel. Don’t take offense, but I hope to never see you again. But also, thank you.”

He did smile this time, a full, normal smile. “I don’t know, there are people I’d hate to see far more than you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” She hesitated briefly before extending her hand to him. “Maybe you aren’t so bad.”

He gave it a firm shake. “Take it easy, Carter.”

Julia waved at them and then the two of us walked away. We headed for the cab stand closest to the main terminal. “I never thought I would befriend this many criminals.” Julia shook her head. “My life is so complicated.”

I laughed, loudly, and she gave me a displeased look. I waved my hand at her and shook my head. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to laugh like that. I get it, I do. But it’s good to have friends in lots of different places. Even illegal ones.”

“Maybe,” she grudgingly admitted.

Now seemed like as good a time as any to bring up Sosa, even though I didn’t want to. I wasn’t sure I would want to know her answer, but I couldn’t put it off forever. “I have to ask you something.”

Julia gave me a curious look as she hailed a cab. “What is it?”

I wasn’t completely sure how to phrase the question. I scratched the back of my neck, searching for words. “I may have been a little too open with you with details about Sosa.”

Without hesitating, Julia gave my arm a gentle squeeze. She smiled softly. “Are you trying to ask me what I’m going to do with that information?”

It was awkward to ask, but I owed Sosa everything. I needed to protect him. The cab appeared, giving me a few moments to stall while we climbed inside. She punched in the address and the cab took off, lifting into the air.

“Yes.” I settled against the seat. “I know you’re a cop and he’s a criminal, but he is my family. He’s important to me.”

Julia watched me quietly, studying my face. I wondered if she was doing her deception detection thing. I didn’t care if she was. I didn’t have anything to hide from her. Eventually, she sighed and turned to look out the window. “I know he is. I don’t want to do anything to hurt you. My plan for this whole

situation—from the moment I was kidnapped until now—is to forget everything. It's not like I didn't do anything illegal.”

Something in my chest relaxed. “You won't use what I told you against him?”

Her eyes jumped back to mine, looking concerned. “No. Am I happy that your closest friend is Goliath? No, but that doesn't mean I'm going to do anything about it. I don't want to be involved with anything regarding his business, but I'm not going to turn him in or give over any information about him.” She sighed again and rubbed her forehead. “I want to do the right thing, but I don't know what the right thing is in this situation. I can't deny that the world exists in shades of gray. I'm not a dirty cop. I'm not going to take bribes or actively help criminals, but I also can't pretend that the law is perfect or that there aren't good people out there who do bad things sometimes.”

I couldn't help but lean over to give her a kiss. “Thank you.”

She smiled. “I want to be a person of integrity, but I'm starting to realize integrity means more than following the law. Integrity is being true to who I am, and I'm the kind of person who cares a lot more about people than I do about the law.” She pressed her lips together, sorting through her feelings. “I'm not saying there aren't things I'll take a hard stance on. If Sosa tries to hurt someone or does business in front of me, I can't ignore it. But I have no desire to turn him in or to hurt you.”

“That's more than enough for me.” And it would be enough for Sosa. He would be relieved to hear she wasn't planning on becoming his enemy. He just needed to be on good behavior around her.

We lapsed into silence for the rest of the drive. It was short, taking maybe five minutes. I had never been to an IPF office, and I was curious about it. The Viridis IPF office didn't look like much, though I could tell it had the most up-to-date security at all the entry points. Our cab was scanned and cleared long before we ever reached the ground. The building

itself was large, made of brick, and had all kinds of vehicles parked in a side lot. I could see tactical vans, mobile laboratories, and hover rescue vehicles in addition to squad cars.

The cab landed and we climbed out. Julia had a huge grin on her face, and I could tell she was ready to see her family and coworkers again.

She led me to the big entrance doors, which swooshed open at our approach. Inside the main lobby were four different stations, and every other part of the building was closed off. It was all restricted access to the back where most of the actual police work happened. The information access station was on the far left, then the criminal processing desk, claims desk, and finally the internal access station. Julia went straight for the last one.

An enforcer sat behind the desk and gave us assessing looks as we approached. Julia simply pressed her palm to the scanner, and it beeped once. Her face appeared on a screen above her head, and the enforcer behind the desk nodded to her. She motioned for me to follow her to the door. I wondered briefly if I would need to scan my palm, but Julia already had the door open and was waiting for me.

I stepped through and blinked. There was an open room filled with short-walled cubicles. Voices buzzed in the air, and I could hear ringing phones farther towards the back. It looked like a call center of some sort. I felt stupid for not knowing a lot about how an IPF office was run, but there wasn't time to contemplate my lack of knowledge since Julia went straight for the lift.

Once the doors closed, she pressed a button and we shot upwards. She shifted her weight back and forth, obviously antsy. I gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Relax. We're almost there."

The doors opened to reveal a wide hallway running to the left and right, and one straight ahead as well. There were doors lining both sides. I assumed they led to offices or maybe they

led to specific departments. This was completely different from the main floor, and I was already lost.

Julia glanced in both directions before turning to the left. She scanned numbers on the wall, obviously looking for something specific. People passed by, barely giving us more than a glance or nod. I stayed close to Julia, trying not to feel too uncomfortable. After the events of the last few days, I felt more like a criminal than I had in quite some time.

“Julia!”

My head snapped up to look at a teenage girl with black hair flying down the hallway. Julia grinned broadly and threw her arms around her. “Lex! I’m so glad to see you!”

I recognized the girl from the video call Julia had placed back when we left Cadium. I also spotted Jordan, her partner, a few paces behind Alexi, a huge grin splitting his face. I had to blink, though, because he was quite a bit taller than I had imagined. His legs were the longest parts of his body, making his stride lengthy.

“Jordan.” Julia released her sister long enough to wrap her arms around him. She was so short compared to him. I’m not even sure her head reached his armpit.

“You have no idea how glad I am to see you.” Jordan ran a hand through his blond hair, ruffling it a little. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Julia seemed more relaxed than I had ever seen her. “I’m glad to be back. How are you feeling? How’s your head?”

Jordan shrugged. “Fine. Minor headache now. That’s it. The doctor took good care of it. Speaking of doctor, have you been checked yet?”

“No.” She made a face. “I was hoping to avoid it.”

“It’s IPF procedure when an agent has been kidnapped. You have to get checked out.” Jordan shrugged. “It’s protocol.”

“Fine.” She turned and motioned to me. “This is Ethan West. It’s a long story, but he saved my life. Ethan, this is my

sister, Alexi Carter, and my partner, Jordan Blaze.”

I shook hands with both in turn, trying to ignore their curious looks. I knew the questions would come eventually, but that didn't mean I wanted to start the interrogation right away. “Nice to meet you both.”

“Same.” Jordan looked back at Julia. “What happened out there?”

Julia and I had spent most of the trip to Viridis coming up with an edited and less illegal version of events to share with IPF. I could tell it pained her to have to lie about the things that happened, but we both knew that we needed to. There was no way she could bring up Emerson without admitting that he was a mercenary, and there's no way we could admit to helping Lyle Archuleta retrieve stolen merchandise. Adjustments had to be made.

“We'll get there.” Julia turned and gave my forearm a quick squeeze. “I'm going to run down to medical and get checked out. Shouldn't take more than twenty minutes. Jordan and Alexi will find you a place to wait.”

I nodded. I didn't want to be separated from her in an environment like this, but I would manage. I wasn't there because I was a criminal, and therefore I had nothing to worry about. At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

Julia gave Alexi one more hug before turning and heading back towards the lift. “Go easy on him, you two.”

Once she was out of sight Jordan motioned down the hallway. “Let's wait in the office.”

He led the way down the hall and into a moderately large office. A couch ran along the right wall in front of the door, and two chairs sat in the middle of the room facing a desk which took up the left side of the room. A lone filing cabinet sat in the back corner, though it looked incredibly dusty.

Alexi went and immediately plopped down on the couch. Jordan turned one of the chairs to face her, so I took the other chair and did the same. I could feel Jordan's eyes on me the entire time, as though he was studying me.

“So, who are you?” Alexi’s question was blunt, but it didn’t bother me.

“Ethan West. I work for Centric Enterprises, a data collection company. I’m a climatologist. I monitor major meteorological events and study the changes those events make to the topography and climate of the designated areas. My company then sells that data to cartographic companies.”

Alexi blinked. “Meteorological events?”

I realized instantly that my terminology was foreign to her. “Storms,” I supplied. “I chase storms. Study the weather. Note the impact the weather has on the surroundings.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t tell if she was impressed or bored. Most people got bored when I started talking about what I did for work. Though I couldn’t say I spent much time talking to people in general.

“So how did you and Julia meet?” Jordan interjected.

“I was working on Cadium, studying a category eight storm, when I spotted these men dragging Julia out from a ship.” My eyes went to Alexi. I didn’t want to scare her too much with the details. “I helped her get free from them. They then proceeded to hunt us down, and they tried to kill us both.”

Alexi gasped quietly, and I flinched. *So much for not scaring her.*

Jordan frowned, obviously concerned about his partner. “You were her means off Cadium.”

“Yes.” It wasn’t a question, but I treated it like one anyway.

“How did you get off Esmuna?”

It was a question that had probably been bugging him since Julia had contacted him. Both of us had agreed she should tell him what happened privately. Jordan would get the truth eventually, but it shouldn’t come from me.

“Julia wants to tell you when she comes back.”

Jordan opened his mouth to say something when there was a sharp rap at the door. “Agent Blaze?”

“Come in, Abbott.”

An older man with a rounder stomach and bristly gray hair stepped into the room. “I heard Carter is back?”

Jordan smiled and nodded. “Yes. She’s getting checked out by medical. I’m sure she’ll brief us on what happened tomorrow. The day is almost up, and she’s got a ton of paperwork to start on.”

Abbott nodded, looking relieved. He glanced at me but didn’t question my presence. “I’m glad she’s okay.”

“Me too.”

Abbott nodded again and left. Alexi tapped out a rhythm on her leg. “Shouldn’t she be almost done?”

“Patience, Lex. Let the doctors check her over. She’s been through a lot.”

It didn’t take much longer for Julia to come back, but it was long enough. She appeared in the doorway with fresh clothes that looked to be hers and not borrowed, complete with her shield firmly attached to her belt again. She was still smiling as she dropped down on the couch next to her sister and wrapped an arm around her.

“I’m so glad to be back. Did you behave for Jordan?”

Alexi almost rolled her eyes, but she didn’t complete the motion. “Yes. I know how to behave.”

“I know. I was just worried.” Julia’s face turned soft as she stared down at her sister. Then she sighed and looked over at Jordan again. “I’m going to need to get some paperwork processed today, and I’ll need to speak to Captain Tyson. Let him know what’s going on.”

Jordan nodded. “I can pull up the paperwork for you. Your report will be the priority. You may have to do an interview with a senior agent.”

Julia scrunched her nose up in distaste. “Fine.”

“How about you start by telling me what happened.”

She glanced at Alexi and shook her head faintly at Jordan. He sat back in his chair, unhappy with her response, but he didn't say anything. Instead, Julia stood up, closed the office door, and walked over to Jordan.

"I wasn't fully honest with you." She motioned at me. "Hand me the pieces."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the three pieces of the destroyed drive. Julia held them up so Jordan could look at them. "This is what's left of the drive. I don't know if we can get anything off of it or not, but it can't hurt to try."

Jordan seemed floored. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"There was a chance someone was listening in. Whoever kidnapped Ben and tried to kill me obviously has a lot of resources and money. Hacking into a video call would be a cakewalk. I'm keeping this unofficial for now. I don't know if it'll be of use or not, but I won't say anything until we have something concrete. I'm going to take it to Michelson and have her work on it off the books."

"Hopefully there's something on here we can use." Jordan scratched his forehead. "This could still be our way of cracking the case."

"Let's not get our hopes up yet, but it's a possibility. I'm going to take it to her right now."

Jordan nodded. "Then start on your report. If Ethan was with you then he's going to have to give a statement too."

We exchanged looks before Julia nodded. "That's what we assumed. But he can do that tomorrow. We've been through quite the ordeal, and I think we're ready for some decompressing time."

I couldn't have agreed with her more. She disappeared back out the door with the pieces of the drive and returned a few minutes later. She immediately got a tablet out and began filling out paperwork. Jordan helped her with it, and Alexi put earphones in and listened to some music. I sat in my chair and

resigned myself to waiting. I decided to take a little bit of time to meditate while I could.

While they were working, Julia filled Jordan in on the bare bones of what had happened. She told him in whispers some of the not-so-legal things we had dealt with. Jordan looked more concerned than upset at what she had done. She didn't breathe a word about my past, nor about Goliath's involvement, for which I was grateful. From what I could gather, it sounded like Jordan knew about Emerson to some extent already, and he didn't seem surprised or upset that she had gone to him for help.

After what felt like hours, Julia finally set the tablet aside and stifled a yawn. "That's it. I'm not doing anything more today. It'll take me all week to finish the paperwork."

Jordan seemed more than happy to put his tablet down as well. "Are you going to brief the team tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'm not mentioning everything yet, but they need some direction. I've got a description of the leader, so maybe we can uncover his identity." She pursed her lips. "I would have loved to get a handprint or face scan of him before leaving the warehouse, but I wasn't exactly lucid at the time, and they burned all the bodies."

Alexi had seen them set their tablets down, and she pulled out one of her earphones. "Are we going home now?"

Julia smiled and nodded. "Yes. Home, home. Luna Abra."

I hadn't realized she lived on Luna Abra, but I supposed it made sense. Many IPF cops lived there because it's where the main IPF training academies were located. The four of us got up and headed down to the lobby. Jordan insisted on going back with us. He lived on Luna Abra as well, not far from where Julia did, I surmised, so he wouldn't be going out of his way. I could tell he was still worried about Julia.

We caught a shuttle at the spaceport. The ride to Luna Abra was quick, but the local time when we arrived was midmorning. I felt like I had been awake for a full two days.

Whether the sun was out or not, I would need to get some sleep soon.

Julia and Alexi's house was not large, but it was more than enough for the two of them. There were three bedrooms, two baths, and a separate office for Julia. The kitchen was modern and up to date, if not a little tiny. Wood floors spread throughout the house, and their furniture was an eclectic mix of different styles. It seemed to fit Alexi's style more than Julia.

Just walking in the door caused Julia to relax. All the tension seeped out of her shoulders, and she immediately headed for the kitchen. "I'm starving."

The three of us followed her and obediently sat around the kitchen table when she insisted on making breakfast for dinner. It took only a few minutes for her to whip up some French toast, eggs, and some fruit. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I smelled the food. My stomach growled loudly, and I laughed when everyone looked at me.

"My stomach is ready for your food, *ami*." I stood up and went to help her carry the dishes to the table.

She allowed me to help while she fetched some drinks. "When's the last time we ate? Sometime this morning, but this morning for us was ages ago. I can't even remember."

Both of us sat down next to each other and Julia gestured to the food. "Help yourselves."

None of us needed to be told twice. We passed plates around and dug in. Alexi sighed with pleasure. "I've missed your cooking. Jordan's not that great at it."

Julia winked at her sister. "I do know how to make a mean French toast."

Jordan glared mockingly at Alexi. "You don't appreciate my food? Really? You could have offered to cook at any time. Or we could have gotten takeout, like I normally do."

Alexi sneered. "You gotta learn how to cook sometime."

Julia reached for my hand under the table and gave it a squeeze. She was smiling at me with a look of pure happiness on her face. It made me smile too. She almost looked like a different person. I wanted to kiss her, to share the happiness, but I wasn't sure we were ready to do that in front of others.

"So, Ethan," Jordan asked between bites, "how long are you staying?"

My brain honestly hadn't thought that far ahead. I shrugged. "Well, for a while, I guess. My company is having my ship repaired, and I can't go back to work until that's ready." My eyes went back to Julia. "I'll have to finish the job I was working on before I'll have some time off. Shouldn't take me too long since I was already almost done."

She nodded as though she understood what I wasn't saying out loud. Once I was done on Cadium I'd come back to see her. Being apart from her was unappealing to me. Of course, since both of us traveled for work we were likely to be apart often. I'd have to figure out a way around that.

"Are you two dating or something?" Alexi's bluntness spilled out again and she gave us questioning looks.

Julia looked at her sternly. "Alexi, that question is rude. But," she hesitated and looked at me. When I nodded, she continued. "Yes, we are."

Jordan's mouth dropped open, and his fork clattered onto his plate. "Come again?"

"Don't look so shocked." Julia bristled. "It's not *that* surprising."

"Yeah, but you never date." Jordan shook his head. "And don't try to use Keith as an example because that's not dating."

Julia's face reddened. "It was too."

I felt lost in the conversation. "Who's Keith?"

Alexi smirked. "Julia's excuse for not dating."

"Lex." Julia sounded annoyed. She turned to me. "He and I would go on dates. The last time we went out, months ago, we

decided we weren't compatible and that we weren't going to continue seeing each other."

Jordan squinted at her. "I knew you were hiding something from me about that."

"Oh, don't get all huffy. You know how I am."

"Stubborn. You are stubborn and independent." Jordan took a drink. "Can't admit when anything is wrong."

I laughed and Julia smacked my arm, making me laugh harder. "What? He's right. You *are* stubborn."

There was laughter in her eyes even though she tried to frown. "You haven't seen nothing yet, mister."

There was a knock at the door, and we fell silent. Alexi immediately got to her feet. "I'll get it!"

Julia looked anxious. "Check the camera and make sure you know who it is first."

"I know." Alexi was already disappearing down the hallway.

Even Jordan seemed a little concerned. "You weren't expecting anyone, right? You haven't been home."

"No." Julia stood up and headed for the hallway herself.

I could hear Alexi's voice talking and then she squealed. It was a happy squeal, not a scream of terror. Julia raced down the hall, and Jordan and I got up and followed. I wasn't sure what was going on, but after everything that had happened, I was still on edge. There was no way to know for certain someone wouldn't still be after us.

Alexi stood with her arms wrapped around a woman in her late forties with dyed blonde hair and wrinkles around her mouth and on her hands. She was dressed, rather tastelessly, in a matching skirt and blouse that was too short and too tight.

"Victoria." Julia sounded shocked.

Victoria released Alexi and turned to Julia with a big smile. Too much lipstick covered her mouth, and her eyes were

heavily painted, making her look more like a doll than a person.

“Julia, darling.” She wrapped Julia up in a brief hug that she did not return. “How are you, dear? Alexi told me you’d been kidnapped.”

Alexi tugged on the woman’s arm. “She got back a few hours ago, Mom.”

Mom? This is Julia’s mom?

Julia swallowed, hard. “What are you doing here?”

Victoria gave her an affronted look. “When someone says my daughter has been kidnapped, I’m on the first flight out. Of course, it took some time for my counselors to arrange for a special release, but I wasn’t about to let them keep me from making sure you were safe.”

There was genuine concern in her eyes. Julia merely blinked at her, looking unsure of what to do. “I’m fine.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. Alexi couldn’t tell me any details about what was going on, but it sure sounded serious.” Her eyes moved to Jordan, and she smiled coyly. “Agent Blaze. Wonderful to see you again.” She moved in for a hug. Jordan looked reluctant, but he returned it. Victoria stood a little too close to him, as though she was trying to make him uncomfortable. Or trying to hit on him.

“Victoria.” Jordan rubbed his arm, obviously feeling awkward. “Glad to hear you’re still doing well in rehab.”

She nodded. “Oh yes, things are going splendidly.” She looked at me for the first time and I saw her spine straighten. I knew what that meant, and I wished I had stayed at the table.

“Well, now, young man, I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you before.” She elbowed past Jordan and stopped directly in front of me, eyeing me up and down. “You do the Novem proud with those gorgeous looks.”

Julia visibly flinched behind her. “Victoria.”

Victoria ignored her and ran her hand down my arm. “I mean, look at that flawless skin. And your bone structure.”

She leaned closer to my face, and I couldn't help but lean back to compensate. She smiled again. "Simply stunning. And I love your hair."

Julia's jaw set and she slid around Jordan and her mother until she was standing at my side. She took my hand in hers and then deftly moved between us. "Victoria, this is my boyfriend, Ethan. Ethan, this is Victoria. My mother."

Victoria blinked, obviously surprised as she looked between the two of us. "Oh. How lovely." She took a small step back and reined in her flirting. She offered me her hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Ethan."

I shook her hand, nodded, and said nothing.

Alexi, not oblivious to the tension but probably trying to compensate, stepped forward. "How long are you staying?"

Victoria turned around and sighed dramatically. "I could only get a weekend pass. I have to be back by tomorrow night."

Julia's face tightened further. "You're just here to check on me?"

"And to see my family, of course." She smiled, but it seemed a little forced. "I haven't seen my girls in forever."

Julia folded her arms. I could tell she was trying to restrain herself. "We're doing fine."

Victoria gave her a look that said she understood exactly how little Julia wanted her there. She looked back at Alexi. "I know we talked about it on our call, and I was thinking how marvelous it would be for you to come back to Arcadia Prime with me tomorrow."

Alexi's face lit up. "Really? That would be great!"

Julia's face turned a dark shade of red. I put my hand on her shoulder, but she didn't look at me. "Excuse me?"

Victoria turned partially to look at Julia. She blinked innocently. "What? I think it's past time for Alexi to come back for a visit, don't you? She hasn't been on Arcadia Prime since you joined IPF."

“What makes you think you can come in here like this and whisk Alexi away?” Julia planted her feet, an obvious sign she was preparing for a fight.

Alexi glared at her sister, moving around her mother. “Chill out, Julia. I can go see Mom if I want to. What’s wrong with me going to Arcadia Prime?”

“You have school, for one.”

“It’s on the net. I can do that anywhere.”

Julia’s look didn’t change. “I’m working on a dangerous case, was just kidnapped, and you’re not going without me.”

Alexi stamped her feet. “You’re being ridiculous! She’s my mother!”

Victoria put her hand on Alexi’s shoulder, but also gave Julia a hard look. “Alexi’s right. If she wants to visit me then she should be able to. Her life can’t revolve around your work, Julia. That isn’t fair to her.”

There was a manipulative tone in her voice that made me fold my arms. Julia obviously caught it, too. “Legally, you’re not her mother. You haven’t been her mother for *years*. You don’t get to come in here whenever you please and try and act like a mother. I’m her guardian and I will do what’s best for her.”

“Just because I made a few mistakes does not mean I am not her mother.”

“A few...*mistakes*?” Julia’s voice shook. Her hands clamped into fists, and I could feel the rage emanating from her.

Alexi looked like she was going to cry. Jordan stepped in and took her by the shoulders. “Come on, kid. Let’s let these guys talk for a minute.”

Although she didn’t seem to want to, she allowed Jordan to lead her from the room. Victoria didn’t even wait until she was out of sight before folding her arms and adopting a self-righteous tone. “You think just because everyone isn’t perfect

like you that you're better than everyone else. Well, honey, that's not how it works in the real world."

Julia didn't seem to be listening. Her mind seemed to be stuck on her mother's earlier comment. "Mistakes?" She snapped. "Getting high every night is just a *mistake*? Spending all your money on drugs so I have to go and beg the neighbors for food for me and Alexi is a *mistake*? Shacking up with one of your dealers to get free drugs is a *mistake*?" Her voice rose in pitch. "Let me tell you something about mistakes. A mistake is forgetting to pay for a parking ticket. A mistake is forgetting when trash day is or filling out the wrong paper at work. Those are mistakes. What you've done, those aren't mistakes; those are serious life choices."

Victoria rolled her eyes. "Getting addicted to drugs was a mistake, I know that and I'm in rehab. Four months clean."

Julia clapped mockingly. "A new record! Bet you won't make it to six."

Victoria glared. "A little bit of support would help. My counselors say addicts have a much better recovery rate when their families support them."

"You've lost your right to call me family, Victoria. You haven't acted like a mother to me since Dad died."

"That's not fair." Victoria looked like Julia had slapped her in the face.

Julia took a deep breath, trying to rein in her anger. "Dad dying wasn't fair, but what you did was abandon your kids to your grief. All the horrible choices you made affected the both of us! How do you expect me not to be angry at you?"

"I did the best I could." Victoria lifted her chin, still refusing to back down. "And if Alexi wants to pursue a relationship with me then who are you to refuse?"

Julia stuck her finger in her mother's face. "I'm the one who has taken care of her! I've tried so hard to keep her from knowing about all the awful things you've done so the two of you could one day have a relationship if you ever actually manage to get sober. I haven't told her about the arrests or the

beatings or the time you tried to sell her for drugs. Do you even remember that? She was three, and you tried to pawn her off to your drug dealer for more drugs!”

Victoria had the decency to look ashamed. “I’m not proud of the things I did.”

Julia yanked at her hair, the frustration obvious. “Do you have any idea what happened to us in the foster homes? I took the beatings, did whatever I needed to do to keep anyone from laying hands on her. I made sure she had food and clothes and that none of our foster parents or foster siblings touched her. Not one.” Tears were welling in her eyes. “It was horrible. I never had a childhood. I gave up everything so Alexi could be a kid. And so long as I am breathing, I will not let you pull her into your destructive vortex. You said you were clean, so many times. And yet you would run right back to the drugs. Even at my graduation, in a room filled to the brim with cops, you were higher than a kite. You can’t screw up her life like you did mine.”

Victoria’s lip trembled, the first sign that Julia’s words hurt her. Julia kept going. “When Alexi is eighteen, if she decides she wants to pursue a relationship with you, then I won’t be able to stop her. But until then, she isn’t going to go anywhere alone with you. If you want to spend time with her then you need to prove you mean it. One-year sober, steady job, a place to live, routine drug tests, and if you have another man, I have to approve of him. Background check, drug test, the whole nine yards. Clear?”

Silence blanketed the room for several moments. Victoria shook her head. “There’s no way I’ll ever make you happy, is there? No matter what I do, you’ll never forgive me.”

“You haven’t earned my forgiveness yet.”

“Then what can I do?” Victoria’s voice rose in anger. “What will make you happy? What do you want from me? I’m trying my hardest here.”

“I want you to love your daughters more than you love drugs!” A tear ran down her face, and she swiped it with the back of her hand. I wrapped an arm around her waist, quietly

offering what support I could. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted. You’ve never loved us enough to break your addiction. We were never important enough. We were your daughters! You would have done anything to get high. Getting your fix was more important to you than making sure we had food in our mouths and clothes on our backs!”

Victoria turned away from her. “You got addicted,” she muttered resentfully.

The words were petty, and Julia sneered. “And I got clean, too. And I’ve stayed clean. Why? Because I knew I couldn’t get custody of Alexi when I was eighteen if I was on drugs. I wouldn’t be able to protect her. I got clean. Was it hard? Yeah. It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. But I’m still clean, and heaven help me, I’ll stay clean until the day she doesn’t need me anymore. You couldn’t do that one thing for us. That’s what I want. And you can’t give it to me. You can’t give me your love.”

“I do love you,” she said quietly.

“Not enough. Your love shriveled up the day we buried Dad.”

“How dare you!” Victoria’s anger spiked again, and she whirled around to face her daughter. “If Alexi wants me in her life, then you have no right to keep her away from me. If she wants to go back with me tomorrow, then I’m taking her.”

“I don’t!” Alexi burst into the room, tears running down her face. Jordan was right behind her, looking panicked. “I heard everything.” She ran over to Julia, threw her arms around her, and sobbed.

Julia squeezed her eyes closed and hugged Alexi tightly. “Oh Lex, you weren’t supposed to hear all that.” Julia sounded heartbroken.

Victoria looked stricken. “Alexi, dear—”

“No!” Alexi pulled away from Julia to face her mother, propping her hands on her hips. “You...you tried to sell me to buy drugs! How could you?” Her voice broke. “Julia’s right. I don’t want anything to do with you!”

Victoria looked like she had been slapped. Julia cringed ever so slightly and reached for Alexi, but she ran from the room, still crying. Jordan looked between Julia and Victoria before following Alexi out.

“I hope you’re happy now.” Victoria sniffed, malice dripping from her voice. “You’ve turned her against me.”

“That was never my plan.” Julia rubbed her forehead with both hands. “If that had been my plan, I would have told her everything ages ago.”

Victoria threw her hands in the air. “Now what? She’s never going to speak to me again!”

“Quit being dramatic.” Julia sighed. “Give her time. But until she’s ready to talk to you, she isn’t going to. My rules still stand on her visiting you. And I think it’s best for you to leave.”

Victoria glared silently. Her eyes flickered to me, but she said nothing. She walked out the door and slammed it behind her. Julia flinched at the noise. As she stood there, facing the closed door, I could see how close she was to falling apart. I wrapped my arms around her, and she buried her head in my chest.

“I’m so sorry you had to hear all that.”

“Shhh, it’s okay. It’s okay.” I closed my eyes, my heart hurting for her. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m here and I’m with you.”

Several minutes passed while Julia cried silently against my chest. I smoothed the hair back from her face and whispered a few consoling words to her in my language.

I couldn’t imagine what she was feeling. My grandfather had been physically abusive, but I didn’t have a sibling to worry about. For most of my childhood, I had been able to run off into the woods, or spend time with other boys in the village, giving me a reprieve from home. I never had to protect anyone but myself from him. All Julia wanted was what was best for Alexi. She was doing the best she could, while at the

same time trying to protect herself from her mother as well. It was an awful place to be.

There was movement in the rest of the house, and then Alexi appeared in the doorway. Her face was red and there were still tears in her eyes, but she seemed a bit calmer. Julia looked up from my chest and wiped her nose.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Alexi’s tone wasn’t accusatory, but it was full of despair.

Julia pulled away from me and went to hug her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to find out like that. I didn’t tell you because...because I didn’t want you to know about that side of her. I still wanted you to be able to love her and see her.”

Alexi shook her head, allowing Julia to hug her but not returning it. “I don’t want to see her anymore. I can’t believe she did all those things.”

“Drugs do strange things to peoples’ minds.” Julia shrugged helplessly. “She never realized how destructive her behavior was.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I was mean to you before.”

“It’s okay, Lex. It’s okay.”

Jordan reappeared, looking kind of helpless himself. “I’m sorry, Jules.”

She waved him off. “It’s okay. You better come give us a hug too.”

He came over and wrapped an arm around each of them. Julia patted his back. “Aren’t we just a bunch of broken people or what?” She laughed a little, which made Alexi laugh. Julia looked at me and held her free arm out to me. “Better run for the hills while you still can.”

“*Ami*, everyone has problems.” I walked over and put one arm around her and the other around Alexi’s shoulders, which completed a circle. “You won’t scare me away like this.”

Alexi gave me a doubtful look. “Mom didn’t scare you?”

I shook my head. “No. I’ve seen people like her before. They all destroy themselves eventually.”

Julia leaned over to give me a quick kiss. I rubbed the back of her neck, trying to offer her comfort. She took a deep breath and wiped off her face. “I think that’s more than enough crying for one day for me. This whole thing just served to make me more tired.”

I smiled at her. “You’ve had a long week.”

“Yeah, but it was worth it.” She found my hand and gave it a squeeze. She stepped back, breaking the circle. “If you all don’t mind, I’m going to go to sleep. And I’m not coming in tomorrow, Jordan, until I feel good and ready.”

He nodded, smiling again. “That’s perfectly fine. You deserve some rest.”

She gave him a quick hug, then hugged Alexi again as well. She turned to me and pressed her hand to my cheek. “I hope you know what you’re signing up for.”

I bent down and kissed her, long and hard. “You know about my past, too. We all have pasts. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to have a future.”

Alexi nudged Jordan. “I like him.”

Julia blushed and ignored her sister. “You’re right. Alexi will show you the spare room. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, *ami*.”

I watched her walk away, a smile on my face. Even if I felt like she was still skittish of a relationship, even if I knew she was running away now so she could pull herself together on her own, she had still let me in. I was happy she had let herself be real with me, especially in front of her family. I was sorry for what had happened with her mom, but it didn’t make me want her any less.

Jordan eyed me, his face and voice turning intense. “Listen, Ethan, I just want to know if you’re serious about Julia. I know she’s beautiful and smart and tough, but I need to know you want to stick around.”

Alexi folded her arms and gave me an expectant look. She obviously wanted to know the answer as well. I understood and appreciated their protectiveness. Julia needed all the love in her life she could get. I had no problem telling them the truth I felt in my heart.

“Although we haven’t known each other for long, I like Julia and I’m drawn to her in ways I’ve never been drawn to anyone. I don’t know where this is going to go with me and her, but I’m in it, one hundred percent. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jordan and Alexi exchanged looks, and for a long moment I thought I had said the wrong thing. But then, finally, Alexi grinned at me. “Welcome to the family.”

EPILOGUE

Julia

Almost a whole week had gone by since we'd returned to Viridis, and yet there still hadn't been any progress on the drive. Paige said she was working on it and that getting anything out of a damaged drive would be a miracle. She said there was a small chance she could get something from it, but it would take her some time and fancy equipment, and there were no guarantees she'd be successful. I knew she was doing her best, but I'd hoped she would have made some sort of tangible progress by then.

Because of my kidnapping ordeal, I was assigned a mandatory counseling session. They wanted to assess whether I was fit to go back to active duty. Even though being forced to talk to someone chafed, it was good to discuss some of the things that happened.

I wanted to bury the pain and the torture to the back of my memory, but I knew that wasn't healthy. I was starting to have trouble sleeping. It wasn't anything major yet, but I knew it might get worse. For Alexi's sake, I couldn't let that happen. I would learn how to deal with it. There weren't any other options. The counselor said what I was experiencing was normal, and he was going to teach me some techniques to deal with the trauma. Once I had agreed to continue seeing him, he had cleared me for duty.

Abbott, Karson, and Borski were genuinely happy to see me, and I was touched by how much they had worried for me. They had crowded around and given me claps on the back and made jokes about how they couldn't function without me bossing them around. It was nice to know I was so well-liked among them, even though I was the boss.

Of course, it was pretty much right back to work for us. We were chasing down any leads that could be found about my kidnappers, but we were hitting wall after wall. We still had no idea who they were, and we were having no luck finding leads

from their time spent on Viridis or Cadium. The lack of progress on any work front was frustrating.

There was progress at home, however. Being able to spend time with Ethan outside of life-threatening, adrenaline-fueled situations was amazing. I was relieved to find I still liked him and still wanted to get to know him better. And it was obvious Alexi liked him as well. Jordan said he was reserving judgment, but that so far, he was team Ethan.

“My ship is repaired.”

Ethan’s voice surprised me, and I turned from where I was folding laundry. He stood in the doorway of the utility room, tablet in hand and despair in his eyes. His eyes told me far more about what he was feeling than his words did.

He wasn’t the only one upset about it being ready. I swallowed and let my hands fall away from the clothing to rest at my sides. “When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow.” He sighed and set his tablet down on a shelf. “I don’t think I’m ready, *ami*.”

I wasn’t ready, either. I slipped my arms around his waist and dropped my head against his chest. I hugged him tightly, savoring his warmth and the feel of his arms as they engulfed me. “I don’t want you to go, either.”

Ethan dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “I like being here, with you.”

“But you have to go,” I whispered. “And then you can come back.”

“Yes.” He pressed a finger under my chin and tilted my head back so I could look him in the eyes. His face was serious and uncertain, and a small line had developed between his eyebrows. “You do want me to come back, then?”

For the past week, we hadn’t talked much about the future, though we both knew we couldn’t avoid the subject forever. I knew Ethan was giving me time to decide for myself what I wanted, and I appreciated him not pushing the subject. At this point, however, I already knew what I wanted. I decided I

wasn't going to cower away from my feelings. Not this time. I was in this with both feet, come what may.

"If you don't come back, I'm going to track you down myself." I smiled impishly up at him. "I know I'm...gun shy about...this." I motioned between the two of us, not sure how to phrase what I was thinking. "But I don't want you to leave. I know you have to, and I'll be okay, but I don't want you to go." I forced myself to be vulnerable, to tell him what I was feeling. He deserved that much. "I like having you here. I like you."

Ethan gently ran his fingers through my hair. "*Ami*. If you want me here, nothing in all the universe is going to stop me from coming back. I want to be with you, too."

I closed my eyes against the rush of emotion that swelled up in my chest. "I'm a mess, you know that, right? You've seen by now that I'm not the best person to get into a relationship with. Are you sure about this?"

Without hesitation, Ethan dropped his lips to mine. I melted against him even more, savoring the faint maple taste of his lips. "You aren't a mess," he murmured against my lips. "Stop putting yourself down. I think you are perfect just the way you are."

"You always know what to say." I kissed him again, rubbing my hands up and down his back. "I think you're the perfect one. How did I get lucky enough to meet you?"

He chuckled and kissed my ear. "You got kidnapped, remember? This must be the universe's way of apologizing to you for that."

"Ugh, do you two have to do that out in the open?" Alexi's voice echoed from behind Ethan. While she might have sounded disgusted, there was a hint of warmth underneath it.

"Just be glad we're still wearing clothes." I stuck my tongue out at her so she wouldn't see me smile.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Hey, Ethan?"

There was a serious note in her voice. Ethan reluctantly released me so he could face her. "Yes?"

Alexi shifted back and forth on her feet as she studied him with thoughtful eyes. “Julia deserves to be happy. If you hurt her, I’m going to kill you.”

“Lex!” I couldn’t keep the exasperation out of my voice.

Ethan grinned and squeezed my shoulder. “No, she’s right, *ami*. You deserve to be happy.” He nodded at Alexi. “I’m going to do my best, Lexi. I promise.”

She didn’t look like she was one hundred percent sold on his truthfulness, but I think she believed him. “Good. I’m going to hold you to that.”

My cheeks flamed, and I turned away from both of them. “You two are so embarrassing.”

Ethan planted a kiss on my neck. “I could be even more embarrassing.”

“Gross.” Alexi huffed and stomped off. “You’re supposed to do that stuff when I’m *not* around.”

I wanted to yell some sort of retort back to her, but Ethan was distracting me too much. His hand settled against my stomach and pulled me against him. “I mean it, *ami*. I’m not going anywhere,” he whispered.

I let out a breathy sigh and nodded. I believed him. I wasn’t sure why he picked me, why he liked me, but I believed him. He wanted me as much as I wanted him. “Okay.”

Knowing he was leaving the next day, I savored my time with him as much as I could. Even though I had been in relationships before, everything felt new and different with Ethan. I wanted to be around him, all the time. I’d never felt like this about another person, and it scared me. But I wasn’t a coward, and I wasn’t going to run away from him.

Ethan made me feel safe. He made me feel appreciated and beautiful and worth something. I had spent so much of my life focused on other people and doing what I had to do to survive and protect others that the idea of having something that was just for myself felt weird. It didn’t feel bad, but it felt uncomfortable. I felt like I was stretching and growing as a person, and it was scary. But no matter what, I had Ethan there

with me, and as long as he was there, everything would turn out okay in the end.

When the next day finally came, Ethan and I took a shuttle back to Viridis so he could get his ship. *Nightfall* looked practically brand new since so much bodywork had to be done. I still couldn't believe they had fixed it all so quickly, but Ethan assured me that when Centric Enterprises wanted something done, it got done.

Ethan smiled broadly when he saw the ship. "Now *that* looks much better."

The door opened and Andy appeared with a smile on his face. "Ethan. Greetings."

Ethan's smile widened. "Andy! I'm glad to see you charged again."

Andy tilted his head slightly. "Thank you. I am fully functional and at your service. Greetings, Agent Carter."

A warm smile settled on my face. "Hello, Andy."

"How's the ship? Everything still intact?" Ethan's eyes roved over the outside of it, checking for any problems.

Andy nodded. "The repairs have been completed and I have checked all systems. The ship is back to full operating capacity."

"That's good." Ethan turned to look at me, and some of his enthusiasm dissipated. "I guess that means I have to get back to work."

I took his hand in mine and intertwined our fingers. "Don't be shy now. I'll be expecting to hear from you soon, or I'll think something's wrong."

He pulled me in and kissed me. It felt good to kiss him. It had been far too long since I'd had that kind of physical intimacy with someone, and now that I had it, I couldn't stop craving it. "I'll call you. As often as I can."

When he pulled away, I tried to swallow back my sadness. "I'll hold you to that."

“You be careful. Just because we’re on Viridis doesn’t mean you’re out of danger.”

I nodded. “I know. I’ve got my team to look after me. I’m not going to take any stupid risks.”

Ethan looked torn, his eyes moving between me and the ship. “Let me know what you find out.”

“I will.” I clasped my hands together to keep from hugging him again. “Be safe out there.”

“Andy will keep me safe.” Ethan tried to smile, but his sadness bled through. He kissed me again, quickly, and without touching me anywhere else. I think we both knew if he did that, we’d be hard pressed to part. “Goodbye, *ami*.”

“Goodbye, Ethan.”

It was obviously tough for him, but he turned and headed to the ship. I looked over at Andy, who was waiting patiently. “Watch out for him, Andy.”

He gave me what almost seemed to be a perplexed look. “Of course, Agent Carter.”

Ethan waved to me one more time before stepping onto his ship. Once they were inside, I backed up until I was at a safe distance. I waited while the engines fired up and the ship lifted into the air. I stood there and watched until I couldn’t see them anymore.

My chest hurt, and my stomach was twisted up into knots. I hated that he was leaving. I’d grown so accustomed to having him around I couldn’t stand the idea of him being gone, even if it was just for a little while. I took a deep breath and tried to tell myself that everything was going to be okay.

My tablet buzzed, and I pulled it out. I accepted the incoming call with a smile. “You missed me already?”

Ethan smiled bittersweetly. “What can I say? I didn’t think saying goodbye for now would be this hard.”

Knowing that he was having as much trouble as I was helped me feel a little better. “Me either. How’s the ship flying?”

“She’s doing well. I’d say better than before. It does feel good to have my ship back.”

I laughed. “I can imagine. That ship is home for you.”

“Temporary home,” he corrected. Andy said something muffled in the background and Ethan nodded. “I have to go. We’re about to jump into hyperspace and I’ll lose you in the jump.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad you called. I ought to be getting back to work myself.”

“I’m going to miss you, Julia.”

My heart melted a little. “I’m going to miss you too.”

“Until we see each other again.”

I nodded, feeling my chest tighten. “Until then.”

The call cut off and I sighed, putting the tablet away. I turned and headed back to where the cab was still waiting for me. I could do this. Even if I missed him, I was still an independent woman, and everything would be okay. I’d see him again soon. And even though this relationship stuff was new, I had a feeling he was going to be around for a while. That thought made me happy.

As I was climbing into the cab, my tablet went off again. “You can’t call me every second, Ethan, or we’ll never be okay apart,” I muttered as I pulled the tablet back out. But it wasn’t Ethan calling.

I clicked the button hastily. “Paige. What’s going on?”

She pushed her glasses up her nose and rapped a pen against her desk. She was obviously at the IPF office. “You need to come see me. Now.”

Knowing she had to have finally gotten somewhere with the drive, I simply nodded. “I’ll be there in ten.”

I rushed impatiently into headquarters and up to Paige’s temporary office located on the technical support level. I went straight to it, even ignoring Abbott when he greeted me.

Paige waved for me to shut the door. I obliged and then leaned over her shoulder to look at her screen. “Please tell me you found something.”

She nodded. “After a very painstaking process of testing what sections were damaged or not damaged, and then taking the time to bypass the damaged areas, I’ve got something. Most of the information I can’t retrieve, and what I can get isn’t complete. I’ve scrubbed up what I could and had to piece a lot of the information back together.”

Impatience warred against politeness. “Okay, okay, I get it. This was hard. What did you find?”

She started typing on her keyboard. “After sorting through some of the data, I came across a file labeled Barrows. I’ve spent most of the day trying to recover and properly organize all the information in the file that I could, but there isn’t much I could salvage.” She pulled up a page filled with code.

“What I managed to retrieve was some details about when the high chancellor was kidnapped. There is a timestamp and coordinates of his abduction site, but the rest of the details are missing. The details we do have match, so it’s definitely his file.”

My heart sank a little. “But that doesn’t help us, does it? None of that is new information, right?”

“Right, we knew all of this stuff.” Paige picked up her pen and rapped it against the desk. “But I looked at the file’s coding and realized it was a file within a file. I thought maybe the parent file might have more information about the high chancellor.”

“And? Did it?”

She made a face. “Not exactly. There’s only one other file contained within the parent file, and it has nothing that looks like it crosses with the high chancellor’s case.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and straightened up, realizing I wasn’t going to be able to understand anything written on her screen. “What was in that file?”

“Honestly, I haven’t figured it out yet. It looks like a code of some kind. There are a bunch of numbers and letters strung together, but I don’t know what it means. I can’t be sure it’s complete, either.”

She pulled up a page that, just like she said, had a bunch of numbers and letters on it, but none of it made sense. I leaned over and squinted at it.

AAPOBL4C22040010083493

CorOD15000FLD

ANVTR18N215007/80W463966

I made an aggravated noise. “That means nothing. We’re screwed. This doesn’t help us at all. We don’t even know if it’s related to our case.”

Paige wagged her hand back and forth in the air. “Not quite. I’d say it’s safe to assume they’re peripherally related.”

I blinked at her. “How? How do you know that?”

“There is a separate part of the drive that was completely undamaged. There I found another file named Marco. Inside that file are five files, all with different names, and inside each file are descriptions for different jobs Santiago pulled. Some are written in code, but some aren’t. One file is about a competitor Santiago killed. Another file is about some artwork he recovered for him. There’s no real information on who Marco is, but I think every job Santiago did for him is stored in those files.”

Things were starting to make sense now. “You think that the files within the parent files are all work done for the same person? Whoever hired Santiago to kidnap Ben also hired him to do whatever this code means from the second file?”

“Exactly.”

“What’s the name on the second file?”

“Strayer.” Paige pulled it up on the screen to show me the two files side by side. “Barrows and Strayer. Both files are far too damaged for me to pull anything else from them. But I think we’re looking for another case.”

“And the parent file? Does it have a name? That would tell us who hired Santiago.”

“Unfortunately, no. I tried everything, but I couldn’t retrieve the name of the file. This is all I have.”

Part of me was excited and part of me was frustrated. We were so close and yet so far. I nodded and ran a hand through my hair. “Send me a copy of this and then keep working on the rest of the drive just in case there’s something else that can help us. I’m going to have Barrows look at this code and see if anything seems familiar to him. Maybe we’ll get lucky. Keep this under wraps though.”

She nodded. “You got it, boss.”

I flinched at the word. I knew I’d get over it eventually; I mean, Paige had always called me boss. Plenty of the agents under my authority called me boss. It was just what you did. But after being around my kidnapers...I didn’t much like the word anymore. I’d get over it eventually. I’d have to. Boss was an IPF culture thing, especially among the enforcers and officers.

“Thanks Paige. Good work.” I turned to the door and then froze when a new thought dawned on me. “That’s it!” I whirled around. “Paige, you’re a genius!”

She blinked at me, alarmed by my enthusiasm. “Thank you?”

I laughed and ran out the door. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t realized it sooner. I felt like such an idiot. I went straight to where Jordan and Borski were trying to run down my kidnapper’s ship. Both looked up, startled, when I burst into the room.

“Julia?” Jordan stood up.

I slapped a hand against my forehead. “I don’t know why I didn’t notice it sooner! You know how I told you all the men who kidnapped me always referred to their leader as boss?”

Jordan obviously wasn’t following, but he nodded. “Yeah.”

“Well, I knew right away they weren’t mercenaries or, at least, they didn’t *act* like mercenaries. They always behaved differently, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Well, duh! Who else do we know who refers to those in authority as ‘boss’?”

“Criminals?” Jordan offered, still appearing lost.

“IPF agents!” I still couldn’t believe I hadn’t figured it out sooner. “It all makes sense now. These guys were IPF cops, either current or former. It would make sense how they had so many resources, and if their employer is loaded, then they could circumvent almost any obstacles in their way.”

Jordan thought it over. “That makes sense. If one of them was still on the force and kept an ear out, then they easily could have learned about Santiago’s hideout, and then when we radioed back that we found the flash drive they could have been waiting for us. They knew right where it’d be.”

I sat down at a computer, pulled up the internal records system, and entered his description into the search field. I closed my eyes and thought hard, trying to come up with anything about their leader that was distinctive so I could find him. I remembered the scar he had running from his nose to his mouth, and I typed facial scars into the search parameters. All personnel were cataloged in the database, complete with histories, descriptions, associated cases, and distinguishing features.

There were a lot of names, so I started clicking through them. After a few moments, I added another parameter: mid-thirties. Jordan had come over by then and was watching over my shoulder. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.” I kept going, clicking as fast as my hand and eyes could coordinate. “I know he’s in here.”

It took me twenty minutes, but I found his file. I clapped my hands triumphantly and sat back in my chair. “Horatio Olivier. That’s him.”

Jordan scanned through his file. “The record says he left the force about five years ago. There’s no record of criminal behavior, and nothing else suspicious in his file.”

I shook my head, glaring at his picture on the screen. “I’m going to dig through his life with a fine-tooth comb. I’m going to look at all his associates and family, and then I’ll look through all his cases until I figure out who else he’s working with and who hired him. Bank accounts, loans, hobbies, family, where he bought his groceries, whatever I need to run down.”

Jordan nodded. “We’ll get these guys.”

The case may not have been solved yet, but I knew we’d figure it out. We had workable leads now, and we knew that somewhere on the force there was an information leak. We’d have to be careful and quiet about things.

“I’m not going to stop until we solve this case.”

Jordan squeezed my shoulder encouragingly. “Me neither.”

We exchanged hopeful looks. I couldn’t wait to find the person behind the kidnapping and to see how all the pieces finally fit together. We were so close. I finally had hope again.

“Let’s get to work.”

Book four in the Solar Hearts series will be coming soon.

Enemy's Scheme

Agent Carter is determined to uncover the culprit behind the high chancellor's kidnapping, whatever the cost. Her team is working hard to unravel the mysterious code they've found in Santiago's records, but the evidence only leads to more questions and fewer answers.

All Kit wants is to no longer fear for her safety or for Ben's. She's tired of looking over her shoulder and waiting for another attack. If that means she has to swallow her pride, break the law, go on a fake date, or work with a team, she's willing to do it. However, she's used to doing things her way, and she's never been much of a team player.

Cassia thought she left the past behind when she and Steel returned to Novus Terra. Unfortunately, when danger arrives on their doorstep, they're pulled back into chaos. She'll do whatever it takes to ensure the threat is neutralized for good this time, even if it means working with people she doesn't like or trust.

To defeat their common enemy, all of them must work together as a team—if they can set aside their own selfish goals. When tensions rise and personalities clash, can they unearth the culprit's identity before it's too late? Their enemy is willing to intimidate, attack, threaten, kidnap, and even kill to keep from being caught.

Can the team survive without them or their loved ones becoming collateral damage?

Books By This Author

[Assassin's Trust](#)

Solar Hearts Book 1

What do you do when you suspect you'll be kidnapped? Hire an assassin, of course.

Creating a secret weapon wasn't supposed to be dangerous and Cassia never thought someone would break into a military base and attack her to get it. But the weapon isn't so secret anymore, and someone is willing to kill to get their hands on it. Cassia needs to get off-world fast, but she's an engineer and scientist, not a soldier. If the military can't keep her safe on their own base, how is she supposed to trust them to keep her safe on a spaceship?

A professional assassin never lets his emotions get in the way. Steel learned that lesson the hard way. Simple rules to stay alive: don't care about anyone, don't trust anyone, and don't help pretty scientists with big eyes. But when Cassia begs him to escort her safely across the galaxy, Steel has a hard time sticking to his rules. It's obvious she's going to get herself killed if he doesn't help.

The only question is, can he protect both her and his heart?

[Thief's Pride](#)

Solar Hearts Book 2

What would you sacrifice to do the right thing?

Kit left her past behind ten years ago. All she wants is to fly around in her spaceship with her dog and steal things. There's no room in her life for complications, and the mysterious man who's been dropped in her lap (without her consent) screams

complication. He won't tell her who he is or why his kidnappers are chasing him across the galaxy. Yet, she can't quite convince herself to get rid of him, even if it means confronting her past.

Ben's whole life has been turned upside down after being kidnapped and tortured for weeks. He thought the pretty, purple-haired woman with her brash words and tough exterior would be his salvation, but she's not in any hurry to release him. And the more time he spends with her, the less he wants to be free. Despite being her prisoner, he can't help but be drawn to her. If only she was willing to give them a chance.

When his kidnappers get desperate, the last thing Ben wants is for Kit to get caught in the crossfire. Can they both ignore their feelings if it means keeping the other safe?

About The Author

Jenn Allen

Jenn has been crafting stories since she was old enough to hold a pen. She started out with a notebook to jot down ideas, characters, and short stories. Eventually, she got a computer and continued to write. In her spare time, she dreams up different worlds and characters.

She loves stories of all kinds and writes mostly science fiction and fantasy with some hint of romance in every story. *Agent's Integrity* is the third novel in the Solar Hearts series. There will be eight novels following six couples in the series.

Agent's Integrity